

The Renewed Church

6/21/12

(cf. the scripture passages for Morning Prayer on Thursday of Week II)

Now, during the on-going sex-abuse scandal, as the Catholic Church leadership continues to degrade itself, is the time for our Church to die to what distorts it and to enter the world reborn as the image of Christ.

The sex-abuse scandal has cast a pall over the leadership of the institutional Church. The hierarchy has shown itself to be dedicated first to the survival of the institution—and of its public image—rather than to the well-being of the members of their flocks. Because of the scandal, the bishops and the Vatican have lost their moral authority in the world. They are not respected. They are mocked. And when they exert their authority, they are ignored.

Nonetheless, this same institutional Church turns out also to be the Keeper of the Gifts of God. In it is housed the Mystical Body of Christ, the spiritual Catholic Church which contains the Truth which Jesus taught—in its fullest expression—and the Eucharist, the great gift of God to us. This spiritual Church is priceless in its beauty and sanctity. It is the most perfect expression of the Way to God that we have. At the same time, the institutional Church which houses, sustains, and manifests this spiritual treasure—this Living Body of Christ—is inclined to corruption.

Is it necessary that the Sacred Mysteries be housed in such a degraded vessel? Is this the pasture that Jesus intended when he called Peter to “Feed my sheep”?

It cannot be so. And so, expecting that the time of rebirth has come, let us address the question, What would the institutional Church look like if it—like the mystical, spiritual Church—were the image of Christ, indeed, the very person of Christ?

We have something of an answer, if somewhat idealized at times, in the gospels and the letters and particularly, in the *Acts of the Apostles*. In these works, the Church is clearly not imperial—persecuted as it was. It was not, in *Acts*, adverse to donations and bequests. But the apostles appear to have used this money not to aggrandize themselves, but solely for the good of the community. There are no imperial trappings, no splendid palaces, no royal finery of dress, and no security guards. Peter walks the streets to get where he’s going, and the crowds wait for his healing shadow to pass over them. What refreshing simplicity, poverty of spirit, and courage!

If we try to characterize the early Church and apply these characteristics to the current Church, we would see a Church today that exhibits these features:

1. **Humility.** Although even in the first century, there was a clear hierarchy, a defined clergy, and a laity with a wide range of education, ability, and social standing, the leaders appear to be frankly

humble. Peter is the foremost example. Jesus appointed him to be the “foundation” of the Church (Mt. 16:18). We members of the institutional Church assume, with little scriptural support, that this means the authoritative leader—as we understand our pope to be. But Peter was anything but authoritative and political. He was simple in his ways, helpful when there was a need, and forthright (as Jesus was) in stating the good and in exposing evil and hypocrisy. At the Council of Jerusalem (*Acts 15*), Peter expressed his opinion, but it is noteworthy that it was the resolution suggested by James, not by Peter, that carried the day. It is clear that there was something in this meeting that was more important than the words of one man—even the “foundation” of the Church. I suggest that this was the genuine unity of mind and spirit in Christ that is the Divine intention for the Church and for the world, and which the apostles were always striving to establish and preserve.

There are other examples of humility on the part of the leaders of the early Church. Peter remained silent as he was corrected in public, before the laity, by Paul for his hypocrisy in hiding his practice of breaking the kosher laws by eating with gentiles. Again, Paul’s speech to the Ephesians before he headed into imprisonment is deeply humble and loving. And both James and Stephen went to their deaths with humble courage—no pope-mobiles to protect them.

Our Church today could become more humble, on this early Church model. I do not dare to comment on the humility of any individual, for who knows anyone else’s heart? But I will ask, Does the institutional Church really need the grandiosity that it decorates itself with? Doesn’t our God say that he is not pleased with sacrifices and oblations, but rather with the contrite person who trembles at his word? In other words, the outer show means nothing to God. So, if the Church gilds itself in splendor to demonstrate or manifest the splendor of God—to inspire our souls to soar, as they say—it means nothing to God. Rather, what is important to the Living God is that he should be invited to live in the heart of the humble Christian, whether leader or follower.

