

The Essence of the Christian Life

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God's aim in delivering the Law to Moses was the creation of a way of communal life that was founded on two principles: that God is the source of all goodness and is always to be worshiped, and that the members of one's community are always to be treated justly. That was the ideal. But as St. Paul points out in *Romans*, it was impossible to achieve this ideal using a Law which only pointed out infractions of the commands of worship and justice, that is, which only steeped the people in the recognition of their sin.

Christ showed us the way. He shifted the emphasis away from sin by earning the forgiveness of all sin for all time. Sin is already forgiven. Christ invites us to move on. To where? To the life of grace and holiness. Jesus teaches that God indeed is the source of all goodness. And so, to become loving, merciful and just—to become people who can engage in the perfect communal life of worship and justice—we must give ourselves over to God completely so that the desires of the self are left behind and we are so open to God that God acts uninhibitedly through us—the grace and love of God flow through us into the world in an unrestrained way.

Personal holiness, then, is not the goal of the Christian life—of the Gospel. Personal holiness is a pre-condition of all members of the Christian church to the establishment of a holy and just community, a community of shared *agape* love, recognizing God as the source of its success.—Christ lived out for us the exemplary life of holiness and justice, and in doing so as God become man, Jesus not only articulated it in his teachings and exemplified it in his actions, especially his death as a criminal “worm, and not a man,” but he also, as God, is its power and the source of the grace that sustains it.

St. Paul saw clearly that the central teaching of Jesus was, in fact, the Christian community, centered in Christ and the worship of the Most High, and living daily the ideal of *agape* mercy and compassion for its own members, while reaching out to the poor and vulnerable beyond the community. He saw that Jesus' ideal Christian community would be made of small gatherings who were able to know one another and live closely/intimately with one another, hearts always turned to Christ. This community of *agape* love and of worship of God is the essence of Jesus' preaching.

Why did God let the Jews suffer under an ineffective Law for so long? To set the stage—to instill expectation in the people—for the effective, perfecting law that Jesus taught—the law of sacrificial love. The first law is the law of obedience—one becomes holy by submission to the law of prohibitions as well as of worship practices, like a child submitting in obedience to the prohibitions of this parents. The second law—the law of self-sacrifice for the good of others, and thus for the well-being of the community—the law that Jesus taught, is a logical extension of

the first law. It's a maturation of the first law, like the concern for the well-being of their family members which adult children come to experience.

The pre-eminent sign and symbol of this mature, self-sacrificing love for the sake of the community is the Cross of Jesus. Crucifixion, of course, at the time of Jesus was a form of execution reserved for rebels and for common criminals. In the eyes of the society of the time, crucifixion was retribution for crimes which threatened the social structure—crimes which chipped away at the justice structure on which society must be built.

Jesus, in accepting crucifixion, identified himself with the lowest of the low, with those who violated the principles which underlay Jesus' teaching, namely, worship and justice in the cause of social harmony and the peace that arises from this harmony. In doing so, Jesus not only forgave the sins—the deviations from the law of social harmony and peace—which these criminals had committed, but he also invited them back, to accept the grace of repentance and reformation, and to return to the society they had once undermined.

Thus, he calls all of us sinners to repentance and return, for by our sins, we also undermine the well-being of the Christian community, in which we always live.

The Cross of Christ is the main tent-pole holding up the tent which houses the People of God. The Cross gives silent testimony to the way of life we must live in order to achieve peace and harmony as the authentic People of God. We can call ourselves any name we choose; we can proclaim ourselves the People of God; we can call out "Lord! Lord!" as much as we want. But if we don't live the life of authentic justice, harmony, and peace which Jesus taught and which the early Christians were led and encouraged by the Apostles to live, we are hollow bells and clanging cymbals, and at his return, Christ will deny that he knows us.

Every Christian church, I suppose, lives out the ideal of the Christian life to some extent or another. One cannot help but be impressed by the rapidity and compassionate concern with which the pastors and people of Baptist and non-denominational churches come to visit their stricken congregants in the hospitals.

