

What Happens Now?

July 20, 2013

Jesus was going through a field of grain on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick the heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "See, your disciples are doing what is unlawful to do on the Sabbath." He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry, how he went into the house of God and ate the bread of offering, which neither he nor his companions but only the priests could lawfully eat? Or have you not read in the law that on the Sabbath the priests serving in the temple violate the Sabbath and are innocent? I say to you, something greater than the temple is here. If you knew what this meant, *I desire mercy, not sacrifice*, you would not have condemned these innocent men. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

This passage from Matthew's gospel (Mt. 12:1-8) is not paid sufficient attention. Nonetheless, it exposes the core of the message of Jesus.

Here Jesus confronts the Pharisees over their stubborn rule-mindedness. His disciples are hungry, so they go into the field and eat the heads of grain. It's the Sabbath, when no "work" is to be done, because God rested on the seventh day of creation. Therefore, all faithful Jews must do the same. Over the centuries preceding our story here, Jewish teachers devised specific regulations for what was to be considered "work," in order to protect God's Law, held to be sacred, from violation. The disciples of Jesus here are ignoring these prohibitions as they walk through the fields, eating.

Jesus doesn't stop his followers from feeding themselves, even though "the Law" (actually, the accretions by others to the original words of scripture) is being violated. But the Pharisees, self-appointed guardians of, and strict adherents to the Law take this opportunity to chastise Jesus' disciples.

In response, Jesus makes three defenses of his followers, and presumably of himself as their leader. First is the argument from precedent. Speaking like a lawyer, he argues that David ate the sacred temple bread which as a layman he was not permitted to eat. If David did it, and scripture records it without blame—Jesus says in effect—what's the problem with my guys doing a similar thing? Here Jesus uses scriptural precedent to deflect the Pharisees' attack, which is itself based in scripture.

Jesus' second defense is that the law in question, like all laws, is not absolute. It admits exceptions. Jesus points out that the priests on temple duty perform work on the Sabbath, such as sacrificial slaughtering, and they are held blameless. Why then should Jesus' followers, he reasons, not be exempted from the Law since they are hungry and need to feed themselves?

Jesus' third defense is the substantive one. The first two are Jesus having some fun, twisting the accusations of the self-righteous Pharisees up in their own scripture and making clear their hypocrisy. The substance of Jesus' third defense is this: These people are human. They have a natural (God-given) need to eat—every day, even in their poverty, even on the Sabbath. Since they are itinerants, they have no way to satisfy this need in the usual ways of Jewish custom. So, give them the latitude, then, to satisfy their needs, and in that way, respect their human dignity.

In this argument, Jesus pits human nature, dignified because its origin is God the Creator, against the dictates of the Law, exalted because its ultimate source is divine. In particular, Jesus questions the justice of applying the Law here because it is being used for a cruel purpose—a purpose which exalts the executor of the Law while causing suffering for the victims of the Law's application.

That is the meaning of Jesus' citation of Hosea 6:6—a favorite saying of Jesus'. (See also Mt. 9:24.) If one must choose between obedience to the Law (in reality, obedience to a human interpretation of divine law) and the well-being of another human being, the divine preference is for mercy toward the person in need. God prefers that compassion trump cosmetic obedience.

In the citation from Hosea, "I desire" is an indicator that the divine will is about to be made clear. Here the people are not receiving a law. They are receiving guidance from God their Creator. In effect, "I desire" means, "If you want to do the best or most virtuous thing, then do this . . ." And what is "this"? Be merciful to others. Opening the heart to love sacrificially—respecting with justice the dignity of another—finding an open-hearted way to supply another—gladly—with what they need—*that* is preferable to sacrificing to God and *not* having mercy. That is, Jesus finds nothing wrong with external acts of worship of the Divine, sacrifice included. But obeying the divine ordinance to worship God is meaningless unless it is accompanied by the just and merciful treatment of those around you. The external action must be the outcome of a pure and loving heart, of human compassion. If you don't have compassion within, worshiping God is meaningless and has no value.

That is the whole gospel in one sentence: *I desire mercy, not sacrifice*. That is the whole of Jesus, pure and simple.

By this point, you might be asking, "When are you going to get to the 'What Happens Now?' discussion?" We're ready for it, right now.