So our Church should divest itself of its splendor. Somehow, the ancient Church managed to preserve the Gospel and to bring Christ to the known world as a persecuted, underground institution, simply by the action of grace, by the apostolic missionaries’ own heroic efforts, and by the Church’s example of brotherly love. There were no multi-manual pipe organs nor lofty, soul-seizing buildings that dazzle us more than bring us to deeper faith. (How many who visit St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome come away with hearts transformed and turned to Jesus, as compared with those who come away awed at the architecture and with a camera filled with snapshots to show their neighbors back home?—Now, ask that same question about those who visit the humble and lowly church of St. James in Medjugorje, Croatia.)

Let our places of worship not be demonstrations of power, neither ecclesial nor divine. Rather, let them be clean but lowly places, adorned with the faith of their members—a faith evident in brotherly love, with deep devotion, and with the quiet lifting of the heart into the Divine Presence, mysteriously there in these humble churches, just as God is present throughout creation.

Let our clergy dress in the plain, unaggrandizing clothes of the day. Let them always remember that before they were priests and bishops, they were first—and irrecoverably(!)—deacons, coming

from the pews without glory, to serve the needs of the others in the pews; that they were men (and I expect soon, women also) of the people, with the lowliness of the people, serving in the midst of the people. So, let their hearts be filled with honorable ministry, with lowly service. Then what need is there for cassocks and purple piping and puffy birettas and up-pointed red shoes? What need for capes and big rings and lace hems?

If a priest or bishop believes he must distinguish himself from his lay comrades, let it be simply by a Roman collar or simple pendant crucifix. But better yet, let him distinguish himself by his actual, lived virtues of devotion to God and loving-kindness toward those around him.

In the Liturgy, why must the clergy wear the garments of fourth century judges and potentates? Why the Pope in white? If he is truly the rock foundation of the Church, he should be coated with the soil of the earth, acquired by his work among the people. Rather, since the alb is symbolic of the baptism in Christ which all Christians share, let the clergy wear a simple, unadorned alb as they lead public prayer, if they feel they must be vested. And if the stole is the sign of clerical office, if clerical office is necessary to be displayed—I do not believe it should be—let the simple, unadorned stole be worn to distinguish deacon from priest and priest from bishop. Let the pope not be distinguished from other bishops except by the compelling quality of his ministry and his Christlikeness.

Let the pope take his place among the bishops—one voice among many—in a conciliar Church, as Peter did in the Jerusalem Council. Let the pope relinquish his primacy (in fulfillment of John Paul II's offer in the encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* to re-shape the papacy.) Jesus did not appoint Peter as governor of the Church, but as its foundation. That foundation was Peter's faith in—and loyalty to—Jesus, even with his recognition of his own weak humanity. Peter was chosen to be the primary source of inspiration to the faithful—the model servant. He was not chosen to be the authoritative intermediary between God and the rest of humanity. (That was Moses' singular distinction.) Peter was to be the rock on which the wise man builds his house, not the prophet standing on a pinnacle.

And not the law-giver. Jesus “abolished” the Law and reduced the 613 to two: love God, love everyone else. In this is the freedom of Christ: to be merciful rather than judgmental (James); to “love God and do what you will” (Augustine). When Jesus gave Peter the keys to the Kingdom, it was not for the purpose of making regulations which keep people out of the Kingdom, but to open the Kingdom to all. Donald Cousins asserts that the Catholic Church is “the Church of No.” Paul of Tarsus asserts that Jesus was not No, but Yes.

Let the pope, then, be the humble servant, the model of pastoral care, the defender of the voiceless and the victimized, the truth-sayer who shines the light of truth on the hypocrite, as Peter did on Ananias and Sapphira.

2. **Simplicity.** Let the Church, built on this rock of humble service, be simple and dedicated to the good news of Christ the Savior and the Liberator. Let the focus of the Catholic faith not be the

Papacy, nor the Vatican, nor the Catechism, nor the Canon Law, nor the documents, nor the regulations, nor the internecine struggles among the denominations. Let the focus of our faith be the Body of Christ, and the Good News which exalts it.

Let the Church be simple in structure: all the clergy at work with all the laity—in brotherhood—working among the people to bring the Gospel to life in the world, to bring Christ to full stature.

Abandon the Vatican. Give it to Italy—or to the world—as an historical site and a monument to human art and learning and devotion. Let the pope live among the poor.