The "high" Christian denominations—the Catholics, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran—maintain the communal ideal in their monastic institutes and religious orders. And of course, they maintain the "source and summit" of the Christian way of communal life in the living Eucharist.

However, the Catholic Church (I ignore the other denominations because I know less about them) over the course of time has become encrusted with four impediments to realizing this communal ideal in its ordinary practice. These are: **imperialism, wealth, contesting in the public forum, and impersonalization.**

1. **Imperialism.** Perhaps the most detrimental historical event to occur to the Christian Church was the Emperor Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 AD and subsequent imperial decrees which legitimized the Christian Church and brought it into the secular political structure. Because of these events, the Church itself was transformed from a persecuted religion whose adherents literally laid their lives on the line for their faith to a political institution with great power and, eventually, an imperial structure of its own. During the Middle Ages, the church hierarchy developed itself into an effective governmental bureaucracy and a powerful legal system which claimed to be the sole legitimate arbiter and interpreter of the Word of God, the moral prescriptions of which it held over the laity's heads like the Sword of Damocles and which it brought to non-Christian peoples with force—often with military force, and for the purpose of colonization and the extraction of native wealth.

Today, although it has lost all the land it once controlled politically and has given up its armies, the Roman Church maintains the same hierarchical structure and convictions it had in its glory days in the Thirteenth Century. The pope is still an emperor (popes stopped wearing the imperial triple tiara just recently, within my lifetime) although now the pope claims a worldwide religious and moral empire. The bishops are subject to the pope, like vassal princes, and the whole hierarchy is dedicated primarily to the continued existence of the imperial institution, rather than to the protection and enhancement of the communal life of the People of God. The continuing revelations associated with the worldwide priest sex abuse scandal have shed devastating light on this wretched state of the Church hierarchy. We know now that the Vatican micro-manages the politically sensitive affairs of individual dioceses. We know that the hierarchy as a group has been willing to sacrifice the well-being of the laity in order to protect itself from the exposure of corruption within its ranks. And we know that even when confronted with their misdeeds, the hierarchy, including apparently the popes, are unwilling to admit their criminal complicity and resign their offices.

The communal life which Jesus taught to the People of God has been betrayed by the hierarchy of the Imperial Church.

2. **Wealth.** Over the course of the centuries, the Imperial Church has collected and secreted away—in the vaults of the Vatican and who knows where else—an untold but immense fortune. Recent news stories have revealed that just one religious order—the Legionaries of Christ—an order founded by a now-disgraced sexual predator who was protected by Pope John Paul II—had a net worth of eight billion dollars. We have also become aware that the first—and still on-going—impulse of the bishops whose dioceses were being sued in the sex abuse scandal was to protect their diocesan wealth.

The Catholic Church, in its liquid assets, its real estate holdings, its art and manuscript collections, has untold wealth. There is no defense for this wealth in a world so poor and in so much need. How can the Vatican museums and the assets of the Legionaries of Christ be justified in the face of the plagues of malaria, tuberculosis, and AIDS in Africa? The

situation calls to mind Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. Surely, the laity are generous in the face of such worldwide need. But for what crisis or what rampant need has a pope ever divested himself of his finery and sold it and given the proceeds to the needy?

It would be better if the popes could be identified worldwide by their charitable actions than by their white regalia and red shoes. It would be better if all the bishops wore simple black clothes and lived in simple houses and worked among the poor and sick, as examples to their flocks. It would be better if the Church were less wealthy, humbler, and more Christian.

3. **Contesting in the Public Forum.** This is a legacy of the moral imperialism of the Church hierarchy. The Church sees itself as the authority on the application of Gospel truth to a myriad of moral issues in our first-world society. The Vatican, the various bishops' conferences, and even individual bishops have proclaimed themselves to be the teachers of moral truth—objective moral truth—in a world of moral relativism and moral nonchalance. We have pastoral letters, proclamations, “clarifications” on everything from just wars to the acceptability of various birth control methods to when Catholic politicians can and cannot receive holy communion.

