

# The Sorrow of the People of God

10/05/12

Go and learn the meaning of the words, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”  
I did not come to call the righteous but sinners. (Mt. 9:12-13)

Our lives, as we are aware, are full of sorrow—the sorrow of loss of security or of loved ones, the sorrow of loneliness or of rejection, the sorrow of unkindness or of injustice, the sorrow of suffering inflicted unjustly on others. The reason for all this sorrow is that we, and people in every society, create separations between ourselves and other people without thinking twice about it. We make strangers out of the people around us—or we call them enemies—for our own selfish reasons, without recognizing them as fellow human beings, as brothers and sisters.

If we did not treat the people around us so coldly and so blindly—if we recognized them to be human beings like us, plagued by the same flaws that plague us, wounded by the same wounds—if we saw others as misused in the same ways that we have been taken advantage of, and as beset by the same ignorance and inability to act wisely as we find ourselves to be when we examine ourselves honestly, then we would possess that humility and other-centeredness and compassion on which wholesome human community can be built.

The Catholic Church for two millennia has carried within the hearts of the faithful the simple message of Christ: love God; love the people around you—with a love that sacrifices yourself for God and for them. This message promises to replace the pain of abuse and the sorrow of isolation with the hope of joyful, loving community, in which each person looks out for—and strives to satisfy—the legitimate needs of those around him without attention to his own needs. To live peacefully together, all we have to do is enact the way of life in the Christian message.

Here and there, to a great extent or to a little, Christian—Catholic—communities and work-groups exist whose participants strive genuinely to live out this proclamation, with its promise. There are pockets of what we might call “more-or-less-Paradise” hidden away among the detritus of modern life. These groups are small and humble. The most known are Mother Theresa of Calcutta’s missions. These are not places of spiritual repose and peace. Rather, they are places of spiritual enactment of justice—of giving to each person what is his by virtue of his humanity, created by God. And from justice—and justice alone—follows peace.

One would expect then that the Christian message of mercy and self-sacrificing love would be embraced by the Catholic Church in its interactions with its members and potential members. One would expect that of all institutions, the Catholic Church, which proclaims and embodies the Christian message, would always open its heart with a compassion honed over centuries which

understands and welcomes the wounded and the sinners of all sorts into its loving embrace. One would expect that the justice which each person is entitled to as “the image and likeness of God” would prompt compassion and mercy on the part of the Church, even as it recognizes the depths of sinfulness into which many—really, all—have fallen.

But in fact, that is not the case. The recent sex-abuse scandals that have inflicted misery on the faithful across the entire planet are rife with deception and incomprehensibly misplaced allegiances on the part of the hierarchy—the “shepherds”—of the Church. What comes out of this situation is that millions realize they have been betrayed by the leaders of the Church and now find it impossible to re-enter the Catholic community with integrity. They have become strangers, outsiders.

In addition to this large class of secondary victims of the priest sex-abuse scandals, there is a large class of victims of the moral teachings of the Church. Over the centuries, and especially since the thirteenth century, the Catholic Church as developed and expanded its code of moral teachings so that in the present day, many groups of people—many millions of individuals seeking justice and mercy from the Catholic Church—are instead treated cursorily, dismissed, sent off on their own. The Church applies its moral code strictly and uncompromisingly to the sinners who comprise the people in the pews. The result is that many, many are burdened with the guilt of sin. They become sorrowful or angry that the hierarchy has excluded them from the community of the Church.

This exclusion is painful and is felt to be unjust. These excluded people feel that the Church leadership does not show them Christian mercy and compassion. It condemns rather than embraces.

These exclusions, which the Church leadership seems to promote, are particularly painful and ironic in these decades of revelations of clergy corruption and malfeasance. The opportunity presents itself in this present moment for the hierarchy of the Church to divest themselves of clericalism, an elitism which has plagued the Catholic clergy for centuries. Now the hierarchy have a God-given opportunity to admit humbly that because of their failings, so evident in the evening news, they too are indeed sinners. Thus they have the chance to forego their elitism, and they and laity have the chance to embrace in brotherhood, in like-mindedness, sinner-to-sinner, as it were.

Sadly, this has not yet occurred. Rather, the hierarchy under attack are digging in. They are building a wall of moral principle around themselves—a wall made of their moral dictates (“homosexual practice is objectively disordered”; “direct abortion is always murder and must be criminalized”; “Divine Truth prohibits the priestly ordination of women”; and so on.) And the people left on the outside of this wall are the many, many Catholics who find themselves excluded from full life in the Church because for them, life is tinged with the moral corruption of their environments or is morally shaded in grey-tones, rather than morally black and white. [Thank God that there are, here and there, pastoral priests, men “on the ground” rather than behind administrator’s desks, who understand the dilemmas of the people they work with, who understand the grey-tones and can respond with mercy and compassion, rather than with cold logic and the exercise of power.]

