



RENEWAL *and* **EVANGELIZATION**

Person, Church, and World

Dr. Jeffrey A. Mirus

a Catholic Culture publication

Renewal and Evangelization

Person, Church and World

by Jeffrey A. Mirus

Collected essays from 2005 to 2014 exploring the necessary elements of Christian renewal and evangelization today, in the person, the Church and the world.

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTORY IDEAS	6
Introducing Renewal and Evangelization	7
Predictability: The Curse of the Spiritually Unprepared	10
PERSONAL RENEWAL	13
The Mystery and Power of Personal Prayer	14
The Five First Principles of Prayer	18
The Ecclesial Context of Personal Prayer	24
Prayer: A Primer on the Path to Union	26
Active Participation	31
How to Discuss the Liturgy	33
If Only I Could Avoid Temptation	39
The Annunciation and the Measure of Spiritual Progress	44
Discipleship: No Excuses	48
Are You Growing Holier?	50
Practice Makes Perfect	53
Living the Will of God: Vocation, Avocation, and Moment to Moment	56
Spiritual Self-Reliance: The Enemy Within	62
The Consequences of Not Fasting	65
The Spiritual Peril of Our Own Sensibilities	68
ECCLESIASTICAL RENEWAL	76
OK, so what sort of renewal did Vatican II prescribe?	77
The Pope, Reform and Discipline	90
Ecclesiastical Culture: Walking the Walk	96
On Discipline, Again	101
Loving to Discipline: The Case for Excommunication	105
Not Just Teaching, but Change	111
Have the Popes Written Enough? A Sharp Turn in Renewal	113
Meatless Fridays?	116
On the Crisis of Theology and the Need for Rulers	118
The Pope and the Jesuits: Explaining the Problem	121
None So Blind: Obedience is an Antidote to Stupidity	123
Episcopal Reform and the Rights of the Laity	126
Vatican Reform: Time for a New Inquisition	131

The Church's Jurisdiction Today: Action Trumps Inaction	134
Spiritual Worldliness: Pope Francis' Critique of the Church	137
Who Is the Enemy? A Growing Emphasis on Changing Ourselves	140
SOCIAL RENEWAL AND EVANGELIZATION	143
From Scandal to Catholicism	144
Evangelization, Apologetics, and the Incarnational Difference	147
Using Ecclesiastical Penalties to Shape Both Souls and Culture	150
The Impossible Reform of Catholic Universities	154
Ex Corde Ecclesiae in America	157
The Credibility Wars: Where We Go From Here	163
Eucharistic Lives of Love	166
Toward an Incarnational Culture	170
How Culture is Done	176
Religious Privatization and the Need for Community	179
Toward the New Evangelization, with Courage	183
The Three Most Important Characteristics of an Evangelizer	186
The New Evangelization: Down with Optimism, Up with Hope	190
Ten Keys to Effective Evangelization	194
The New Evangelization: What Does It Look Like?	201
Toward Effective Christian Witness: Making Room for the Gospel	208
CLOSING THOUGHTS	214
Converting the Average Catholic	215
Because I Love God	217

INTRODUCTORY IDEAS

Introducing Renewal and Evangelization

August 05, 2014

We have a large topic. One of the points I make in this collection of essays is that authentic Christian renewal touches all of life—everything about ourselves and everything that Christians interact with in the Church and the world. Orienting ourselves firmly toward Jesus Christ, and fostering the growth of His life within us: This will ultimately change every emphasis and every value in everything that we think, say, do and attempt to achieve.

This simple and inescapable reality creates a selection problem. Which of the essays I have written for CatholicCulture.org over the past ten years are most apt for the topic of renewal? I found several hundred that could conceivably fit, but I only wanted about fifty.

The reduction came by dividing the collection into parts which ought to proceed in a certain order. I decided to emphasize personal spiritual renewal, the renewal of the Church as an institution, and the broader social renewal that can transform whole cultures. The individual reader, it would seem, should start with himself, should turn almost immediately to the needs of the Church, and then should consider how he himself, in the context of the Church, can work for the renewal of the entire social order. With all this in mind, I think the collection as a whole should make a certain basic sense.

The Question of the Universities

Some special questions may still arise. One of them is how to treat the renewal of Catholic colleges and universities. Along with some wayward religious communities, our allegedly “Catholic” institutions of higher education constitute one of the grave crises of contemporary renewal. Having almost uniformly abandoned anything approaching a Catholic identity, they continuously secularize their students in the name of the Faith and the Church. It is a situation as difficult to address as it is intolerable.

From one perspective, most such institutions are historically creatures of the institutional Church, so we might include essays on this topic in the middle section on Church renewal. But from another perspective, they are mirrors of the larger culture,

enjoying an independent governance which makes them very difficult to change. Thus we might include them in the final section on social renewal, especially because colleges and universities are still broadly accepted (as the Church herself is not) to be a significant component of the social order.

This gives colleges and universities an enormous power not only to form students poised to take their own place in society but also to form their surrounding communities. Therefore, most of what I have to say about their renewal is included in the final section of the collection.

How Evangelization Fits with Renewal

Readers will also note a significant point which I have not yet mentioned. The title includes both renewal *and evangelization*. I suppose these could be considered two entirely different topics. But to me it seems clear that in our particular age a new evangelization is essential to renewal at all three levels treated in this book—the person, the Church, the world. All of us, even the most committed, are in some ways victimized by the fact that Christianity is, shall we say, culturally old hat. We all need to hear the Gospel afresh, no matter how committed we are, if we are to be reignited by its fire.

Nonetheless, I mostly hold off on evangelization until the latter portion of the third section, which is appropriately titled “Social Renewal and Evangelization”. The importance of evangelization to renewal rests most comfortably there—we have to put it somewhere!—because we traditionally think of evangelization as a means of drawing others to Christ. Doing that successfully in large numbers will obviously transform the entire social order over time, just as it has so often in the past.

Special Emphases

Those who peruse the table of contents will notice immediately that there are a disproportionate number of essays on prayer in the first section, and on discipline in the second. The reader will recall that the book is a collection of what I have written on CatholicCulture.org in the past, which means the selection is influenced by the kinds of topics I have emphasized in the past. But I stand by that emphasis here.

Perhaps the best way to express this is to suggest that, among those things *not* being done for renewal with anything near the required intensity, the most important for the individual person is prayer, and the most important for the institution of the Church is ecclesiastical discipline. As I mention in one of the essays, it is easy to talk the talk when it comes to renewal. Talking the talk generally leads to fastening on convenient “programs” that are good in themselves, but in order to evade the deeper transformation

God is asking of us. The bottom line is that prayer and discipline are essential to walking the walk.

Finally, I should call the reader's attention to the long essay which opens the section on ecclesial renewal: "OK, so what sort of renewal did Vatican II prescribe?" This essay has a very different structure than all the others. It is more of a study guide to the Second Vatican Council, running through each document in order, explaining the problem each document had in mind, and summarizing the solutions it proposed. This, or something like it, should be required reading for anyone who blathers on about the Council without having the vaguest idea of what problems afflicted the Church by the middle of the twentieth century, or what the Council Fathers said we ought to do about them.

But again, this is a very different sort of essay, and while it belongs where it is, at the start of the section on Church renewal, it might be just as well to study it separately, going through it slowly, attempting to digest the point of just one conciliar document at a time. For most readers, the time spent will be well rewarded. The text promulgated by the Council remains the most comprehensive blueprint of renewal for the modern Church. It is no small thing, at long last, to try to understand what all the fuss was about in the first place, and what the Council really tried to accomplish.

Moreover, only some of what the Council taught and called for has yet been implemented, and of that far less has been effectively interiorized. I join Pope Francis and his immediate predecessors in wishing we could quit hiding behind all the confusion—so conveniently stirred up by the Devil—and just get on with the job.

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Predictability: The Curse of the Spiritually Unprepared

July 05, 2005

In the mid-1980's, Fr. Gerald McGinnity attempted to warn his superiors of the sexual misconduct of Msgr. Michael Ledwith, then head of St. Patrick's College at the national Irish seminary at Maynooth. For his pains, Fr. McGinnity was removed from his position as Dean and exiled to parish work in the provinces. This was predictable; Fr. McGinnity should have been prepared for it.

Predictable Rulers

Few longtime observers of ecclesiastical affairs would be surprised at Fr. McGinnity's fate, then or now. The standard operating procedure throughout much of the Church since at least the late 1960's has been to silence the bearers of bad news. Bishops vigilant in protecting the faith and morals of their dioceses have been exceedingly rare. Many bishops have acted more as heads of exclusive gentleman's clubs than of local churches. The chief qualification for membership has often seemed to be clerical urbanity.

Hear no evil. See no evil. Given the sad weakness of human nature, those whose loyalties lie beyond good fellowship are very generally ignored, ostracized or exiled. Bishops share our human nature and Church governance is no exception to the norms of human conduct. One may expect more from the episcopate, but history offers little comfort. There are, of course, better and worse periods, for the norms are dictated in part by the health of the general culture. Thus the last forty years have been especially difficult. But the difference is probably more one of degree than of kind.

I do not mean that the typical bishop is as bad as the typical man in the street. On the whole, churchmen hover well above the cultural norm, but the standards to which they aspire are higher still, and the lapses draw more attention. As always, the Church both redeems our fallen nature and is profoundly affected by it. Saints are born and bred not because bishops are perfect, but because bishops are instrumental in channeling the grace of Christ into the world. This grace is received as so many sparks in the soul which must be fanned into flame by the Holy Spirit, Who invariably demands that we first

recognize our need for more light and heat. For those who have risen high, this recognition comes hard. Many bishops are spiritually unprepared for their task.

Predictable Victims

Three years ago, in the wake of more prominent sexual scandals, the Irish bishops ordered an independent inquiry into Msgr. Ledwith's administration, the results of which were recently made public. Among the findings: Fr. McGinnity was punished for doing exactly what he should have done.