The question on my mind is, What happens now to those of us who were spiritually driven out of the Catholic Church by their disgust with the priest sex scandal and the Great Betrayal by many of our bishops and recent popes, namely John Paul II and Benedict XVI? We're talking about those people who have left the Catholic Church permanently, fed up with

clerical sanctimony and hypocrisy, nourished by a self-imposed elegiac blindness of the laity. What has become of these disgruntled ones, spiritually?

The question brings attention to what Paul of Tarsus called “the Body of Christ.” (See 1 Cor 12:27, and Eph. 4:12.) In Paul’s vocabulary, this is the gathering of all the “holy ones” who are filled with the spirit of Jesus (by baptism) and join together to function as the various members of the body itself of Christ, alive in the current world. That is, when Christians say, “Christ is among us” or “Christ is with us,” they *must* mean that the spirit of Jesus is animating and propelling every member of the Christian community to *do Christ* in the world. Jesus acts in the world, now, through us. If love, healing, forgiveness, justice, and MERCY are to come to the people in the world, it is through our actions alone that this goodness of Jesus’ is realized.

The Body of Christ brings the interior, spiritual compassion of Jesus to reality in the exterior world of actions.

The Catholic Church asserts that it is the actualization of the Body of Christ in the world. In some senses, I agree that it is. In the Eucharist is to be found—in my experience as well as my “belief”—the living reality of Jesus. This presence among us of the living God emanates glory. When I am open-hearted during the Sunday liturgy and during Eucharistic Adoration, I have witnessed this emanating glory many times. I cannot and would not deny, then, that Christ is present among us in the consecrated bread and wine. (Even if I were forced to recant this, it still remains true. What is, is.)

Christ is also present in the works of those who quietly place themselves among the needy and minister to their needs—sometimes to their own peril, as with the six Italian nuns who in the 1990s rushed to the aid of the victims in Zaire of ebola fever, and who themselves perished.

Now, the Catholic Church claims that this Body of Christ “subsists” in it, that is, that the Catholic Church is the actualization of the Body of Christ. As I said above, in some ways it is. But a distinction must be made. Nowadays, it is an easy one: We must distinguish and separate the Body of Christ from the “institutional Church,” that is, the administrative structure—still Byzantine, secretive, bureaucratic, and imperial in its arcane organization and in the gloriosity of its public showings—of the organized religion called the Roman Catholic Church (RCC), headquartered in the Vatican State.

[Before we proceed further, a caveat: The Body of Christ is a spiritual entity, the effect of divine grace. The institutional Church is outward action. As is evident in our discussion of the gospel passage above, worthy external action may or may not reflect spiritual purity. In the same way, members of the RCC may or may not actually be effecting the graces of the Body of Christ. And so, some members of the RCC truly bring the living Christ into the world of action. Some do not. And on the other hand, the Body of Christ would be nothing real without the external action of the members of the RCC. The point here is that although the distinction is easy to

make abstractly, the two entities are in real life intermeshed. Nonetheless, let us continue the abstract analysis.]

One analogy of the relationship between the institutional Church and the Body of Christ is this. The institutional Church is the machinery—the necessary machinery, it would seem—by which the Body of Christ accomplishes its work in the world. Extend the analogy to automobiles. Sitting empty and parked, an automobile is nothing but an eyesore and a nuisance to pedestrians. But when it is operational, it serves to bring about *travel*—it brings about the transport of people from one place to another.

Now, by analogy, the institutional Church is like the machinery of the automobile—the pistons, the drive shaft, the tires, all the grease and oil, and of course the seats in the cabin. It's messy and complex, and subject to frequent breakdown. Now, also by analogy, the Body of Christ is *not* comparable to the people who are moving with the vehicle (and within it.) Rather, the Body of Christ is the *travel itself*: the movement itself from a starting place toward an end point.

Just as the automobile brings about the transportation, in the same way, the Church is the machinery that brings about the reality—the existing among us—of the Body of Christ.

Let's evaluate all this, for the purpose of clarification of the nature of the Body of Christ.

First is the question: Is the automobile important? No, it is not important. It is only necessary. This is what I mean. Sitting empty and parked, the automobile has no importance. It accomplishes nothing. Likewise, when it breaks down en route, it has not importance. In fact, it is little more than a source of aggravation.

The automobile, of its nature, has no importance. But it *is* necessary if one wishes to accomplish the goal of moving from City A to City B. When the automobile is operational and accomplishing the transit, it is useful and in fact, for those using it, necessary.