Send the Vatican bureaucrats to the soup kitchens and hospitals to serve Christ, the least of the brethren.

If the bishops truly are the successors to the Apostles, as they (and I) claim, then send them out among the people as itinerant preachers, prophets, and healers. Why should a bishop be the head of a territory? That is a vestige of the feudal times. The ancient apostles were missionaries.

But in areas in which the people have come to Christ, let the overseer live itinerantly, moving from parish to parish (as Bishop Kenneth Uentner set the example.) Let him direct a small enough area that he (or she) is known personally by most and is greeted by all at least once a year.

Why do we have “auxiliary bishops”? Let each bishop oversee a smaller area.

Let simplicity guide the clergy in their chastity. Let those whom God calls to unmarried chastity follow the celibate life genuinely, without hypocrisy and without hidden lovers, spouses, or casual playmates. Let those whom God calls to marriage be married and raise families, without lovers on the side. Let those who find themselves to be homosexual either remain chaste or enter into life-long committed relationships, as God calls each of them. Let those who find that their spouses or partners have broken their vows of commitment genuinely forgive and attempt to reconcile—and failing that, let them withdraw from a covenant that no longer exists and, if God wills, enter a committed union with another. Let it be the same in regard to celibacy and committed union for clergy as for all the Catholic faithful. Let God guide and judge. (“Who appointed me your judge?” said the Lord. Let what is good for the Lord be good enough for his Church.)

3. **Poverty.** Let the Church give its immense wealth to the poor of the world and live plainly and moderately. Let our leaders follow the example of Jesus, who lived simply (and sometimes endured hunger) among the working people.

How does a religious institution, dedicated to worship and to virtue, including the virtue of poverty, justify owning its own bank?

Get rid of the pope-mobile, which hides the pope from martyrdom and heightens his celebrity status. Let the pope walk to his destination or take public transportation. Let his shadow literally fall on the faithful sick, and heal them. Let the great heroes of the popes be Francis of Assisi, Theresa of Calcutta, Peter Claver, Father Damian, Dorothy Day, and Oscar Romero. Let the popes imitate them in their poverty, in their dedication to their ministry, in their humility, and in their fearlessness in the face of death, hoping for martyrdom, as did our earliest models of Christian faith.

Let the Church share the poverty of the “least brethren” of Jesus, and honestly dedicate itself to ministering to them, not by delegation, but from within their midst. Bring the bishops and auxiliary bishops and priests now housed behind desks out into the poverty-ridden streets, to bring solace to those who are suffering and provision to those in need. Let the leadership no longer be plump and shiny-faced, and sleek in their lace and brocade. Rather, let them *live* the “preferential option for the poor.”

4. **Forthright Honesty.** The one character trait that Jesus could not stand was duplicity. He excoriated the Jewish religious leaders of his time for their hypocrisy. What, then, would he have to say to the leaders of the Body of Christ in this time of sexual and financial scandal and obfuscation by the bishops and protection of criminals at the cost of exposing the innocents of the Body of Christ the Shepherd to these wolves? Surely his prophecy has come to pass that what is spoken in secret will be shouted from the rooftops—both the Good News of the Gospel, and the lies told by the leaders of the Church which Jesus founded.

When the leaders of the Church clothe themselves in simplicity and courage, they will be able to be forthright and transparent in their dealings with the faithful, with the institutional structure that contains and bolsters the Body of Christ, and with the general society. When the leaders are willing to die victorious rather than to sin, when the joy that arises from complete devotion to living the just Christian life is sought exclusively and political power is despised, then and only then will all the world be able to see the glory of God radiant in the Church as the People of God.

Let the hierarchy, then, drive from its midst all those in authority who are secretive offenders against the People of God. Let all protectors of pedophile priests, and these priests themselves, be offered resignation or immediate expulsion from their positions of authority. Let all other thieves and criminals among the hierarchy be offered the same option. Then let the hierarchy cleanse itself by genuinely cooperating with civil authorities in the prosecution of these criminals.

Let the clergy openly practice the morality which the Church teaches. There is terrible hypocrisy in the hierarchy touting the celibacy and chastity which its clergy are said to espouse, and then being exposed to the mockery of the media who find bishops with families and children, and well-known preaching priests with mistresses. Let the individual offenders be punished, and also, let the official policies on celibacy be questioned and examined.