For me, it is to love and forgive these men of the hierarchy, rather than to judge them, as I pray daily in the Lord's Prayer that God will likewise forgive me. As for the offenses themselves, however, they cannot be overlooked. They are social sins in the society of the institutional Church—"the Vatican," as I call it here—the government operated by the hierarchy I am striving to forgive. The sins are structural sins. They are woven into the fabric of the institution. As offenses against large groups of victims, these structural sins must be exposed, time and again, until they are rectified.

We are taught that we must love the sinner and hate the sin. I will try in what follows to separate the one from the other, to make no accusations against individuals or against the hierarchy, but to make clear the injustice suffered by those who have been injured or offended by the decisions and policies of the Vatican.

Let us turn our attention then to what is urgent: the two grievous offenses.

The first offense is deceit: The Betrayal of the People of God. Some of the bishops, no doubt, are sincere as they meet with the victims of priest-predation and bishop cover-up, and offer them apologies and money in compensation. But some bishops are not regretful, and they ignore the Dallas Accords, or they refuse to cooperate with civil authority and then defend themselves in the courts.

I know the shame and the deep scarring and the self-hatred of the young ones preyed on by these predatory priests, who abuse their authority for personal benefit (though in my case, it was not a priest, as far as I know.) I suspect that for most victims, a few minutes spent with a bishop speaking sincerely to them is not enough to heal the years of secret burden, of self-loathing, of identity confusion, and of play-acting in public interaction with clergy. And along with the many Catholics who were not personally victimized, I feel disgust and disillusionment at The Betrayal. But for love of the Eucharist and for love of the ministry to which I have been called, I will not walk away, as many have.

To date, whatever has been done in reparation is not enough. The Prodigal Bishops have not returned in shame and humility to their people. There has been no convincing public expression of contrition. And because there has been none, the bishops (as my bishop said publicly not long ago) have "lost their moral authority." Truly so, and the world—even a large number of the People of God—is paying them scant heed.

What would be sufficient reparation? I don't know how other Catholics would answer. For me, it would be fitting that all the bishops who had a part in the Betrayal resign from the Chair of their dioceses. At any rate, it would take some significant demonstration that the hypocrisy of those bishops who behave like politicians doing damage control is over. Pope Benedict's finger-wagging at the Irish bishops, although apparently deserved, cannot be taken seriously until he explains

publicly and convincingly his personal involvement with the Peter Hullermann affair during his tenure as Archbishop of Munich.

Whether or not Bishop Ratzinger was involved in the Hullermann case, nonetheless, as the Pope—the first bishop among equals—Pope Benedict should be on his knees before the eyes of the world, soiling his white satin with the dirt of the earth, humbly apologizing from his heart to all the People of God for the violations to the human dignity of the victims and to the trust of the flock which (he and?) many of his brother bishops have perpetrated. The Pope himself must do this, not his secretaries nor his spokesmen. The Pope alone is the voice of the Church; let him speak the truth to the faithful—if in fact, contrition *is* the truth among the bishops.

The second offense—more unheeded and more widespread—is the exclusion of the millions, noted above. The immorality of The Betrayal, as well as the embarrassment of public episcopal disagreement on both worthy and trivial moral issues of the day, have discredited the bishops as teachers of the Church. This has prompted commentators and theologians to open the range of Church teachings to re-examination from fresh viewpoints. My own thought has led me to conclude that over the course of time, in general, the Vatican has “imposed on people burdens hard to carry, but you yourselves do not lift one finger to touch them” (Lk. 11:46.) The leadership have preferred the strict logic of their natural-law moral theology to the people’s need for the justice and mercy and wholesome, complete lives that God intends for them. The result of the leadership’s preference for reason over mercy is that one large group after another has been excluded from either wholesome living or full life in the Church. Let us list and discuss the main offenses.

A. Women’s Place in the Church. The Gospel of Luke is particularly attuned to the need of women for the care of the Church. Women in the first century were treated as a separate and lower form of human being, usually the property of the men who provided for them. The current Church likewise treats women as a separate form of human being, denying them participation in the complete sacramental life of the Church by denying them the Sacrament of Holy Orders. The Church’s natural law argument against the ordination of women is that women are substantially different from men in their natures. This separates women into a different class within the Church than men—an oppressed class, most evident in the First World. There, in the work place, women are recognized by law as being equally competent to perform, in general, all the jobs which men perform.