Again, it is useless to be surprised by this injustice; it is simply a clear instance of a scenario which has been replayed with only minor variations throughout history. But precisely because it is useless to be surprised, it is vital to be prepared. According to Catholic World News, Fr. McGinnity commented on his recent vindication as follows:

I have suffered, not only in the cruel removal from my position of respectability and responsibility at Maynooth, but also from the professional and emotional destruction caused by my subsequent 20 years in the wilderness. I must now wait and see how serious the Church authorities are about their apology, and whether it will be followed by any restorative action.

From this quotation, it appears that Fr. McGinnity was not, in fact, prepared as he should have been. It is unfair to judge any man from a single remark, but these are not the words of one who has successfully prepared for his work as a priest.

To avoid misunderstanding, allow me to affirm that Fr. McGinnity suffered a grievous injustice, the kind of injustice that bishops must be especially alert to avoid and correct, providing restitution when possible. Nonetheless, it is a singular spiritual failure for a priest to bemoan the loss of a position of respectability and to describe parish work as a wilderness of professional and emotional destruction. I sincerely hope that none of Fr. McGinnity's parishioners become acquainted with this statement.

The sentiment expressed here is, in fact, a singular spiritual failure in any Catholic. Countless people suffer injustices, missed opportunities, public shame, even loss of a career—and much worse besides. It is the glory of Christianity that it provides a means for making gold out of this dross, of bringing immense spiritual good out of suffering, above all when this suffering arises from fidelity to Christ. Catholics in search of union with God not infrequently regard apparent injustices as what they deserve or, if not yet that, at least recognize them as unwelcome but genuine opportunities for spiritual growth. Perhaps only a few succeed in immediately embracing God's will, but surely a

great many, looking back later, are able to joyfully recognize God's providence in the path they have been forced to walk.

Predictable Sinners

Though it may seem strange to emphasize it, the initial sinner in this case was even less spiritually prepared, and we do well to remember that we are all sinners. Msgr. Ledwith, who resigned in 1994 amid further allegations that he had sexually harassed students, has now had over ten years to repent the misdeeds characteristic of his seminary administration. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that he has not yet taken advantage of this opportunity. Rather, he has moved to the United States, where he now teaches at Ramtha's School of Enlightenment in Washington State. Ramtha's first principle of instruction is "You are God."

While this story is blackly humorous as a factual paradigm for What Is Wrong, it nonetheless points us to real persons who are desperately in need of interior life. From first to last, the entire tale is as predictable as it is tawdry, as tawdry as it is dreary, and as dreary as the spirituality it represents.

It is a grave failure in Catholics to be so predictable. All of us have an obligation to work for justice, but we have an even graver obligation not to depend on it, especially since our claims are so tenuous. This suspension of our own ideas of justice is the essence of spiritual preparation for all of life. It is fatal to be content only when we experience what we feel we have a right to expect. There are other and greater goods. In fact, as St. Paul says, "All things work together unto good for those who love God" (Rm 8:28).

To be prepared spiritually means to trust that this maxim really does apply to *all things*, and to live in that trust. The alternatives are chilling: for the successful, complacency; for the injured, bitterness; for the sinner, a god who cannot save.

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PERSONAL RENEWAL

The Mystery and Power of Personal Prayer

October 12, 2007

I am continually amazed at how many Catholics forget the power of personal prayer. There are priestly, consecrated and lay apostles who make significant commitments to the active Christian life, including the Church's liturgical life, but fail to nourish that commitment through personal prayer. There are Catholic parents who take their Faith seriously but seldom remember to pray for their children. And of course there are many relatively casual Catholics who fail to cultivate a personal prayer life of any kind.

Personal and Private Prayer

There is certainly great power in public prayer, especially the Mass and the Sacraments, by which Christ makes His divine life available to us in a pre-eminent way. Christ also taught that wherever two or three are gathered together in His name, He will be in their midst (Mt 18:20). But the power of Christ's presence, offered to us in all the various forms of public prayer, cannot be absorbed and released into our own lives without personal prayer. For a deep combination of spiritual and psychological reasons, if we fail to pray personally, we not only miss many opportunities to do good, but we slowly smother our own relationship with Christ—no matter how many times we go through the motions of public or group prayer.

Although liturgical prayer can and should be intensely personal, we cannot learn to pray personally, or ever excel at it, unless we are willing to pray *privately*. Our Lord tells us this point blank when he warns us not to be hypocrites, who pray only in public, but to go to our rooms, close our doors and pray privately to our Father, who reads the secrets of our hearts (Mt 6). In fact, the New Testament speaks repeatedly about private prayer (and says comparatively little about any other kind). Jesus prayed at his baptism (Lk 3:21), He frequently went aside to pray alone (see Mt 14, Mk 1 & 6, Lk 5 & 6, etc.), He prayed at the time of his Transfiguration (Lk 9), He prayed that Peter would not fail in his faith (Lk 22), and He prayed mightily during his Passion (Mt 26, Mk 14). Even his great priestly prayer at the Last Supper (for all those the Father had given Him in the world) was an intensely personal prayer said in the presence of the Twelve (Jn 17).

Not surprisingly for one who prayed so frequently, Our Lord also taught often about personal and private prayer. He enjoined us to pray for our enemies and those who persecute, curse and calumniate us (Mt 5, Lk 6); He told us to pray for vocations (Mt 9, Lk 10); He urged us to pray against the temptations and trials of the end times (Mt 24, Mk 13); and He warned us to pray unceasingly (Mk 13, Lk 18, Lk 21). He also explained that we would receive whatever we asked in prayer (Mt 21, Mk 11), and He taught us the Our Father so we would know both how to pray and what kinds of things to pray for (Mt 6, Lk 11). The evidence abounds in the gospels, and this emphasis on personal prayer continues in both the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles.

Persistence in Prayer

In the many New Testament texts on prayer, we see Our Lord emphasizing again and again the need to pray persistently, without losing heart. He told two wonderful stories about the importance of persistence, one concerning a widow and an unjust judge (Lk 18), and the other about a man who needed to borrow bread from his neighbor in the middle of the night (Lk 11). Both the judge and the neighbor, neither of whom loved as God loves, succumbed to the onslaught of personal entreaty. Moreover, Jesus sometimes demanded that same persistence from others, as in the case of the Canaanite woman who actually had to argue with the Son of God that even dogs get the crumbs from under their master's table (Mt 15, Mk 7). The result was that He healed her daughter.

After the story of the importunate neighbor, Our Lord so stressed persistence in prayer that it became a proverb: "I tell you, ask and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (Lk 11:9-10). But his next point is even more dramatic. What father, Jesus asks, will give his son a serpent when he asks for a fish, or a scorpion when he asks for an egg? This question is the prelude to Our Lord's final and greatest lesson about prayer: If we who are evil know how to give good gifts to our children, "how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Lk 11:13)

The Holy Spirit in Prayer

Here Our Lord teaches us that the Holy Spirit is always at work in prayer. By way of introduction, I'll offer an exceedingly small proof, but of a kind that is commonly experienced. On one occasion when I went to Church for my hour of Eucharistic adoration, there was a man sleeping in the back pew of the small chapel where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed. He was stretched out, flat on his back, and snoring

loudly enough to distract even the greatest of saints! This annoyed me, but I decided to wait to take action until I'd spent a little time attempting to pray. Paradoxically, as time went on, the louder he got, the less it bothered me. Occasionally he stirred and muttered something like "Oh my God", so perhaps he was praying too. In any case, left to my own devices, I would have been driven to anger, yet his unseemly noise soon sounded more like the music of another soul. Clearly, I wasn't being left to my own devices.

Thérèse of Lisieux often fell asleep at prayer, and it caused her to glory in her littleness. I don't recommend the technique, which was also employed by the apostles in Gethsemane, yet I leave it to God to understand the effort at wakefulness and render it fruitful, even if it fails. In any case, our topic is not sleep, but the Holy Spirit, Who is actively involved in all prayer. The magnitude of Christ's teaching is precisely this: Personal prayer is a continuous motion of the Holy Spirit between the one who prays and the Father (or, indeed, the Son). It is the Holy Spirit whom the Father continually gives in prayer, and the Holy Spirit whom the Father continually receives back. St. Paul explains it this way:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.... Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rm 8:22-27)

The challenge for us is that this astonishing and growing action of the Holy Spirit—this ever-deepening exchange of the Holy Spirit between ourselves and the Father—does not take place within us unless we pray *personally*, by which I really mean *interiorly*. There is nothing automatic about it, and the mere external use of rites, group prayers, or verbal formulas avails nothing. True prayer requires our personal, interior participation—that is, our determination to communicate with the Father, honestly lifting ourselves to God with whatever capacity we possess at the time. Even if all we can do is throw ourselves toward God in an occasional moment of fear or longing, we have made a beginning according to our capacity. The intention and the habit of personal prayer can be built on whatever beginning is within our power. It is up to us to practice, to exercise this initially limited ability to pray.

When we do this over time, the Holy Spirit becomes a fountain of life and power within us, uniting us to God Himself. Just as the theological virtues enable us to believe with God's conviction, hope with God's strength, and love with God's love, so too is our capacity for prayer uplifted, amplified and perfected by the power of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, there is nothing on this earth more powerful than a person at prayer. Nothing is better calculated to overcome any conceivable obstacle, and we can give or receive no greater gift than prayer. Indeed, the success of everything else depends on our interaction with the Holy Spirit in prayer. Are we not foolish, then, to so often overlook what should be first, last, and always in our lives?

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The Five First Principles of Prayer

February 06, 2009

If we get too busy with “projects”, including the Catholic Culture Project, we’re sure to forget about the role prayer must play in all of them. At the same time, it would be a poor spirituality that sought to emphasize prayer only for the sake of particular projects. If our prayer is completely project-oriented, our relationship with God can never get beyond the “gimme” stage. After all, the primary purpose of prayer is to increase our union with God. Amid all our activities, then, and especially among all our good and even apostolic activities, how should we approach prayer?