Let the Church take an honest and consistent stance on homosexuality. If the Church insists

that homosexual practice is immoral, then let the clergy be purged of practicing homosexuals. On the other hand, if the hierarchy wishes to continue to permit these behaviors, let the Church revise its stance on homosexual practice, so that the actual sexual practice of many of its leaders is reflected in its moral teaching. If the leader cannot live within his own strictures, on what basis can he object to the rebellion of his charges?

Let personal and institutional wealth be abandoned, and let the clergy turn exclusively to prayer and fasting, to the preaching of the Gospel, to offering the sacraments to the faithful, and to ministering in purity to the people. Let the Church dedicate itself exclusively to bringing about and to living out the vision of Christ for a just society.

At that point, the Church will desire to break all its reliance on civil authority. Let the Church give up its exemption from taxes, and let it pay its fair share of the legitimate taxes, as Scripture enjoins us all to do. Why should the Church be exempt from the injunctions of Scripture?

Once freed from what binds it in dependency on the civil authority, the Church can without hesitation “teach the truth from the sidelines.” It need have no fear that it is not complying with one regulation or another that might lose it its tax exemption. It would be able to say the Truth which it would exemplify when it teaches public morality.

The Church having voluntarily sidelined itself in the political process, the bishops will no longer have to take their parts in the political power process. They will be able to give up arguing over every issue of the day, both substantial and trivial. They will be able to purify their positions and to cleanse the Church in general by giving up the exercise of their considerable power to sway the opinions and the votes of their flocks. No more threats; no more negotiations with the political leaders. Let the bishops turn away from power and honestly lead their flocks to live just and Godly lives, eyes turned toward heaven rather than toward the front page.

Thus will God be glorified in his people. Thus will justice and faithfulness meet.

5. **Pastoral Love.** Jesus enjoined Peter to “Feed my sheep.” The clergy of the Body of Christ must be dedicated to fulfilling that command alone. Let the pastors turn their attention away from bingo and split-clubs and all fundraising other than the offertory. Let the parishioners be responsible for the support of their parish church and staff. If they fail in this, let them receive the fruits of their little effort. And let the priests (and their families) be prepared to endure whatever their parishioners provide them with. In lean times, let them share. In fat times, let them share with the needy.

Let the bishop know his people. Let him have the habit of accepting social invitations from individuals or groups in his diocese. He should be able to go to dinner at the home of whoever invites him. He should be able to roll up his sleeves and play poker with some parish’s Ushers Club on Friday night. He should show up at hospitals and wakes—of lay people, as well as of priests, and comfort his people; and at birthday parties and wedding receptions, and celebrate the joy of his people.

The bishop should be exemplary at breaking down boundaries between people. He should be the initiator of (and participant in) inter-parish meetings, social events, and worship services aimed at bringing community to life in his diocese or his mission area. He should gather the people of different denominations and faiths socially and spiritually, so that strangers become familiar and enemies discover no need to fear. He should be willing to give everything for unity of heart among his people, and he should be the first to step forward when death threatens.

He should know the names of the common people, not just the heavy hitters and big donors, by associating with them and spending his time with them. He must not only know them, he must share their lives with them and invite them to share his life with him. By the example of his life, he must be the signal call to his people to join in community with God and with one another.

The clergy of the Church have only one function: to be the love and care of Christ to the People of God. And the People of God have only one function: to be the love and care of Christ to one another and to all their brothers and sisters in the world, especially to the least of the brothers and sisters of Christ. Let the Church, then, willingly and spontaneously manifest the life of “Christ in us.” When they do this, the People of God will bring to reality with one another the vision of Christ for a just and peaceful society, full of devotion and joy. And having been led and formed by their clergy in the life of Christ, the People of God will then bring this joyful way of life to the rest of the world by their loving care of all God’s people.

When the Church devotes itself just to doing this, in single-mindedness and purity of heart, then the glory of God will shine from it, and many in the world will stop and take notice. The simple and unpretentious virtue of God’s people will attract all those who desire lives of joy and peace. And thus, in time, all creation will come to be gathered together in Christ.

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