Nonetheless, the Vatican insists that natural law compartmentalizes women and men, and that Jesus chose men as his disciples in large part *because* they were men. Thus, the “constant tradition” of the Church has been to ordain only men because in their maleness, they are “icons of Christ.” In the face of an uproar of objection, John Paul II attempted to end the debate on this subject by declaring his teaching a “part of the Treasury of the Faith” and “infallible.”

Thus, it is in the name of the Jesus who in Luke's account of the gospel is so solicitous of the oppressed women of his time that the hierarchy of today excludes women from full participation in the sacramental life of the Body of Christ! The result: If you are a woman who believes that you are called by God to the vocation of Catholic priesthood, you are, *ex cathedra*, in error, and if you pursue unapproved ordination, you are liable to excommunication, that is, to exclusion from the Body of Christ.

John Paul II's encyclical, then, demands that we include this teaching in our profession of our Catholic faith! One gets the sense that the big guns have been brought out to shoot the rabbits because the garden fence has been blown down.

I question whether this dictum is an authentic statement of our Christian faith, and wonder whether it is more properly to be seen as John Paul II's profession of hope—in this: What the Pope has declared infallible, let God not tear asunder.

But as I said, the fence is already down, and it has been for many years. Among the great teachers of our Catholic faith are Catherine of Siena, and Theresa of Avila, and Terese of Lisieux, all of whom the Vatican itself has declared to be Doctors of the Church. Surely we must agree with Jesus that “no disciple is above his teacher, no slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple to become like his teacher, for the slave that he become like his master” (Mt. 10:24-25.) Are great teachers of the faith, women like these three, and many other intelligent, credentialed, and dedicated women, to be denied access to the priesthood while many predatory male priests—who in their maleness, we are taught, are “icons of Christ”—see their crimes hidden away by their bishops in the folds of the skirts of Holy Mother Church?

**B. The Place of Homosexuals in the Church.** The hierarchy denies that there is a moral problem here. If a person with a homosexual preference wishes to participate in the sacramental life of the Church, he or she is welcome to do so, as long as the person does not engage in same-sex genital behaviors. That is, for an estimated ten percent of the human population, and therefore, ten percent of Catholics, the choice is to be practicing Catholics who must give up for their entire lives all genital sexual expression of love and affection with their partners, or else to engage in same-sex behaviors and thereby to violate God's law, as the Vatican teaches in its natural-law moral theology.

I once had a friendship with a woman co-worker in her thirties who was a lesbian. One day as we were having lunch together, she asked me what the Catholic Church's teaching on homosexual practice was. I explained to her what I have written in the preceding paragraph. She said, “So for the rest of my life, I can never make love with the person I love?” I said, “That's what the Church teaches.” She said, “That's no help.”

In my heart, I agreed with her. I have spoken with many gays and lesbians who have repeatedly told me that before they had specifically sexual urges, they knew in their children's hearts that they were different. Many say that they experienced strong attraction to people of their own gender long before they felt their first sexual urges. In other words, at least some percentage of gays and lesbians believe, sometimes since childhood, that God has created them with these homosexual preferences—that they are homosexual by God's will. Their homosexual inclinations, then, cannot be "objectively disordered" (CCC 2358). They must surely be a part of the orderly structure of the universe God has created and is creating still. These inclinations are an organic aspect of the human natures of the people in whom they have been placed. Our priests and bishops who are inclined to homosexuality surely know this as well.

Homosexual lay persons know that their lives are intended by God to be wholesome lives of love, just as the lives of the heterosexual laity are intended to be. Catholic homosexuals, then, hope to live lives in which they share themselves intimately with their partners of the same gender. This being the case, they know that God is not calling them to a life of sexual abstinence simply because of their God-given homosexuality. But that is exactly what the hierarchy prescribes for all homosexuals, namely, unwholesome lives of struggle against their own natures, unaided by the grace of God since God has not called them to celibacy. The result: the large number of gays and lesbians who are called to practice lives of sexual expression of love and fidelity "sin grievously" and are cut off, according to the teaching of the Vatican hierarchy, from the life of the Church.

This exclusion results from the Vatican's natural law teaching that genital sexual activity is not moral when no "pathway to conception" is open and available to God. This prioritizing of the physiological purpose of sex (reproduction) over the sacramental purpose (sex as an expression of the couple's love, which by its unitive nature deepens that love) harkens back past the advances of *Gaudium et Spes* and past all the progress made by the Second Vatican Council in understanding the unitive purpose of marital sex, to the time of medieval theological mistrust of the human body and of human emotions. This mistrust led the old theologians to emphasize the mechanical, reproductive function of sex—predictable and easy to contain in the structures of rational thought—and to downplay the impact of sex on the bond of love existing between the spouses at every level of their beings. The existential experiences of deep emotional life which are the substance here were foreign territory to these theologians' comfortable rational structures.