Now, the institutional Church is like the automobile. When as for example in the first three centuries of its existence, the Church was filled with the dynamic grace of passionate faith and the Spirit of joy, it *was* the living Christ, ministering to the members of the community with love, and bringing the Good News to anyone who would hear it. In such times, the Church is useful and necessary as the expression of the love of Jesus in the world.

However, when in its history the Church has been static, its masters distracted from its authentic purpose of promoting “mercy and not sacrifice” by political and financial—that is, imperial—undertakings, as it was pretty consistently from the eleventh through the seventeenth centuries, it served no meaningful purpose. It decorated itself with all those accretions which made it an emblem of everything but the authentic gospel. It grew itself a huge and unwieldy theology which no person can now master, except perhaps after a lifetime of investigation. It created a Pharisee-like code of laws and regulations, which picked its way into civil institutions

which were doing pretty well without it—like marriage—and stuck them full of prickly little thorns—like the trousers get when a man walks through brambles. It acquired for itself political might and became the medieval Superpower. It aggrandized its potency by building immense and magnificently beautiful structures. It captured for itself the authority to judge the living and the dead. (Who makes the saints?)

Later on, the RCC barricaded itself behind the intransigent theology of the Council of Trent, a “spit in your eye” response to Luther and Henry VIII and the Reformers, who by that time had gone their own ways. And then, it went to war with them and took its share of the lives lost in those Thirty Years of bloody slaughter.

Where in all this was the Body of Christ?

And likewise now in the present day, like an expensive automobile loaded with all the electronic wizardry, with power everything, chromed and gilded at every bend and edge of its body panels, but out-of-gas, the institutional Church has sputtered to a stop as the transporter of the gospel.

So much for the RCC. There’s more to understand now about the Body of Christ. Continuing the analogy of the automobile, the Body of Christ is *not* the people travelling in the car. People—even Christian people, baptized people—are not the Body of Christ. People can get together in groups and communities, even for the “benefit of the Church” and not be the Body of Christ. (“Let’s have bingo—we’ll run it, Father—and use the profits to buy a beautiful new altar for our church.”)

The Body of Christ is the community of Christians en route. The Body of Christ *is the travel*. Jesus came among us as God-become-a-human-being among human beings, in order to propel us to accomplish the Divine Plan for Creation, that is, that we might all achieve the single goal of our individual existences. That goal is the same for each of us: that we might “be one as you and I, Father, are one.” The goal of each of our lives is the goal of the Body of Christ, and it is Jesus’ goal: that we all live together in unity and harmony of heart, joyfully, peacefully, with justice for everyone, in self-giving love. (See Jn. 17, Eph. 1:10; Col. 2.)

The Body of Christ is all of us getting there.

So, back to the original question: What happens spiritually to our brothers and sisters who have left the institutional Church in disgust? The short and simple answer is that they use other ways to come to God. In our analogy, they give up on the sputtering automobile and continue their spiritual journeys on bicycles, or by airplanes, or in sampans and rickshaws.

If they go to another denominational church—one without such a tarnished reputation as ours—such as the Russian Orthodox Church, are they horrid apostates? I don’t think so. They are baptized in Christ, after all, and therefore can never not be members of the Body of Christ, although like the rest of us, they may not exercise that calling. And indeed, leaving Roman

Catholicism in search of trustworthy shepherds is not a sign of abandoning Christ but rather, of seeking him.

Paul of Tarsus would not disagree, as I read him. He asserts that the Body of Christ is comprised of all the baptized (Rom. 12:4-5; 1Cor. 12:12-13;12:27). Never envisioning the terrible, murderous unraveling of Christianity in the Great Schism and particularly in the Reformation and its aftermath, he sees all the baptized living and working together in the harmony of the *agape* community which Jesus established. But now, Christianity having been fractured and divided by arrogant men, the community is shattered into different ecclesial and denominational fragments. Nonetheless, Christ lovingly embraces us all, of every denomination, and in his love for us calls us to love him in return.

The Body of Christ, then, is still a seamless garment, untorn by demands for political or institutional loyalty by one fragment of the Christian church or another. If some secularized schemer sits on the chair of Peter, behaving more as a dictator or a thief than a pastor, why should any Christian continue allegiance to such a man rather than run into the sheepfold of a more trustworthy and nurturing pastor?