Here I intend only to explore the first principles that must underlie all prayer. I will not attempt to explain how to deepen an already good prayer life; nor do I have any special gift for that task. But when we fail to begin with the right principles, either we will not make the progress we should, or we may not really get started at all. If you’re already well beyond these points, feel free to pass them along to anyone they might help. Here are my five first principles of prayer.

Principle 1. There is No Such Thing as Coincidence.

Coincidences don’t happen, and this is an important article of the Catholic Faith. The entire universe is governed by Divine Providence, which is so complete that it is able even to take human freedom into account, and to bring the Divine plan to fruition without violating that freedom. So the first principle of prayer is that everything depends on God. Everything that exists is held in existence by God’s creative power, and every success and failure depends on God’s will, either his permissive will or his perfect will. Moreover, everything that happens contributes to the fulfillment of His overarching Providential purpose, a purpose rooted in His very being, which is Love.

But one of the mysteries of God’s Providence is that He permits our prayers and actions to play a role in the fulfillment of His Plan. Having made us in His image and likeness, He calls us to be cooperators in His great works of both creation and redemption. What we do and how we pray actually make a difference in how God’s plan unfolds. But while our actions proceed largely along natural lines, producing results that are within our power, prayer works by invoking Divine power. It follows that the power of prayer is potentially greater than the power of human action (though the greatest

power at any particular moment lies simply in doing whatever we are called by God to do at that time).

Since all things are present to God (Who is outside of time), He sees in one continuous present all those things which to us unfold only over time. This sheds some light on the mystery of Providence and freedom, but we must admit that it remains a mystery. Though it is difficult to fathom, trust in God's Providence involves the recognition that our prayers matter very much indeed, both in the natural and the supernatural orders. Our prayers matter to the overall economy of salvation, to those for whom we pray, to those whom we touch while open to God's action (or not), and to ourselves.

Nothing happens by chance. There is no such thing as a coincidence. Nothing is beyond God's Providence of Love. This is a powerful inducement to prayer.

Principle 2. You are You and God is God

Though even an inkling of God's Providence is an inducement to prayer, prayer itself—that is, a real and effective communication of love between ourselves and God—cannot happen until we grasp the fundamental difference between the two parties. This difference is profoundly simple: God is God, and we are not. But it is astonishing how confusion on this basic point causes all kinds of difficulties with prayer.

The first difficulty is an unwillingness or refusal to pray simply because we do not wish to be subservient or beholden to a Being we either deny or misunderstand. The simplest recognition that God is all-powerful self-existent Love will dispel all such barriers. A second but similar difficulty arises from all the ways in which, despite a good basic abstract understanding of the difference between God and ourselves, we continue to puff ourselves up, letting pride interfere with the deep sense of dependence and gratitude that we ought to have with respect to God.

A third difficulty arises from a certain immaturity about how we handle this matter of dependence. We may approach God only when we think we need something (as if we don't continuously need God). Or we may fail to appreciate that God, as our creator, has a perfect right to determine our purpose in life, or that seeking to do His will is not merely the only possible just response to His gift of life, but the key to our happiness. Or we might attempt to negotiate with God in prayer, promising all kinds of things if He'll do what we want—ludicrous!

We shouldn't approach God in negotiation mode; it betrays a complete ignorance of our relationship. In fact, we shouldn't even make heartfelt promises while under duress. Instead, we ought to rely on His mercy and love, which shows far greater recognition of

Who God is. Then, when we realize that we have something special to thank Him for, we ought to seek to discern in subsequent calm periods of prayer what the appropriate response to God's love should be. (And before making big promises, we ought to consult a spiritual director or confessor. God desires union, not rash vows.)

Principle 3. Feelings Don't Matter

Once we get started on the right track in prayer, our feelings will almost always at some point become an impediment to progress. This is because, in most cases, God grants us consolations when we first commit ourselves to prayer. We feel a peace or a sweetness or a delight of some kind. In group settings, where many more psychological and social factors are at work, we may also feel a certain satisfaction or even an emotional high. This attracts us to prayer, and it is all well and good until God sees that we're ready to move on from loving the consolations to actually loving Him. Oops.

Eventually He'll withdraw the consolations, and leave us (or so it seems) on our own. We'll be plagued by distractions, feel bored or "dry", or experience prayer and meditation as hard work. So the third principle is that feelings don't matter. I do not mean to assert that they are irrelevant; obviously, they're very relevant, or this wouldn't be a problem. But they are not a guide to progress in prayer, and if they are taken as a guide, they will always be a false guide. Whether positively or negatively, our feelings will always entice or compel us to seek consolations instead of God.

At the risk of going beyond the limited purpose of this essay, please note that there can be a number of things that cause prayer time to become less "satisfying" as we pray more, giving us the (probably false) impression that we are regressing. The cause may be an attachment to some fault which needs to be actively purified before progress can be made. Or if the problem is not consistent or steady, it may be caused by other difficulties that are stressing or upsetting us, and that we simply have to work through. But eventually it will be caused by God's invitation to rest in His presence, in support of which He will permit us to experience our own conscientious mental activity (prayers, spiritual readings and meditations) as dry, hard work. We must be attentive in these circumstances to avoid, through our own insistence on mental activity, staving off the very invitation to go deeper.

Indeed, we all start out like Martha, turning our minds to many worthwhile things even in prayer. But we must eventually become like Mary. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps 46:10), says the Psalmist. "Taste and see that the Lord is good!" (Ps 34:8)

Principle 4. Prayer is Not a Political Tool

Insofar as we're involved in the culture wars (or if we are operating in a culture or subculture in which appearing to be holy carries social weight), we'll eventually encounter the temptation to use prayer as a sort of socio-political tool. By this I don't mean that we shouldn't pray that people will do politics for God's glory and according to His will. Politics needs to be hallowed just like anything else, and no sphere of human action should be viewed as off limits to grace. What I mean is that the visible fact that we're praying, or that many others are praying with us, is not to be parleyed into a form of political pressure or social enhancement.

In our present secular culture, many of these temptations are much reduced. Nonetheless, to take but one example, there are dangers in those prayer vigils which are designed in part to be a public demonstration of prayer. We must examine our motives. Is our purpose to apply pressure through the demonstration, relying on strength of numbers to effect change? Or is our purpose to pray for God's help? This is a fairly subtle distinction; it reminds me of the old joke about two seminarians who enjoyed smoking and praying at the same time. The first seminarian asked his spiritual director if he could smoke while he prayed; he was told no. But the second asked if he could pray while he smoked. The answer was "yes".

The purpose of gathering together in prayer is to seek God's help, not to use the external fact of prayer to apply pressure or enhance our reputations. Extraneous calculations, hopefully mostly unconscious, can even affect our liturgical choices or our attendance at particular devotions, depending on the circles in which we move. We may be seeking opportunities to gain favor, to project a certain image, or to appear holier than others.

I do not wish to go too far. There are certainly legitimate reasons to pray while giving public witness, and there are many good reasons to let someone know we're praying for them, when this will be an encouraging word. But an external show of prayer with the goal of enhancing our stature or increasing our influence is simply the politics of the Pharisee. When prayer becomes political in that sense, its spiritual power—no, its very identity as prayer— is lost. "Amen I say to you, they have received their reward" (Mt 6:5).

Principle 5. Group Prayer is Never Enough

The fifth of my first principles of prayer is that we will never develop anything beyond a superficial relationship with God if we participate only in group prayer. Family prayer, participation in prayer groups, major prayer events, even the official liturgy of the Mass can have only a very limited effect unless we engage in private prayer as well. In fact, if

these things are having their intended impact on us, they will lead us to seek time alone with God in prayer.

There is a danger in every form of group prayer, the danger of doing it for some reason other than seeking God's help and entering into loving union with Him. Thus it is possible for parents to pray regularly with their children because they believe it is good for them, without bothering to deepen their own lives of prayer. It is possible to enjoy a prayer group for the fellowship it provides, or a major prayer "event" because of the "high" that is induced by both the numbers involved and their external enthusiasm. It is possible to attend Mass by way of fulfilling an obligation, exposing oneself to the flame, as it were, but never catching fire. And beyond all these dangers, there is a fundamental limitation in group prayer, an emphasis on the activity of the group which necessarily limits the degree to which we can use those occasions to explore—in our own special way—a quiet, personal intimacy with God.

Without in any way diminishing the importance of community prayer in general or the supreme importance of the sacraments of the Church in particular, the key to union with God is the determination to respond to His love by spending personal, intimate time alone with Him. The sacraments impart grace with unsurpassed power, yet no matter how many sacraments we have received, their power will never be unleashed within us unless we commit ourselves to spending time with the Font of grace one on one. If we are really progressing in prayer and holiness, we will be drawn increasingly to private prayer. We'll be drawn to quiet spiritual reading, silent meditation on Scripture and the mysteries of salvation, time before the Blessed Sacrament, interior conversation with God, listening to Him in our hearts, and resting in His embrace. In so doing we will grow in the awareness of His Presence, an awareness that—in time—will spill over into all of our activities and everything we do.

Prayer and Perfection

I have said that these five principles are first principles, principles to help get us off on the right foot. When any of these principles is neglected, progress in prayer suffers dramatically. But there is much more that could be said about prayer, about its nature and its stages, and especially about the deep relationship between prayer and growth in perfection. For the two are closely linked. The point of prayer is union with God. This union requires the gradual purging away of anything in us that is not worthy of God—and that is quite a lot.

In the end, perfect prayer is perfect conformity with God's will. At first these seem like separate issues, but they are not. Perhaps we need a sixth starting principle! In any

case there is no progress in holiness without prayer, and nothing stalls the progress of prayer faster than an inattention to overcoming our habitual faults. The desire to pray is itself a prompting of grace, but we must take advantage of the opportunity, first by beginning to pray, and then by persevering in prayer while striving for perfection. Only through prayer will God fuel and strengthen our desire to be one with Him. Only through prayer can we possess and be possessed by Love. And speaking of all our projects, only through Love does anything bear fruit—in this world or the next.