This prioritizing of physiology over the emotional congruence of spousal love leads also to other absurdities, as we will see in items C and D below.

Allow me one reflection, however, before we move on. Someone will inevitably point out the Scripture clearly condemns homosexual practice in Romans 1:24-27, and that therefore, there is no argument to be made for the legitimacy of homosexual practice. In context, however, Paul's condemnation is aimed at those who ignore their natural, heart-implanted knowledge of God and pursue their own vicious interests. He charges that such people are "filled with every form of

wickedness, evil, greed, and malice” (v. 29) and are thus subject to the wrath of God, who leaves them to pursue their own desires. It seems clear that Paul has in mind the Greco-Roman culture of hedonism and decadence. This includes the *gymnasia*, where young men wrestled naked with each other, watched and encouraged by wealthy older men. In effect, the *gymnasia* were upper class homosexual brothels. That Paul found such behaviors, promiscuous and oriented toward sexual gratification alone, morally objectionable is understandable.

Our discussion here, however, is about stable, committed homosexual relationships—in particular, the relationships of homosexual practicing Catholics. These are our brothers and sisters in faith, equal members of the Body of Christ, who seek to enter into the heart of God and to share love with their life-partners just as heterosexual married Catholics do. Given that we know a good deal more in our time about the origins and nature of homosexual inclinations than did the people of Paul’s time, and given that Paul is describing a set of circumstances far different from the situations we are discussing, we must dismiss Paul’s condemnation as inapplicable to the issue of how the Vatican treats committed homosexual couples who are practicing Catholics.

C. Those Who Use Artificial Contraception. (I’m discussing here only non-abortifacient methods, like condoms. Methods that cause the death of the embryo, like the pill, are immoral because an innocent person dies. I join the Vatican in this belief. However, I no longer press my belief on those who do not share the Catholic Church’s stance on this issue. The unbelievers—and the government which presumably represents them—must come to this conviction themselves, though perhaps with on-going reminders from the pro-life community. Only then will there be substantial change, that is, justice for the unborn.)

To the issue: It does not matter whether the percentage of married Catholics who use artificial birth control is 9% or 90%. Whatever the number is, that number of people are declared by the moral teaching of the Church to be sinners, guilty of abusing God’s purposes for sex, and therefore, disjoined from union with God.

The reasoning which the Vatican uses to arrive at this conclusion, however, is specious. The Vatican’s natural law teaching is that as long as the pathway to conception is open, it is morally valid for couples who are practicing “family planning” to time their intercourse according to the wife’s physiology of fertility, so that there is little or no chance that pregnancy will result. In other words, such couples decide—and act—to reduce greatly the chances that a child will be conceived when they have sexual intercourse.

The Vatican insists that the “open pathway” method of family planning (called Natural Family Planning, or NFP) is essentially different from the use of artificial birth control methods because the physiological pathway to the joining of sperm and egg is nowhere closed in NFP. Artificial

methods, on the other hand, attempt to block the pathway to conception or to foil conception in some way.

Factually, the statements in the previous paragraph are true. However, the Vatican's reason for demanding that the pathway remain open is so that, at God's discretion, a child may be conceived with every act of intercourse. That is, the core of the open-pathway argument is that it is God who should plan the family, not the couple. The couple is simply to accept God's will. So, as soon as the couple allow themselves to control whether children will be conceived, the situation becomes a *birth control* situation. That is, the decision whether to conceive a child comes under the couple's control; it is no longer God's.

In this crucial sense, there is no difference between NFP and artificial contraceptives. Both methods are *birth control*. The use of either method demonstrates that the couple intends to prevent conception. In either case, the openness to the will of God for conception is absent. In either case, control of birth resides with the intention of the spouses. And it is intentionality which is key here—whether God chooses or the couple chooses. The method used once the couple enters the *birth control* mindset is of no importance (unless, of course, it threatens the embryo's life.)

Nonetheless, the Vatican insists that NFP is the only morally acceptable way to control the size of families. And so, all those couples who cannot use NFP because the woman's menstrual physiology is not normal or who do not trust NFP are cast into sin by the hierarchy and excluded by their own guilt from full life in the Church. – And this in the face of the Church's teaching on the *sensus fidelium*, that the authentic teachings of Christ are alive within the Body of Christ as a whole. Consequently, any teaching which offends the *sensus fidelium* cannot be authentically Christian. “There should be a remarkable harmony between the bishops and the faithful” (CCC84, quoting *Dei Verbum*). If it is true that the percentage of married sexually active Catholics who use artificial birth control is in the 90% range, the Vatican must admit that the current teaching on family planning is not in harmony with the understanding of the faith held by the People, and the teaching must be re-evaluated and revised. Now, the reality is that for the last fifty years, this teaching has been ignored by most of the married Catholic faithful, but the Vatican has yet to re-examine the teaching. Rather, it continues to exclude these otherwise faithful people, by virtue of their presumed sinfulness, from full and wholesome life in the Church.