Now, what of those who abandon Catholicism and embrace some non-Christian religion, such as Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism? Are such people infamous apostates? I do not think so. Why would these people (“fallen away Catholics”) bother to go to these other ways unless they were seeking with open, waiting spirits to come into the presence of God, whatever Divinity might be called in these various other ways which we humans have been given for the purpose of approaching God? I do not curse them for having left the community, as John did in his letters. Rather, I encourage them in their quest for God, for the Truth of God, which in their view, the shattered Catholic community can no longer adequately help them to discover.

The fact is that genuine seekers after God of all religions are engaged in the same quest. We may come to Divinity in different ways—often ways provided by the various religions themselves—and we may experience different aspects of the living God. But we are all brothers and sisters with the same desire, seeking the One God. We might argue about which route is the best to take, which religion is the most effective one, but in the end, the way which we take individually (given to each of us by the Creator) will bring us all to the same destination. We will all come together in unity and love in union with Divinity itself.

One implication of this conclusion is that our original definition of the Body of Christ is too narrow. If, as we Christians believe, Jesus is the human incarnation of the One God, Creator of the Universe, then the Body of Christ, as the community of just and loving seekers after Divinity coming more and more into union with Divinity, is comprised of all of those who are seeking after God, in whatever way Divinity leads them to come to him.

And so, of course, those who have abandoned Catholicism and subsequently follow no other religion, when they yearn for God in their hearts and seek to be decent and open to the

needs of other people, are no less on their way toward God than any sincere religious adherent. If one finds the way to God in clouds or sea or forest, rather than in sacrament or worship services, where is the quibble? Both contexts are manifestations of the love of God, and both are ways into union with Divinity. For my part, I say, Go the way in which God leads you to himself, whether by communion-line and church aisle, or by meditation and chanting, or by forest paths and open-country hikes. It is all the same God, leading each one in the way that is appropriate for him or her, into union with the God of all.

And finally, what is to be said about those who abandon not just Catholicism but Divinity as well? What about those who “lose their faith”? I have two things to say about that. First, the aberrant priests and bishops and popes who have damaged not only the individual victims of their predation and of their conspiratorial suppression of the truth, but who have also damaged all those who have been spiritually displaced by these crimes and these revelations, should open their consciences to their own examination and take responsibility for those shattered faith-lives and the consequences of these people’s loss of faith.

And second, whether we are experiencing Divinity or not, and no matter how distant or undiscoverable or absent Divinity may appear to be at the current time in our lives, we are nonetheless being drawn by his love toward him. If there are others who exercise their cruelty on us, or who ignore our needs, or who betray us, we are nonetheless being formed and transformed into seekers who are drawing closer to Divinity, just as in fact our persecutors are. Even in our despair or anger toward God or hatred of God or denial of God’s existence or of his love for us—even in the terrible darkness of lost hope—we are always, unbeknownst to us, drawing nearer our goal. Either the pain breaks us and makes us blind but humble, or it informs our character and gives us strength.

(At the close of their worship time together, Hispanic Catholics offer one another *la Paz* or *la Paz de Cristo* – “peace” or “the peace of Christ.” Occasionally, you will hear *la Paz de Fe* – “the peace of faith” – not *la Paz de la Fe*—not “the peace of the Faith.” The recognition here is not that the Catholic religion gives peace, but that simple faith in God gives peace. That seems to be why so many elderly Jews still worship YHWH, despite the *shoah*, the Holocaust. That is why, I believe, an elderly Jewish man whom I met in my chaplain work in a hospital—a man with a number tattooed on his forearm—a man who, when he trusted me a bit, confided that he had eaten human flesh in the boxcar bringing him and many others toward the concentration camp—placed his yarmulke on his head every day and prayed to *Adonai*. The reason is this: The God whom one might blame for all the sorrows and horrors of human life is, in one’s faith in him, the only genuine source of inner peace.)

And so, I think it is preferable to view those who have left the Church in pain because of the scandalous way the clergy and the hierarchs have treated them as courageous people, throwing off what crushes them and embracing spiritual freedom—the freedom which the grain eaters in the field, led by Jesus, experienced. These “escapees” of our times are willing to forego the promises made by now-clearly-inglorious men about the glories of Catholic destiny, and

although broken and sorrowful and bitter, they strike out on their own in unplanned directions, with conscious or unconscious trust in the God who will surely and lovingly lead them into union with him. They are indeed the grain-eaters in the field, ignoring the rules that contort them, ignoring the leaders who oppress them, these grain-eaters who trust their own best natures and, perhaps, trust in the God who made them to be what they are, to lead them in the ways they should go.

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