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The Ecclesial Context of Personal Prayer

February 16, 2009

As a follow-up to my column [The Five First Principles of Prayer](#), I want to reiterate what I said in the conclusion: “But there is much more that could be said about prayer, about its nature and its stages, and especially about the deep relationship between prayer and growth in perfection.” One of the first additional things that needs to be said about prayer—a point so important that the failure to observe it can render the whole enterprise fruitless—is that whenever possible prayer must have an ecclesial dimension. That is, it must be rooted in the Church.

The Church alone possesses all the goods offered by God for our salvation. She is the conduit of grace through which all of those who are saved, whether they achieve juridical membership in the Church or not, are in fact saved. She is the extension of Christ’s work in the world; indeed, she is both His spouse and His very body. It is an article of the Catholic faith that some sort of connection or “joining” to the Church is necessary for salvation. “Extra ecclesia” (outside the Church, without the Church, completely apart from the Church), no one can be saved. It follows that insofar as someone understands something of the mission of the Church, one must first seek Christ there.

There are two reasons for this. The first is to be filled with divine life, or grace. I had said in my column that no matter how many sacraments one received, their power would not be unleashed without personal prayer. I stand by this assertion, but I would be a colossal fool if I intended it to mean that the sacraments may be ignored. Quite the contrary, the sacraments effect what they signify, always transmitting a share in the Divine life. But they do not force us to tune in to that transmission. It is through personal commitment to God, particularly in private prayer, that we learn how to take advantage of the grace we have received, cooperating with it as Christ intends. Anyone who is aware and able to partake of the graces offered by the Church, and who nonetheless fails to take advantage of them, is keeping himself from what he most needs for his prayer to be effective.

The second reason is to take advantage of the “mind of the Church”—her teachings,

her spiritual wisdom. To pray while willfully failing to do this is the classic recipe for the sin of presumption. We presume that God, who has given us everything we need through His Church, will make special provision for us if we ignore these gifts. Instead, by relying only on our own ideas, we will experience three immediate and severe spiritual handicaps. First, we will start off in a state of relative ignorance (perhaps complete ignorance) about the relationship between man and God, how prayer works, the nature of spiritual discernment, and so on. Second, we will have no sound reference points for correcting our own ideas or our own perceptions of what God is saying to us in prayer—or, indeed, whether it is even God whom we are hearing. Third, we will be cut off from the sole authoritative source of spiritual instruction, which must severely limit our personal spiritual growth.

It may be asked whether the grace gained through private prayer can compensate for any or all of these deficiencies? The answer is yes, but under what circumstances? When is God likely to act in such an extraordinary fashion since He has already given us His Church to continue His Son's redemptive work in the world? Clearly, He is likely to do this only insofar as a particular person fails to take advantage of the Church through no fault of his own. For to reject the Church is to reject Christ, and to reject Christ is to reject the One who sent Him. Thus, anyone who understands that the Church speaks with the voice of Christ yet fails to seek to be formed by the Church is actually begging to be left in the darkness of his own folly.

I assumed in my column that I was writing for Catholics already rooted in the Church and eager for both her doctrine and her sacraments. If this does not describe you, then hit pause and rewind. Pay attention first to the Church, and insert yourself into Her life of grace. Without the Church, any advice I have is mere vapor. But if you hear with the Church's ears, then you'll make something good even out of bad advice. So if you started the five first principles of prayer without the Church, try them again after you're properly connected. That's the fine print, if you like. Those are the conditions for the guarantee.

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Prayer: A Primer on the Path to Union

September 09, 2011

Prayer can be classified in more ways than we can count. From one point of view, we are either praying with the Church in liturgical prayer, or praying more generally in a group, or praying alone. From another point of view, we are praying either vocally or mentally. From still another vantage point, we may be reading pre-composed prayers, saying rote prayers, speaking naturally to God, or even simply listening.

Then within mental prayer, there is the distinction between mediation, in which we actively reflect on some topic, theme or text in prayer; and contemplation, which is always initiated by God, and by which He brings us into a deeper and more direct experience of His Being. For the practice of meditation, there are many different techniques. For example, the Jesuit approach is to take a passage from the Gospels and imagine ourselves as one of the characters in the scene. My own approach is to read some spiritual text slowly and carefully, exercising my mind in the task of understanding it more deeply and seeing its myriad connections with my own spiritual life, my own relationship with God.

Contemplation

Contemplation is another matter entirely, and there is widespread misunderstanding about it. The essence of contemplation is God's action, not our own. In one sense, we engage in a sort of contemplative prayer when we attempt to empty our minds and simply become aware of the presence of God, but there is a difference between this and contemplation proper. We practice the presence of God by trying to make ourselves continually aware of God's presence not only when we are at prayer but also as a habit of our daily lives. But contemplation proper does not happen until God discloses Himself to us in a special way, drawing us more directly into the mystery of Himself.

Some spiritual directors prescribe a process, for beginners, of emptying the mind to prepare for what they see as God's inevitable action in contemplation. Certainly, if we signal our desire to be filled with God, He *may* initiate the desired connection and disclose Himself more directly to us in prayer. But on the whole I favor those spiritual guides who, more in keeping with the Catholic spiritual tradition, warn beginners of the dangers of leaving the mind empty for very long, lest it become filled with ideas

proposed by evil spirits or our own auto-suggestions; or lest it simply be empty and unfruitful.

These more cautious directors suggest pausing in spiritual reading or meditation to enable God to take charge, but if the sense of God's presence does not strengthen, we should move on with our more active meditative prayer. The same is true if the sense of God increases and then later diminishes: time to move on. The point here is that we cannot control contemplation; it cannot be forced. But as we will see below, after the long practice of meditation, God will often invite the soul, if not to full contemplation, at least to a more passive and restful form of prayer.

Progress in Prayer

When we are learning to pray, we generally start by memorizing some tried and true prayers and learning to say them well. Next we learn to talk a little to God in our own words. Typically we also go to Mass and learn to participate in the official prayers of the Church. Then we begin reading the prayers and spiritual reflections of others, in order to help us to pray longer and more fruitfully. Finally, we learn to put ourselves in God's presence, to share our concerns with him, to rest in Him, to listen in our hearts to the promptings of His Spirit. We set aside time for prayer and, if we are wise and have the opportunity, we pray also at set times before the Blessed Sacrament.

In all this we must stay faithful to the sacraments of the Church, and we must be guided by her teachings, for we would be exceedingly foolish if we were to attempt to chart a course subjectively in prayer while ignoring the objective and certain aids Our Lord has given us to help us on our way. Moreover, as we move from stage to stage, we do not abandon any of the earlier forms, for these all serve to keep us anchored in the Truth, minimizing the possibility that we will end up, in effect, praying and listening to ourselves, or to deceiving spirits. No matter how advanced in prayer we become, we may or may not experience full contemplation. But everyone will gain facility in prayer and also see themselves growing spiritually through an ingrained habit of prayer.

Stages in Meditation

Most people will find it progressively easier to meditate fruitfully with time. Paradoxically, however, after even more time (perhaps years or even decades), many who persevere in meditation will gradually find it growing more difficult again. This may seem surprising, and I am not referring to a period of increased distractions, or to the difficulties that beset us in prayer when there are other serious problems with our spiritual life. But in many or even most souls, an increasing difficulty in meditating after

a long period of success is a sign that God is calling the soul to a less mentally active, and therefore more spiritually receptive, form of prayer.

Whereas before we might have been put off by placing ourselves in the presence of God with “nothing to do”, now we find ourselves comfortable simply resting in the Lord, communicating heart to heart (so to speak), rather than keeping our minds so busy. Again, this is not true contemplation, though it might in some cases be a prelude to it, especially for those in religious life who spend many hours of the day in prayer, and for whom the experience of contemplation is strongly related to the nature of their vocations.

Very often, as I indicated earlier, these periods of rest will occur rather naturally (if I may abuse the term) during one’s normal program of spiritual reading. Thus we remain anchored in some spiritual text, but linger at intervals in the presence of God, as the Spirit moves us to do. This is quite typically a stage to which Our Lord draws us after we have gone as far as we can through the activity of our own minds. Sometimes conscientious souls will retard their progress at this stage by not recognizing it for what it is, and instead fighting it in a further effort to meditate more actively, fearing that to relax that effort is the same as failing to persevere in prayer.

Prayer’s Object

The overarching object of all prayer is union with God. It is absolutely vital to emphasize here that the one indispensable means to union is doing God’s will. But it is through prayer that we grow to know and love God more, to discern His will more clearly, and to gain the strength to do it. On the other hand, nothing prevents our union with God more effectively, or undermines it more quickly, than a refusal to seek and do His will. Thus union with God is always to be measured by our conformity with His will.

This includes His will as disclosed to us through the certain means He has provided, especially the teachings of His Church; anything in prayer which leads us to reject or ignore these teachings does not come from the Spirit of God, for God cannot contradict Himself. His Revelation and its proper interpretation by the authority He has established in the Church is necessarily certain, whereas our own insights in prayer are necessarily fallible and subject to correction. But of course, we must seek and follow God’s specific will for us in prayer as well, and it is one of prayer’s important purposes to discern that will. The main point here is that our progress in union with God is not on any account to be measured by the good feelings we happen to have while at prayer, or at any other time.

Consolations

Such feelings, insofar as they come from God, are called *consolations*. Feelings of peace

or joy or sweetness—when they are not purely natural (and not, please God, confused with that dangerous spiritual smugness which often accompanies a somewhat self-righteous piety)—are given by God when we need them for the good of our spiritual life. Thus beginners in prayer, when they make their first serious commitment to it, very generally experience such consolations as an encouragement to persevere. But the consolations will be withdrawn later, lest we learn to love the consolations and not the Consoler.

This is a significant point. Those who tend to emotional forms of piety need to be cautioned against attempting to stir up the emotions as a substitute for consolations, because both consolations and positive emotions are completely irrelevant to the actual quality of our prayer life. Deliberate immersion in them is a sign not of spiritual growth but of spiritual selfishness. The same is true of excessive attachment to any particular private devotion or liturgical celebration based on the pleasurable feelings which accompany it. This should not occasion surprise, for we are never more united to Christ than when we are with Him in His Passion.