D. Physically Dysfunctional Spouses. There is a class of spouses who have lost the capacity to have sexual intercourse with their marriage-partners. Among these physically dysfunctional spouses are wounded soldiers who have been made impotent but who still feel sexual desire, or whose spouses still desire sexual satisfaction. Also in the group of dysfunctional spouses are aging men who likewise, because of naturally declining levels of testosterone or because of prescribed medications, have become impotent but who still feel sexual desire, or whose spouses still desire sexual

satisfaction. Another class of dysfunctional spouses are aging women who have lost the ability or the limberness to engage in intercourse, but whose husbands still desire sexual satisfaction.

All these types of dysfunctional spouses—presumably all in loving, caring relationships with their spouses—are unable to engage with their spouses in the only form of sexual expression which the Vatican allows: penile-vaginal intercourse. The only recourse for sexual satisfaction for these dysfunctional couples, then, is mutual masturbation, in which each spouse brings the other spouse to sexual satisfaction. However, this behavior is closed to them because the Vatican teaches that under all circumstances, masturbation is “intrinsically and gravely disordered” (CCC 2352).

Thus, the Vatican tells these people that even though they are called by God to the sharing of sexual satisfaction with their spouses in marriage, and not to celibacy, they must forego sexual expression of their love with one another because in masturbation, sexual pleasure is sought “outside of . . . mutual self-giving and human procreation” (CCC 2352). This is an especially absurd demand upon aging couples, where the woman is well past her childbearing years. Yet the Vatican insists on oppressing these couples in this way, even in the case of women who have had hysterectomies and have no uterus in which to conceive a child!

Here the hierarchy overlooks two crucial considerations. First, the “unitive purpose” of sexual relations between spouses is not achieved in the way discussed by the Vatican hierarchy, who write, “the truly human performance of these acts [in marriage] fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude” (CCC 2362). The “unitive purpose,” however, is not achieved during orgasm. Ultimately, at the moment of orgasm, ecstasy occurs. At that moment, the pleasure is all that is. It fills the spouse completely. There is no existential union with one’s spouse at that moment. It is a completely private and incommunicable experience. Orgasm does not satisfy the “unitive purpose” of sex. Rather, the “unitive purpose” *is* achieved immediately before and immediately after orgasm. The embracing and kissing and touching of one another are the actions which express the “unitive purpose.” In these actions, the couple express their love for each other. But the orgasm itself is a peak moment of *individual self-expression*, expression of the most private, most vulnerable, most self-declaring part of oneself. The other spouse, witnessing their beloved’s pleasure, can rejoice in it but can in no way share in it.

The actions which express the “unitive purpose,” then, simply build a comfortable, honest, loving environment in which the *individually* expressive peak experience occurs. This environment is the safe harbor of the spouse’s embrace, where the other spouse can freely and fully experience the private sexual ecstasy in which the partner cannot share.

There is nothing mutual about orgasm, no matter what method is used to achieve it. So the Vatican’s objection that masturbation is not “self-giving” to one’s spouse is true not only for masturbation, but for orgasm achieved by any method, including penile-vaginal intercourse.

Indeed, in some circumstances, intercourse may be less “self-giving” than masturbation. In intercourse, each spouse gives pleasure to the other by making pleasure for himself or herself. But the pleasure which the “pleasure-giver” derives may be for that person the whole intent of engaging in the sexual activity in the first place—not a “self-giving” attitude. Or the sexual activity may be even less “self-giving.” A husband could engage his wife in intercourse for the sake of exercising dominance over her. In mutual masturbation, on the other hand, the giver of the pleasure derives little pleasure for himself or herself in giving pleasure to the spouse. In this sense, mutual masturbation may achieve the “unitive purpose” more fully than intercourse in some cases.

Second, in the case under discussion, where penile penetration is impossible, procreation is also impossible because the husband’s sperm cannot be discharged into the wife’s uterus. Nonetheless, the unitive purpose of sex remains valid and is available to the couple. The Vatican teaches that sex between spouses achieves both purposes—the procreative and the unitive. Then the impossibility of satisfying the procreative purpose does not preclude engagement by the couple in the sexual behaviors which are available to them in order to achieve the unitive purpose. Since vaginal penetration is not available to them, any other mutual sexual activity, performed with the self-giving attitude which is presumed in a loving marriage, will achieve the same purpose. To insist on openness to procreation when penetration is impossible, when sperm production is reduced, or when the wife possesses no uterus is to oppress already suffering people for the sake of a principle which God has made impossible for the couple to achieve.