My point is not that there is anything wrong with our religious leaders offering moral guidance. But that guidance should be offered at the proper time to the proper audience. We are the People of God, a community seeking first justice and harmony among ourselves, and then offering compassion and mercy to the needy in the world. Let our teachers first teach us the next step *we* should take toward justice and self-sacrificing love. When we have achieved genuine communal justice and peace, there will be no need for us to go out to the hostile world and tell them what they are doing wrong. If we have joyful peace, they will come to us to learn how we do it.

As it stands now, while the bishops are out in the marketplace arguing with the heretics, the scoffers, and also with those who hold reasoned, humane views different from the bishops', their flocks within the Church are wandering in every different direction. The scholars tell us, for example, that the percentage of Catholics who undergo abortion is the same as that of the general American population. And the percentage of married Catholic couples who actually practice Natural Family Planning is less than five percent.

Moreover, the bishops' handling of the pedophile priests and of the breaking news of the scandal, and the continuing refusal of some of them to abide by their promises in the Dallas Accords to cooperate with civil prosecutors has undermined the authority of the American bishops to teach about the morality of any controversial issue. Like the bishop of Phoenix, Arizona, who removed “Catholic” status from a hospital he found offensive, the bishops are being politely ignored by the society they hope to influence.

Let the bishops turn their attention to the care and teaching of their flocks. Let them attend to the growth of the Church in justice and righteousness by their example more than their words. Let them “set things right” first with themselves (Let the guilty resign!), then with the faithful. Let the bishops, and all of us, devote ourselves to worshiping God and caring for one another, not counting the cost to ourselves.

4. **Impersonalization.** In the centuries in which the Imperial Church has existed, its most formidable tool for manipulating the people under its control has been the guilt resulting from sin. The logic was simple: The goal of faithful Christians is “to save our souls” and “to get into heaven.” To do this, we must be free of mortal sin at death. But the Church presents us with long catalogues of sins, and in these we recognize our own sinful behaviors, and we feel guilt. This guilt is an indicator of our ineligibility for heaven. God has given the Church hierarchy the power to forgive sins. Therefore, the people must depend on the Church for its bestowal of absolution as the way into heaven.

Since in this traditional model of church, personal salvation is the goal—unachievable without compliance with the requirement of weekly attendance at Mass—the hierarchy was unconcerned about who or how many were packed into the churches for Sunday Mass. Presence was everything. The church was the location where the great events of salvation history were memorialized and witnessed by the faithful, as the condition of their salvation. The church was all about what happened in the sanctuary, the privileged territory of the hierarchy, the intermediaries between God and the faithful.

Since this was the case, it was unimportant how many people were packed into the churches. The individual Catholic was just one of many, standing in line for the chance to approach the communion rail.

Since Vatican II, the ecclesiology has changed and the centrality of the community of believers in the liturgical process has been recognized. And yet, the churches are still often crowded and always impersonal though the reasons have changed. Now the priest shortage dictates that (unless the stringent criteria for who can be ordained a priest are relaxed) parishes must merge, and regional parish churches—usually quite large—are emerging as the Catholic worship spaces of the future.

The result is that these mega-churches are the context in which authentic Christian community is being attempted. The outcome is predictable. A thousand people at mass cannot enter into authentic communion with one another. Authentic community can only arise when everyone knows everyone else reasonably well. Authentic community can arise only in a small-church setting, say, groups of one or two hundred people, well-formed and dedicated to the goal of Christian community. Such small groups are able not only to worship together, but also to tend to each other’s needs interpersonally and to act effectively in the external social structures in which they find themselves.

Where will the priests come from to pastor these small flocks? “You are a kingdom of priests, a holy nation” (Exodus 19:16). Let the priests come from the faithful. Open the gates to whoever wishes, and is called, to serve the people in this way. Many are willing; the hierarchy is holding them back.

It is clear that the hierarchical Church must alter its structure and re-make itself by the guidance of the Holy Spirit into a community of faith communities in which justice and compassion are truly the behavioral norms. The leaders must give up their elegance and lead the humble faithful by good example. And the faithful must give up their individualistic mentality and see that they, as individuals yielding to the needs of the others around them, are the stones of which the living Church is built—a Church in which the plan of God for a universal community of justice and *agape* love, out of which peace and joy arise, comes to be realized.

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