Our Own Specific Purposes at Prayer

Now, while the overarching object of all prayer is union with God, we nonetheless very frequently come to prayer with our own specific and active purposes in view. These fall always into four categories: Contrition, Petition, Thanksgiving, and Praise. We approach God in prayer either to express sorrow at having offended Him, or to ask Him for help of various kinds, or to thank Him for favors already received, or to praise him for Who He is. We may at times simply try to listen at prayer, but this (hopefully!) is in essence a prayer of petition to discern God's will.

A few words may be in order on three of these purposes. With respect to Petition, those who pray regularly find (or ought to find) that they become increasingly uncomfortable asking for worldly things for themselves, as we do when we are children. While bringing our concerns before God in prayer is good, it also tends to purify them, and we gradually grow to desire things only insofar as they will be for our spiritual good. Thus there is great wisdom in the firm advice of the late Fr. John Hardon, SJ with respect to our own needs. Only two forms of petitionary prayer need concern us, he said. When we are uncertain of God's will, we pray for light. When we know what His will is, we pray for courage.

It may also be useful to distinguish between Thanksgiving and Praise. God deserves our thanks insofar as He has done something good for us. But He deserves our praise simply because of Who He is: The eternal, omniscient, all-powerful, omnipresent God,

the One who is totally complete and perfect in Himself, the Supreme Good and the source of all goodness. The wonder of His being is, of course, manifested in His works, and because He chooses to do so much good to us through His mighty works, the distinction between thanksgiving and praise naturally tends to blur. Nonetheless, in a nutshell, we thank God for favors, and we praise Him—or give Him glory—simply because of the unequalled greatness of His very Being.

Glory, Love and Union

This giving of glory to God is the fundamental purpose of all created things simply because they are all infinitely less than God. God is all-good, and so the created order participates in this goodness, which means the fundamental structure of reality is inescapably moral. Giving glory to God is the right and proper acknowledgement of who we are and Who God is. Moreover, it is the only one of the four purposes of prayer that does not contain a hint, if not of selfishness exactly, then of self-interest.

Considering the importance of giving glory to God in all true religion, and in each person's life, we are indeed fortunate that God has made us for Himself, and so we give Him the greatest glory of which we are capable by drawing into union with him. Through this union, God wills to extend his incomparable glory through all of creation. And so the right order built into all creation becomes at the same time the pure, overarching purpose of all prayer. Once again: Prayer is that habit of communication with God by which we gain both the wisdom and the strength to love Him at every moment of our lives, and so to draw into a complete and perfect Divine union, both now and forever.

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Active Participation

July 19, 2010

The June issue of the *Adoremus Bulletin* carried an instructive [interview with Cardinal Antonio Cañizares Llovera](#), Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. Cardinal Cañizares commented on several aspects of the liturgy and the new translation to be implemented next year. The *Adoremus Bulletin* is published by Adoremus, the Society for the Renewal of the Sacred Liturgy, which in my judgment is the single most faithful, sensible and reliable group working on liturgical renewal today.

What I found most refreshing about Cardinal Cañizares' comments was his response to the question: "What does active participation mean?" Readers will no doubt recall that the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)* called for "full, conscious and active" participation in the liturgy (14), and one of the many battles for the meaning of Vatican II has been fought over this phrase. Too often, it was taken merely as a signal to make the laity "busier" at Mass, giving them more and more liturgical things to do, as if external activity were the key to active participation.

Now don't get me wrong. In the years before the Second Vatican Council, the laity too often regarded themselves primarily as spectators at Mass, watching and listening to something that "the priest did". This was by no means an inescapable outcome of what is now the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite; clearly, the understanding of the role of the laity has waxed and waned in different places and different times over the centuries. Nonetheless, the Council wished to emphasize that the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life, and that the Mass is to be offered by the whole body of the faithful, and not just the sacred ministers. (This takes nothing away from the fact that all the laity in the world cannot offer the Mass without a priest, whereas a priest can offer the Mass, as it were, single-handedly, since the priest alone acts *in persona Christi*.)

Clearly the Council Fathers clearly did not regard it as adequate (as at least one pope did in the preceding decades) that optimum participation should consist in the recommendation that lay people say the Rosary during Mass, to take just one example of what we might call the best the "old school" (if the early 20th century can be considered old) had to offer. One can certainly defend this advice after a fashion, by pointing out that

the Rosary can be used to unite oneself to the mysteries of Christ which are unfolding in the Mass, but it does smack of the spectator mode of thought, and few would actually argue (either then or now) that praying the Rosary through the Mass is superior to a conscious engagement with and meditation upon the liturgical texts themselves. This of course touches also the question of the use of the vernacular in the liturgy.

I say these things not to start World War III, but to preface my relief and gratitude that Cardinal Cañizares has “active participation” exactly right:

The protagonist of the celebration is Jesus Christ, not us. For this reason, active participation means uniting ourselves to Christ; uniting ourselves to Christ, who offers Himself to the Father; uniting ourselves to Christ, who receives the gift of God; uniting ourselves to Christ, who loves the Father above all else; uniting ourselves to Christ in praise of the Father; uniting ourselves to Christ in thanksgiving; uniting ourselves to Christ in His very attitude before the Father and in favor of man. This is how there will be active and fruitful participation. And it will be truly fruitful because then it is Christ who acts in us; when we unite ourselves to him, He acts in us. And He effectively makes us worshippers.

This is what the Church means when it refers to the liturgy as *opus Dei*, the work of God. The Mass is the representation in an unbloody manner of Christ’s supreme act of obedience to glorify the Father. Our job is to unite ourselves—fully, consciously, actively—to that sacred action.

There are many other important things to be said about the liturgy, and Cardinal Cañizares touches on several of them. For example, he offers a brief exposition on the key role Tradition plays (or ought to play) in the liturgy, for this sacred action is always something received rather than invented; and he includes a brief statement of the manner in which unity in prayer leads to unity of belief, deftly explaining the meaning of the famous Latin phraseology, *lex orandi, lex credendi*. But it is enough today to answer the vexing question of “active participation” at Mass: The key is uniting ourselves with the saving action of Jesus Christ.

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<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=673>

How to Discuss the Liturgy

May 16, 2011

Inevitably the publication of [Universae Ecclesiae](#) has stimulated heartfelt exchanges on the liturgy, and once again I have seen a tendency (though not generally in the public posts on CatholicCulture.org) for each side to denigrate the other. The presumption, too often, is that those who oppose one's own liturgical preferences must necessarily possess a deficient piety, a lack of an authentic Catholic sensibility. Because it is so obvious to people on both sides that they are right, they cannot imagine that their opponents might be as thoroughly Catholic as themselves.

This is by far the most unfortunate aspect of liturgical disagreement, this tendency to write those with different preferences out of the Church, or at least to insist that their understanding of the faith is deficient. While many people think that the Devil rejoices when people are attached to the “wrong” form of the liturgy, it is my conviction that what really makes him happy (insofar as the Devil can be happy) is the vicious division caused by disagreement over the “best” form of the liturgy. For this reason, I'd like to suggest some points to keep in mind for anyone who wants to have fruitful liturgical discussion, as opposed to yet another condemnatory rant which does the Devil proud.

1. Recognize that liturgy always enshrines potentially conflicting objectives.

Just as our understanding of God depends on the consideration of different aspects at different times, the form of the liturgy, as a human medium, is incapable of perfectly expressing once and for all the union with Christ's sacrifice that ought to take place at every Mass. Consider that God is both infinitely transcendent and infinitely immanent, outside and beyond us yet very near and even within us, our Creator and Judge yet also our Brother and Friend, not to mention our Lover! A liturgy can emphasize God's transcendence only at the expense of his immanence, and vice versa.

Closely related to this problem is the tug of war between mystery and intelligibility. While people generally associate mystery with transcendence and a desire to emphasize reverence and awe, mystery is no less associated with immanence, as in the mystery of the Incarnation, by which Our Lord walks with us as a brother. Either way, however, to create a sense of mystery in liturgy we must conceal something, veiling it in ceremonies

and words which repeatedly hint at but do not purport to reveal (for how can they!) the glory of God. But this trajectory generally makes liturgy less immediately intelligible. Thus we may communicate a sense of the ineffable only at the expense of reducing communication about what this encounter ought to mean in our daily life.

Note that these are not quite zero sum games, but questions of degree and balance, as the Mass may, in its unfolding, do more than one thing.

There are other dichotomies as well. Is the liturgy for praise or instruction? Clearly both. Is it to be concerned with the interior life or exterior action in the community? Again, clearly both. Prayers and readings that emphasize our interior relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are certainly appropriate. But so are prayers and readings which emphasize our solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ which is actively formed by the Eucharist itself. The prodigal son, yes; but also the good Samaritan. Similarly, prayers of thanksgiving, penance and praise are wonderful, but if these do not flow naturally into prayers for the assistance of our brothers and sisters in Christ, then we capture only one half of the dichotomy in question.

2. Recognize that it is not the form of the liturgy that saves.

We sometimes hear arguments that the very salvation of the world depends on getting the liturgical form right. We can grant, I think, that one form of the liturgy might reach particular souls more effectively than another, but then I believe we must also grant that this depends not only on the values most effectively communicated in a given liturgy (see previous section) but also on innumerable cultural and even personal factors. It goes without saying that the Church should strive to develop liturgical forms and rubrics which will touch people most deeply and draw them most effectively into the action of Christ. On the one hand, there is no warrant for assuming that the same form will work best for everyone, yet at the same time the Church must obviously impose a certain uniformity on the liturgy to ensure that it remains true to its purpose.

It is fortunate, therefore, that it is not the form of the liturgy that saves, and we must beware of any over-zealous statements which may imply that a particular form is essential to the salvation of the world. This is not the case. It is Christ who saves, through His supreme sacrifice on Calvary which is represented in every liturgical form the Church has ever promulgated. Compared with this, the specific form is of cosmically negligible importance—though it is not unimportant from the point of view of trying to draw us more effectively into union with what Christ does at Mass. Still, this tremendous and even infinite disparity in importance between Christ's saving action and the particular form of the liturgy should fill us with gratitude and help us to keep a

much-needed sense of proportion concerning the human side of things.