In these cases, the Church’s moral theology offers the married couple just two merciless options: to live in sexual abstinence, ungraced by God, who has clearly called the couple to the fullness of the married life of love; or to live in mortal sin, separated from God and the Church. In effect, the Church’s teaching on this issue offers the couple only death: slow death by the frustration of ungraced sexual abstinence and by the self-imposed denial of the full married life; or the death of sin, which entails exclusion from the full life of the Church. The hierarchy in its moral theology demands sacrifice on the part of the spouses, rather than giving mercy to them in the form of relief from its oppressive and inhumane moral strictures.

E. Divorced and Remarried Catholics. When Catholic spouses reach the point of legal separation from one another, the Vatican claims that it has an acceptable solution to the problem of the spouses’ desires to marry other people and also remain eligible to receive the sacraments. That solution is *annulment*, a legal process within the Church which does not *dissolve* an existing marriage, but rather, declares that a valid marriage had never existed between the separated spouses in the first place (while, curiously enough, also maintaining that the children of such a non-union are nonetheless legitimate.) This declaration of annulment is made on the basis of evidence of an impediment to valid matrimony which had existed before the marriage ceremony was performed but

which had gone undetected. The fact is that many Catholics receive annulments and continue their lives as spouses of other people.

However, there are many other Catholics who are refused annulments because the necessary evidence cannot be supplied or because circumstances after the marriage ceremony fostered abusive or felonious or adulterous interactions between the spouses. To this class of Catholics, the Vatican offers no help. The victimized spouse may separate from the predatory spouse (and be civilly divorced) but cannot marry another and remain eligible for the sacraments. Though such victimized people are clearly called to matrimony rather than to celibacy, they must remain alone—even the battered 22-year-old mother of three—, without the love and support and sexual comfort of a spouse for the remainder of their lives, because man may not separate what God has joined together. (One wonders whether a marriage which turns loveless and even violent had actually been blessed by the all-loving God in the first place, in spite of the fact that all the right words were said at the marriage ceremony.)

And then, of course, there are those of the pre-Vatican II generation who are separated or divorced but have never remarried, who believe that they were told by their pastors that their divorce itself excommunicated them from the Church. There are many such; I have met more than my share. Is the Vatican responsible for these people's misunderstanding? To this question I answer: Who was it who trained those pastors in their pastoring skills?

F. Protestant Christians Wishing to Receive the Eucharist. The denial of the Eucharist to Christians who are not Catholic is an especially offensive sin against the Body of Christ. Jesus offered himself to death freely for the salvation of all. At his last supper, he said, "Take this, all of you, and eat." The Vatican rephrases him: "Take this, all of you who have made the political decision to accept the supreme authority of the earthen vessel we call the Pope, and eat." Or, less politically: "Take this, all of you who accept the theological theory of transubstantiation, and eat."

This policy of denying the Eucharist to Protestant Christians, it seems, is a continuation of the spite-game which the Reformation spawned. (Protestants have their own version of the game: "Catholic bashing".) The historical outcome of this spite-game was this. The loving Christ gave his life in order to bring about a universal community of *agape* love, in which all are joined as one in Christ. But what actually emerged was a divided spiritual community, of which one side—the Catholic Church—asserts that one's acceptance of the political institution called the Catholic Church determines one's right to receive the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of the Living God.

In fact, the Mystical Body of Christ consists of all who are baptized and who know Jesus as Lord (1 Cor. 12:12). This Mystical Body, in the purity of the Divine Presence within it, is the source of the Eucharist. The "Church" as an institution is simply the physical and political holding vessel which houses the Catholic members of the Body of Christ. The Vatican, as "the Church," has

no right to inject itself as a barrier between the Savior and those members of the Body desiring to eat and drink, whether they are registered members of the Catholic Church or not.

The Vatican's refusal to share the Eucharist with those millions who know Jesus as their Savior is an especially grievous offense against the Body of Christ.

G. The Post-Vatican II Generation and the Sunday Obligation. Those who have grown up as Catholics knowing only the Church revised by the Second Vatican Council have been found by researchers to have a relaxed attitude toward the Sunday Obligation, a Vatican-imposed discipline which demands attendance at Mass every Sunday under pain of mortal sin and if unrepented, of eternal damnation. The Post-Vatican Generation are inclined, researchers find, to attend Mass when they feel moved to do so, or when their schedules and the schedules of their children (soccer practice, instrument lessons, etc.) permit. These Catholics attend Mass regularly but not weekly. They appear to ignore *en masse* the Sunday Obligation which binds all Catholics, even the parents of children whose Catholic school soccer coaches hold practice on Sunday morning. The Vatican (which has said nothing about this situation that I know of) in order to remain logically consistent, must hold that those in this carefree generation of Catholics who do not worship every Sunday are guilty of mortal sin and therefore, liable to hellfire.