3. Recognize that the current ordinary and extraordinary forms, under any names, are very closely related.

People have such a strong emotional reaction to even small changes in the liturgy that they often tend to view the current extraordinary and ordinary forms of the Roman Rite as polar opposites. One can, of course, argue about how much change is too much, or whether particular changes are good or bad. But if you want to contemplate what a truly foreign development would be, or an obviously “inorganic” change (as the expression has it), then consider the Mass without one or more of its essential parts.

All liturgies of the Church are built on the same principle. The liturgy of the Word prepares the congregation for the liturgy of the Eucharist, and the height of the Mass is the representation of the sacrifice of Christ in the consecration, in which Our Lord gives Himself for us, followed by the Communion by which we actually eat His gift of Himself and are formed into one body, the Mystical Body of Christ. The goal in developing what is now called the ordinary form was to strip away various accretions from this essential structure which had accumulated over the years, and to make the basic structure clearer and more intelligible—to recover and enhance, if you will, the noble simplicity characteristic of the Roman Rite. Certainly we can discuss the degree to which various changes succeeded, and it goes without saying that some sense of mystery as well as some beloved aspects of the extraordinary form were sacrificed. But the far larger point, though it may startle you to hear it, is that the two forms are essentially the same thing.

Indeed, we may like or dislike this or that change, especially the more noticeable ones such as the direction the priest faces or the language. Every liturgical change is significant in its province, and may be rendered even more significant based on how it is received, for good or ill. We are well within our rights as Catholics to advocate changes, renewals or restorations which we believe will best serve the Church, as long as we do not credit our own judgment too highly or grow to think that we are the supreme architects of the Church’s form of worship. But we are foolish if we exaggerate the significance of any change that still leaves the fundamental structure and purpose of the Mass intact (as anything approved by the Church will do). The extraordinary and ordinary forms, as formulated by the Church, are as closely related as any of the other approved liturgies of the Church are to each other, and in most respects more closely related. At root, in any case, they are all the same thing expressed in different human ways. It is essential to remember that in discussing the liturgy.

4. Recognize bad arguments when you hear (or make) them.

There are many cogent arguments that can be advanced in favor of or opposition to different approaches to the liturgy. But certain common broad and sweeping arguments are so weak (and even ludicrous) that they really need to be dropped from the discussion as quickly as humanly possible.

For example, proponents of the ordinary form will argue that their opponents are stuck in the past, want to roll back the clock, and refuse to mature in their faith in the ways emphasized by the Second Vatican Council. In some sense, these things may be true of people on all sides of the debate. Some seem unable to leave the 1940's behind, just as others seem eternally mired in the 1960's! And I sincerely doubt there has ever been a magisterial call to ecclesial responsibility that has not been too frequently ignored by people in all camps. But this "stuck in the past" business is not an argument; it is a prejudice. The same sort of prejudice on the other side seeks to make an "argument" that love of the ordinary form is restricted to those with little interior life who possess only a horizontalist spirituality fueled primarily by the errors of popular culture. The proof of this is circular: They love the ordinary form.

Then, too, a specious argument from "attitude" is often used against those who love the extraordinary form (sadly, such an argument is convenient only when one's own side is in the ascendancy, else all Catholics could more often use it against the surrounding culture without assessing its worth). It holds that all those who prefer the extraordinary form are disobedient, self-righteous and narrow-minded. But looking once again from the opposite side, we find an equally specious argument from "fruits". This argument holds that the ordinary form of the Roman Rite is responsible for the crisis of Faith and upheaval in the Church of the last forty years, even though this crisis and upheaval was initiated before the *Novus Ordo* even existed by a priestly and episcopal intelligentsia, born and bred on no Mass but the Tridentine, which had been seduced by the academic culture of Modernism—and as if the massive cultural secularization which swept the entire Western world in the 1960's, much to the Church's detriment, had either never occurred or was also caused by the introduction of the *Novus Ordo* in 1970.

Finally here is one more, in its multiple forms: (a) It is necessary for the liturgy to be in Latin because an unfamiliar language reserved only for worship enhances the sense of transcendence and mystery; (b) It is necessary for the liturgy to be in Latin because this manifests the Church's universality (with the practical advantage that we can all be comfortable with it when we travel abroad); (c) It is necessary for the liturgy to be in the vernacular because this makes it more accessible to most people; (d) It is necessary for

the liturgy to be in the vernacular because God wants us to pray in the language in which we think, the language of our hearts. Each one of these statements, suitably modified, is a reasonable argument for or against Latin, and for or against the vernacular. But the very fact that they contradict each other serves mainly to demonstrate legitimate liturgical tensions that only authority can balance.

All of the arguments in this section betray a combination of over-simplification, ignorance and prejudice which have no place in serious liturgical discussion. I will take the liberty of stating once again that such specious arguments can survive only when emotional attachments are perceived as inherently and exclusively logical, and so are rated far more highly than they deserve.

5. Recognize that we are all unworthy of even the ugliest Mass.

I said elsewhere that I tended not to become emotionally attached to any form of the liturgy, by which some have concluded that I think liturgy is unimportant—an appalling leap of logic. But my emotions can be roused, and here are two things sure to do it:

1. *The insistence that the ordinary form of the Roman Rite is deficient as to form, and either is or may be invalid.* In response, I must ask: Do we inhabit a Church characterized by an authority principle or not? Has Christ promised that the Gates of Hell will not prevail? And has He, or has He not, promised to be with us until the end? How many popes must affirm the validity of the ordinary form, and even insist on acceptance of that validity, before this canard is laid to rest?
2. *The denigration of any Catholic who attends Mass simply because he or she prefers one lawful form of the liturgy to another.* There is no need, I suppose, to belabor this point. I cannot say this strongly enough: Anyone who does this is being used by Satan.

And to these two, let me add a third. If you want to see me really angry, then say something to denigrate or demean any approved liturgical form of the Mass. If you make reasonable arguments for the improvement of any liturgy, I am open to discussion, but if you dismiss any approved form as worthless or abominable or evil, you cross a very dangerous line with me. I should make the same point about valid masses you may encounter away from your usual parish, where you may not like the musical selections, the quality of the lectors, the personality of the priest, or the gender of the altar servers. I recommend you give thanks that you were fortunate enough to attend Mass at all. In any

case, if you dismiss any legitimate form of the Mass as worthless, you have started a fight with me.

So much, then, for my own emotions. The plain fact is that not one of us is worthy of even the most poorly said Mass. Never in our wildest dreams could we ever be worthy. The Mass is an incomparable gift. In any form whatsoever, it is the living and continual representation of an infinite act of Love. For us! Our first obligation is to receive this gift with supreme gratitude and to treasure it in obedience to the authority God has established to provide it.

But is this how we act? No. Instead, suddenly everybody is a critic. Or more likely a parrot of a critic. And so I fear we all have sins to repent in the liturgy wars. In fact, if we repented of these sins, there wouldn't be any wars. There would be only treasured discussions of the best ways to assist others in fruitfully receiving so incomparable a blessing—discussions in which we listen as well as talk; discussions in which we learn as well as teach. And should we still disagree in some measure (as, being all different, we surely will), we would no longer fear that salvation has departed from the Church of Christ—if only we remain obedient to that Church. For apart from the Church we have no guarantees, but with the Church, in whatever form she may choose, we are guaranteed the Mass.

The Mass! It is enough.

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<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=494>

If Only I Could Avoid Temptation ...

July 23, 2009

A recent magazine article called attention to a web site devoted to connecting people who wish to commit adultery. This is an excellent reminder that, perhaps especially in our culture, it is impossible to hide from sexual temptation. It will never be sufficient to attempt to eliminate temptation from our lives, or from the lives of our children. Rather, we must devote ourselves to the cultivation of the virtue of purity. But this must be something more than the cultivation of a natural virtue. To resist temptation successfully, our desire for virtue must be spiritually rooted. It must grow out of our own personal relationship with God.

Purity

Of course the cultivation of a specific virtue is necessary to overcome every vice. But the case of sexual temptation is particularly vexing. In the first place, sexual desire is normal. Not every normal person will experience (for example) the desire to maim or murder. But every normal person will experience sexual desire. And in the second place, contemporary Western culture is now deliberately constructed around the fulfillment of sexual desire. Our culture no longer acts as a hedge against sexual dangers and weaknesses; rather we live in a society which is designed to be sex-saturated, a society which impels each and every person to satisfy his or her sexual impulses. The ubiquity of private, anonymous sexual gratification through the Internet, television and movies has been generally sufficient to break down the instinctive human sense of shame. Immodest dress and the near complete deregulation of sexual activity has led to enormous opportunities for those whose sense of shame has been blunted to take the obvious next social step.

It goes without saying that parents should make a serious effort to shield their children from the worst of our culture's sexual blandishments. All adults should also make reasonable efforts to shield themselves from these temptations throughout their lives. But it is very important to understand that the battle to eliminate temptation cannot be won. No parent can shield his children sufficiently; no adult can shield himself sufficiently. Sexual allure will still become present in a hundred different ways, often arising almost inadvertently from normal interactions which are otherwise completely

good. One way or another—and usually in many ways—the temptation to impurity will be felt, especially by men.

The key, then, is to develop the ability to resist temptation when it does come. This requires a growing relationship with God, a genuine desire to please Him based on the knowledge and experience of His love. In other words, we must pay attention to our spiritual nature, the goodness of God, our dependence on Him, and our need to spend time with Him in prayer. We must also cultivate that same attentiveness in our children. Spiritual growth is not only the ultimate solution to the problem of temptation, it is the only solution.