However, there may be a silver lining in this dark destiny, which will endure until this generation untangles itself enough to recognize the presence of God and the value of worship, or until the Vatican changes its policy. The silver lining is this. Those of the Post-Vatican Generation who do attend mass on a given Sunday do so because they want to be there. They come to mass expecting that something holy will happen there (even if they may not be able to say exactly what it is.)

This situation, in which people are behaving honestly, and perhaps devoutly, seems more desirable than that of those who were raised in the pre-Vatican II Church. That older generation of Catholics attend Sunday mass weekly, without fail. However, often they are present in body only. They attend mass because they always have, though they don't expect to receive much from the service and therefore, they don't. Hospital chaplains have much experience with these people, who say they have been "good Catholics" all their lives and end up in hospitals, frustrated with God for putting them in the dying situation when they "haven't done anything wrong" and "don't deserve this." These people are frightened, angry, and resentful. They have shallow faith, as well, which is of no help to them as they prepare for death. They are resentful that they put in all those years at mass, and now they come to this vanishing point in their lives unready, without a glimmer of faith to ease them and give them hope.

One wonders which generation is in the worse condition, the older "practicing Catholics" or the younger faithful-if-not-steady generation.

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What a painful, embarrassing, and intimidating situation we loyal Catholics find ourselves in at this time in the history of the People of God. It is difficult for outsiders to understand that “the Church” comes simultaneously in two flavors, “pure” and “corrupt.” And so outsiders cannot understand how we continuously charge the Church with these sins and others as well, and never give up on it and go elsewhere. (To whom should we go?)

And so, even in the light of truth and pain, the deceit and the exclusion which follow from the Vatican’s view of the Body of Christ persist. Indeed, there is a pattern in the injustices evidenced here. In each case, the Vatican says in effect to the individuals in the oppressed group: Learn to live without that which would fulfill you and would make your life whole, and offer your incomplete life to God. And so, in each case, the people are instructed to *sacrifice* what would make their lives more wholesome and more grace-filled. The Vatican has always encouraged the sacrifice of what pleases a person, in order that the person grow in self-discipline and demonstrate the willingness to do anything for God. Presumably, we are also told to sacrifice in these cases in order to imitate Jesus’ sacrifice of his life on a cross. Perhaps also in order to show our effectuation of his teaching, “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is of no avail” (Jn. 6:63).

Nonetheless, a major problem arises here. Authentic sacrifice is always a response to a call from God, for “It is you who have accomplished all we have done” (Isa. 26:12). When we act in the will of God, it is God’s grace that brings God’s intention to reality by our agency. Without grace, we can do nothing of value. So simply “offering it up” or sacrificing it for God’s glory is in itself ineffective. What we sacrifice, God must first call us to sacrifice. It cannot be our own idea; it cannot be our bishop’s idea; it must begin with God’s call.

And so, the whole theology of imposed sacrifice is meaningless. If, for example, a man is called to priesthood but is not called by God to celibacy, then the Vatican does a disservice to him by compelling him to promise celibacy as a precondition to ordination. For in doing this, the Church is insisting that he sacrifice something difficult without his having been given the grace to accomplish the task. This can only lead to misery, disaffection, anger, rebellion, addiction, and the panoply of outcomes of living an unwholesome life.

Truly, sacrifice, when God calls us to it, is a great good. It is a source of grace and wisdom. It is the conduit of God’s love and mercy.

And God calls many to sacrifice, in a multitude of ways. When one falls into disease or disability, God is calling on the sufferer to sacrifice his well-being willingly (while seeking effective treatment, of course). God’s call to sacrifice is also made to the spouse in a decades-long loving marriage who loses his beloved to death. God’s call to sacrifice is present in every marriage; the

spouses must yield themselves to the other. In every birth; the parents must place the well-being of the child before their own convenience. In every college student who commits himself to learning; he must separate from his good-time companions. In every laborer; he must put the quality of his work and his family's well-being ahead of his own relaxation. In every member of the clergy who is called by God to celibacy; he makes a profound sacrifice for wholeness of heart and for the glory of God.