A Multitude of Sins

Spiritual growth also covers a multitude of sins. What I mean by this can best be conveyed by an example. Suppose parents in a particular family try hard to keep their kids from encountering Internet pornography and stalkers. They set up the necessary controls. They supervise access. But at the same time their kids see Mom dressed immodestly at the beach, and they notice Dad has a cache of questionable magazines. Movies which excite a mild prurient interest are routine. The kids go to the local public school, which does nothing to inculcate purity, and their parents have never talked with them about purity. The family does not pray together, and the parents don't direct their children to spiritual reading suitable for their age group. In fact, the parents don't even remember to pray for their kids. One day the Internet controls fail (this will always happen), and the kids get into all kinds of things they shouldn't see.

Now imagine a different scenario. Mom is modest, Dad clearly values purity, and modesty of dress is enforced for the children. If Dad is watching TV, which he seldom does, he switches channels when inappropriate commercials come on, and he won't watch movies that objectify women, make light of sex, or seem to encourage promiscuity. The parents pray both with and for their children and encourage them to read the lives of the saints. They talk with their kids about the spiritual life and about purity. Unfortunately, though, these parents are fairly clueless technologically, and they aren't sufficiently aware of the danger of cell phones with Internet connections. Their kids soon realize what they can find with their phones, and one day they decide to go find it.

What messages are implicit in these two scenarios? In the first, the message is that the children have gotten their chance to enter the adult world. Their understanding of Internet pornography is that *it is not for children*, and now they can jump-start their transition to adulthood. But in the second, the children understand that they have found a

way to go down a path that is profoundly different from the one their parents have chosen, and which departs from a loving relationship with God. They also know very clearly that their parents regard pornography as wrong *for everyone*. They have already developed some spiritual sense of why this is so. They have the benefit of their parents' prayers, too. Taking everything together, they know they have sinned, and they at least dimly perceive how they ought to deal with this sin now that they have fallen into it.

In the first case, the kids have almost no chance to deal positively with the situation in the long run. But in the second case, the seeds of ultimate success will begin to grow even in the midst of the sin itself. In this way, the preliminary spiritual development of the child will initiate an immediate struggle toward virtue. Spiritual growth covers a multitude of sins.

Same for Adults

The general situation for adults is similar, except the drama is enacted without the continued presence of their parents. If an adult takes a lackadaisical attitude toward spiritual growth, figuring he is basically a good person, organizing his life in a fairly conventional way, and assuming that he will always avoid the worst sins, then when a temptation does strike, he is doomed to fall without engaging in the kind of serious struggle that leads to virtue. But if he is aware of his own weakness, cultivates a desire for grace, spends time in prayer and spiritual reading, frequents the sacraments, seeks spiritual direction as needed, and makes a point of practicing small acts of self-denial when it comes to minor pleasures (especially those he suspects are only semi-innocent)—well, then he will seek to resist temptation when it comes. He may not always resist successfully but, if he falls, the seeds of his ultimate spiritual success will also begin to grow in the midst of his shame.

Anyone who works consistently at spiritual growth will also know that his spiritual battle has an essentially positive trajectory, and so he will generally be shrewd enough to avoid discouragement. While the problem of discouragement can arise in relation to any habitual sin, it is often a bigger problem with impurity, because this sin touches us so personally. We feel not just regretful or weak, but soiled to the core. For this reason, we tend to dwell on it. If we get discouraged, we can lose our sense of God's love, on which also depends our own sense of worth. Such discouragement will stop our spiritual life in its tracks. Even if we don't succumb to discouragement, we might be excessively hard on ourselves, joining the battle too aggressively, worrying too much about the next temptation and how to prevent it. Unfortunately, with sins of impurity in particular, dwelling on the problem will always cause the level of temptation to increase, leading

almost infallibly to another fall.

The solution to both problems is a positive concentration on God's love, and a steady desire to draw closer to Him. The primary prescription is frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance, spiritual direction as required, and regular time for personal prayer. It is important to note here that the sacraments are powerful and certain gifts of grace, but they are gifts which will sit unopened if we fail to develop a personal prayer life through which we can unpack their riches. In addition, spiritual direction may be necessary if we need a change of focus or a deeper understanding of things to get on the right track.

Now, with our spiritual life firmly intact, we grow to understand that for each moment of failure there have been a thousand moments of prayer, spiritual effort, and resistance to temptation. We further understand that every moment of prayer, spiritual effort and resistance has been a sacrificial offering of love. In this context, even our very falls become occasions for recognizing more deeply our dependence on our heavenly Father. God, who loves us far more than we love ourselves, sees all of these moments and wants us to recognize every one of them. Satan sees all of them as well, but he wants us to recognize only the moment of failure.

The Whole Armor of God

If this column were a religion class, I would caution the students not to rush out and tell their friends that "the teacher" says you don't have to try to avoid temptation. To the contrary, we do have to try to avoid temptation, but we cannot avoid it entirely, and we must be prudent. Surely we should try to avoid bad company or refuse to engage in unnecessary activities which incite us to sin. But we cannot refuse to interact with others, and we cannot wall off all temptation by confining ourselves to a dark room with no external stimulation of any kind. In fact, if we were monks, we would know that even this would accomplish nothing. We are at war not only with the world, but with the flesh and the devil. When the hermits of old had to rush out of their rude caves to roll in the snow, it was because the devil himself incited their flesh to rebellion, in memory of the world.

No. The only path of success lies in drawing closer to God, cooperating with Him in our own spiritual development. Then, as we mature spiritually, we will find many things less tempting than they were, or even no longer tempting at all, and we will also fall less often even in the face of temptations which remain strong. The battle against some vices may take years or even decades, or indeed the battle may be lifelong. But it is a battle not to prevent temptation but to cure it through union with Christ; it is not a matter of cutting

ourselves off from life in the vain hope of never falling, but of embracing Life more fully in the assurance of ultimate victory over sin and death.

St. Paul put it this way in his letter to the Ephesians:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

(6:11-13)

This is what I'm talking about. It is not enough simply to avoid temptation. Victory consists in reaching out to "take the whole armor" so that we may be able to face evil when it comes. For it will come, and we must face it. There is no other way. So we must put spiritual growth first. We must above all seek an ever-deeper union with Jesus Christ. This, and this alone, is what it means to put on the whole armor of God.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=334>

The Annunciation and the Measure of Spiritual Progress

March 25, 2010

As serious Catholics, we are often troubled by our inability to pray effectively. We are distracted at prayer; we fail to concentrate as we should; we feel indifferent or even cold; we finish our prayers unsatisfied; and often our prayers seem to be ignored. There is much that could be said about each of these problems, but none of them should make us doubt our closeness to God, for the ultimate test of our spiritual progress is simply whether or not we are doing His will.

In saying this, I do not in any way mean to praise action over prayer, for not only must we pray to know how to act, but it is God's will that we both pray and act, and that we do each at the appropriate time and in the proper way. What I mean to point out is simply this: We cannot judge our spiritual progress by how much time we spend in prayer or by how satisfying we find our time at prayer, or by whether or not we judge our prayers to be frequently answered, or even by the degree of success we see in our apostolic labors. Our spiritual progress is, in the last analysis, measured by one thing and one thing only, our attentiveness to discerning and doing the will of God.

God's Will

Everything that matters is included in the idea of doing God's will. It is God's will that we nourish ourselves in prayer whether we are distracted or not, whether we experience consolations or not, whether we see results or not. It is God's will that we accept the teachings of His Church regardless of whether we fully understand them or like them. It is God's will that we be open to spiritual direction from those who are placed over us in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and that we acquire the mind of the Church through spiritual reading. It is God's will that we attempt each day to live in His presence, seeking to know and follow His will in every circumstance, looking for opportunities to serve His Church and magnify His glory. It is God's will that we work patiently to curb our appetites and overcome our habitual faults, so that nothing may separate us from Him and nothing will diminish our effectiveness in doing His will.

But when it comes to judging our own progress, we must dispense with the false

standards of measuring our consolations, reviewing our prosperity, or even gauging the success of our apostolic undertakings. God may choose to give us consolations, or He may withhold them lest we love the consolations more than the One who gives them. He may choose to crown either our vocations or our career choices with worldly signs of success (which we must use to good advantage for His Kingdom), or He may prefer that we struggle (which we must offer up in penance and reparation). He may cause our work for the Gospel to draw countless souls immediately to our cause or, in His wonderful economy of salvation, He may make our work appear fruitless, granting the increase only invisibly or in another time and place. One sows; another reaps.

All this is true on both sides of our own foolish accounting ledgers. Just as apparent fruitlessness is no sure sign that we have failed to do God's will, so is apparent success no sure sign that we have done it. All visible failures and successes can contain an admixture of worldly dross which make them very difficult to assess. Therefore, our sole reliable criterion of judgment on the question of our spiritual progress is not whether we appear to be successful at prayer, in our vocation, or in our apostolic work, but whether we are living moment by moment according to what Our Lord asks of us right now.

The Role of Success in Discernment

I hasten to add that, as a prudential matter, we must often judge God's will concerning our activity in the world by both the opportunities we have and the successes or failures we experience. If we are married or ordained, of course, certain duties and responsibilities go with these states in life which must be fulfilled at all times regardless of whether they seem to meet with success or failure. The same is true of various jobs in which we are placed, so long as we remain in them. But as we judge how much time we should spend on this or that specific activity, or whether we should make a career of one thing or another, or even whether we should throw our energies into this apostolic labor or something else, we must naturally take into account what opportunities we have and, as we try whatever seems best, we must inevitably learn whether we will meet with sufficient success to continue.

Thus in certain areas of our lives, we can and must discern God's will not only by prayer and spiritual direction but by the openings placed before us and the results we achieve. But this is a matter of our ongoing discernment of God's will, a task which will never cease to occupy us; it is not at all a matter of judging our spiritual progress. Unless we see something seriously deficient, either indolent or headstrong, in how we have approached some work, we are not to assume that its failure means we have not been doing God's will. It is just as likely that He wants us to experience this difficulty for the

fruit that it will bear in our lives or the lives of others. Therefore, it is very often the case that, if we can see no way to continue a current work, we learn not that we have failed spiritually but only that Our Lord wants us now to turn our efforts in a new direction.