However, sacrifice which is not a wholly voluntary response to a person's existential recognition that God is calling him to it—that is, sacrifice which is imposed on the life of one by virtue of the authority of another—is oppression. Forced sacrifice is a sin, a violation of the God-given dignity of the victim. Forced sacrifice is what the powerful do to the weak in order to maintain the imbalance of power by which the powerful flourish. Forced sacrifice is what the rich impose on the poor, for the sake of protecting and enhancing their own wealth.

The forced sacrifices which the Vatican, in its power and authority, impose on the Body of Christ are of just this kind. They are inhumane. They offend human dignity. They deprive the victims of wholesome lives and/or of access to the Font of Wisdom and Grace.

It is impossible to imagine that such over-extension of authority is sanctioned by God. It cannot be that the NO of the Vatican, so widespread and so virulent, has as its source Jesus the all-merciful, who is always YES (1 Cor. 1:19).

God created us to live wholesome, productive lives (Gen. 1:28). The Scripture tells us that he made us “in his image” (Gen. 1:27), that is, he made us to live lives which are whole and complete, as is his. This means that we must become like the Father in personal holiness. But more than that, we must live whole and complete communal lives as well. We must perfect our lives among our fellow humans by offering self-sacrificial love to them, by raising them up, encouraging them, consoling them, bringing them also toward perfection. The great theme of Scripture (both the Old and New Testaments) is the theme of “gathering into one” (e.g., Isa. 42:4; Dan. 7:13-14; Acts 10:34-43; Rom. 15:7-13). The Law of Moses clearly states this social theme: three commandments enjoin us to love and serve God, and the remaining seven enjoin us to live in a community characterized by justice, peace, and respect.

Likewise, the table-fellowship gatherings that Jesus instituted were built on this same principle. We must love God, and we must love one another. Then we can sit down together in peace, justice, and *agape* love at the Supper of the Lamb, both in this life and in the next. This is the final form of the wholeness which God desires for all of us in this life and the next.

The key to the accomplishment of this unitive principle in all creation is social justice. However, apparently this is not the thrust of the Vatican's view of Catholicism. Rather, personal holiness, and the loss and regaining of it through the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist, are the main focus of the institutional Church with its thousands of rules, canons, and regulations. The

breaking of these rules and the repair of the breach for the individual, to return him to eligibility for personal eternal life, seems to be the priority concern for the Vatican. But this is not the way of life which is at the heart of Jesus' teaching. For Jesus, personal holiness is a precondition to the major issue: serving God in serving one another. **That** is God's overall plan for creation: That all members of the Body of Christ will love God and will serve others with so much Godly love that those others will naturally turn away from sin and toward God's grace, to grow into his wholeness. In the end, all creation will have been joined in love of God and in mutual care for one another.

In other words, God's plan for creation is not an individual one, but a social one. We are called primarily to bring about love of God, and peace, justice, and *agape* love for all. That is the goal of all our ministries and missions.

Therefore, sacrifice as a private event has little meaning. Sacrifice *must* arise within the community or be dedicated to the well-being of the community. It must be a response by or for the community to the gifts of God—the gift of life, the gift of wholesomeness, the gift of divine freedom, the gift of our presence in God's loving goodness.

Jeremiah 31 and many other places in the First Covenant picture life in God in terms of abundance of food and of joyful community celebration. God creates us to live in love with each other, and to express that love by living lives turned toward one another, wholesome lives filled with blessings.

And so, private sacrifice, especially forced sacrifice, opposes the wholesome life of joy, shared love, forgiveness, justice, and mercy. Private sacrifice is self-controlled rejection of wholesomeness. On the other hand, living with wholesome joy results from other-controlled engagement in loving service.

The Vatican says, "Sacrifice what is important to you, and you will save your soul." Jesus says, "Go and learn the meaning of the words, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' I did not come to call the righteous but sinners" (Mt. 9:12-13).

In light of this invitation, may the hierarchy in the Vatican, as the leaders of God's people, re-think their positions and open wide the gates to all the people called by God into his assembly. The motto of the Vatican must be "YES" and not "No." ("The Son of God, Jesus Christ, . . . was not 'yes' and 'no,' but 'yes' has been in him" 1Cor. 1:19.) The Vatican must teach service to others—and the hierarchy themselves must actively engage in bringing what is needed to those who need it, in order to be models of Christian living, and also as humble brothers sharing generously in the street-level work of the Body of Christ. The Vatican must find ways and reasons and rationalizations in its reading of Scripture to see Scripture as God's statement of mercy and service to *all*, so that all may lead wholesome lives. The Vatican hierarchy must repent its sins toward its own flock and relieve the distress these sins have caused. Our leaders must be moved with humility so that they embrace us just as we in humility embrace them—in joy and peace, in justice and

respect. Their motto and their intention and their whole driving force must be: "Mercy, not sacrifice."

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