The Lesson of the Annunciation

I write this on the Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord because the Church in her wisdom teaches us precisely this lesson above all others through her readings for this particular feast. There is, of course, the reading from the Gospel of Luke, in which Mary responds to the Angel's words with her famous *fiat* (Latin for *let it be done*): "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." This is a perfect expression of the Virgin's conformity with God's will, and it has always taught Christians a great deal about the spiritual life. But the point is made even more tellingly in the second reading.

We must remember that the Annunciation is the day on which we commemorate not only the *announcement* of the coming of the Son of God to the Blessed Virgin Mary, but His actual incarnation in her womb. The *Letter to the Hebrews* tells us in Chapter 10 exactly what this means to the Son Himself:

When Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings thou has not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou has taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God.'"

Has God not fashioned bodies also for us? If so, it is for the selfsame purpose. We cannot judge how pleasing we are to God by our apparent success or lack of success in prayer or action of any kind, neither by the joy we feel in personal devotions, nor by the beauty of our liturgies, nor again by the commendations we may receive for our accomplishments. The sole measure of our spiritual growth is whether we are doing God's will today more perfectly than we did yesterday, and doing it this year more perfectly than last—and whether we are doing it not only in the big decisions by which we direct our lives but also in the countless little opportunities for love which mark our every waking hour.

Was Our Lord less united to His Father in the Agony in the Garden than in the Sermon on the Mount? Or was He more pleasing to the Father on Palm Sunday than on Good Friday? In reflecting on such questions, we may honestly say that there are two things only for which we must pray: light to know God's will, and courage to do it. This is the only way we have of drawing into union with God, of giving Him the glory due

His holy name. And so it is the ultimate spiritual distraction to think there is some other means of measuring our progress in His love. There is one proper measure, and one only: We have come to do thy will, O God.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

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Discipleship: No Excuses

October 27, 2010

Recently I had an interesting exchange with a reader who was concerned that I was too hard on the many Catholics who have simply been too spiritually lazy to take seriously the Second Vatican Council's call to renewal in their personal lives (see [Afterword: The Mythology and the Reality of Vatican II](#)). This correspondent thought such laziness was inevitably the Catholic norm, and insisted that the real blame lies with their pastors—priests and bishops who have distorted or ignored the Council. Of course, it is not just the Council we're talking about, but the authentic call to renewal which lies at the heart of every Christian life.

I have no wish, of course, to exonerate culture-bound shepherds, whose failure to exercise a proper responsibility for their flocks will indeed be judged harshly. As Luke's Gospel explains, "to whom much is given, from him much will be expected" (Lk 12:48). But it is also necessary to insist on other parts of the same Gospel which stress the responsibility each person bears to seek God, learn His will, and follow it. It is true that everyone is judged according to what he has been given, but as the parable of the talents shows, satisfactory excuses are few and far between.

Our Lord said as much elsewhere in St. Luke's Gospel, when He reflected on discipleship. "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (14:26). And "whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (14:27). And again "So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (14:33).

Jesus gave two examples to illustrate what He meant. In the first, He compares a failure in discipleship to a man who starts building a tower without sufficient resources to finish it (14:28-30). In the second, He compares such a failure to a king who neglects to sue promptly for peace if he sees he is about to be assailed by an enemy more powerful than himself (14:31-32). The second example is perhaps the easier to grasp. The wise king, realizing he cannot resist the opposing force, sends an embassy and asks terms "while the other is a great way off." In other words, the wise king is willing to capitulate promptly, to give up whatever is asked. In the same way, any wise person, seeing the vast difference between God and himself, must be willing to capitulate—to give up

anything and everything—to save his life.

The case is similar with the one building the tower, who will be a laughingstock if he cannot finish. Does Our Lord mean that we should not build if we wisely foresee that we lack sufficient resources to complete the tower? This can hardly be the point. Rather, what is required to build a true tower to God is simply all that we have—just as in the case of the king. Only if we are willing to give everything can we be His disciples. Holding back makes us God’s object lessons—His laughingstocks.

I grant that this self-abnegation does not often occur promptly, nor does it generally happen all at once. Certainly Our Lord tells the merciful and moving story of the prodigal son in the very next chapter. Nonetheless, He has already made it clear earlier in the same chapter that discipleship is a serious business, with serious consequences attending its failure. We find Him at a banquet where the guests are vying for the higher places, and so He gives a lesson in humility (again, the emphasis is on self-emptying), and on the blessings self-effacement brings to those who immediately seek out a lower place. So one of the guests exclaims, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (14: 12-15)

We might expect Our Lord to approve this insight, but He does not. Instead (“*but*”) Jesus replies with the parable of the householder whose ostensible friends refused to come to his banquet. In anger the householder turns to the poor, the maimed, the blind, and the lame; he sends his servants even into the highways and hedges to draw in guests to fill his house. “For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet” (14:16-24). These are Our Lord’s words just before St. Luke takes up the requirements of true discipleship.

They are also reminiscent of one of His more famous sayings: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mt 7:21). Indeed, in another place in Luke’s own account, Jesus Christ demands in apparent exasperation: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you?” (6:46). But, you see, what He tells us is that we must sacrifice everything to be His disciples.

So, yes, our God is a merciful God. He alone reads the heart aright, and we must not presume to judge the spiritual state of anyone’s heart. But neither may anyone rely on excuses. Excuses won’t get the tower built or save the life of the king and his people. In exactly the same way—unless we wish to be laughingstocks or worse, and myself first of all—we must not count on excuses in the spiritual life.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=726>

Are You Growing Holier?

April 12, 2011

We want to be holy and we pray and work toward that end. But if we are honest and self-aware, we also realize that we do some picking and choosing among the various paths and regimens of holiness, selecting those which are most congenial to our personalities, and avoiding what we find too taxing or even intolerable. So how do we know whether we are growing in holiness?

A person is typically a poor judge in his own case, and I don't mean to ignore the potential assistance of a good spiritual director. But most of us, most of the time, must rely pretty heavily on our own understanding both of what it means to be holy and of whether we are progressing along that road. In general, if we constrain our beliefs and our piety within the limits set by the Church, if we pray regularly, and if we truly try to discern the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we will not go far wrong. But sometimes we'd be willing to trade half our kingdom for a checklist.

I think I've found one.

In the latest issue of *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, Fr. Basil Cole has an article entitled "Formation of novices and seminarians: Nine signs of steady growth". Fr. Cole, a Dominican scholar and prior whose writings I have found both interesting and helpful, is attempting to set forth a series of indicators of spiritual growth by which someone preparing for the priesthood can be evaluated. But it turns out that his list is a pretty good tool for evaluating all growth in holiness, making suitable adjustments for each person's situation.

Here are Fr. Cole's indicators, simplified in the form of nine questions, which suggest the key areas in which we should honestly look for continual growth:

1. **Am I God-centered?** This addresses the question of whether we think ourselves the center of the universe, in which case we are likely to be tense, negative and critical. We discern progress here if we come more easily to see the good in others, to accept the dispositions of Providence cheerfully, and to trust in God even in the midst of trials and temptations.
2. **Do I take joy in serving others?** There may be times when either our normal duties or interruptions in our routine demand that we occupy ourselves with tasks

we do not particularly enjoy, primarily for the benefit of others. We are growing in charity if we find such services easier to perform over time, especially with a sincere desire to be of benefit, and if we gain the ability to remain recollected and prayerful even when doing something we do not naturally enjoy.

3. **Do I hate sin?** As time goes on, if we are growing spiritually, we should be increasingly averse not only to great sins but to lesser ones. We should be developing a progressively stronger resolve to avoid anything—including objectively innocent pursuits—which can be an obstacle to our union with God. And of course we should be actively seeking the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit, which are the opposite of the disposition to sin.
4. **Is my conscience delicate?** This is closely related, and refers to the need to become ever more sensitive in discerning what is displeasing to God. In the beginning, for example, we may wish to avoid adultery but think nothing of flirting or stealing the odd kiss or two. In time, true growth demands that we more clearly perceive the sinful attitudes at work across the board. Then we will become more watchful over our virtue, even in our thoughts, and we'll also more easily distinguish among degrees of sin, and between temptation and sin.
5. **Am I humble?** To use Fr. Basil's own words, a sense of humility "means a submission to whatever God desires in the moment, even if it means being unknown or unrecognized." Pride and vainglory lead us to be calculating in all that we do, in order to increase in stature before the world. But God wants our personal surrender to Himself and to those who, in each moment, represent His will.
6. **Am I faithful in prayer?** If we prefer to lose ourselves in a constant whirl of activity, and find that we are uncomfortable being alone with God in the silence of our hearts, we'll go backwards. Spiritual growth is marked by a growing willingness to put ourselves in the presence of God, even if we suffer from dryness or distractions in prayer.
7. **Do my decisions reflect truth and prudence?** As we grow spiritually, we should become more adept at knowing when to seek counsel, yet we should also be increasingly able to advise others, or act quickly and decisively ourselves, in ways that will still seem spiritually right after the fact. We should grow in our capacity to size up each situation properly and apply the right virtue and the right solution to each challenge.

8. **Is my heart undivided?** Simply put, this question asks whether we allow various interests and attachments to conflict with our thirst for God or whether we are gradually developing a more ordered appreciation of all good things in, through and for God, in proper relationship to Him. Especially with things we particularly enjoy, we should be praying and working to see them in the light of Christ.
9. **Do I love the Church?** To again quote Fr. Basil, “the institutional Church is the unsullied Bride of Christ through which He gives Himself and His graces to a flawed people in need of enlightenment and purification from sin.” Each day, each moment, we should find ourselves loving the Church more and more wholeheartedly, despite her all too evident human flaws. If that is not happening, it is a sure sign we are backsliding.

To me, this seems like an excellent set of indicators for self-evaluation. Each item is a tool for spiritual growth in its own right. And in the end, progress in every area is essential if we are to maximize the potential God has given us for union with Him.

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Practice Makes Perfect

March 07, 2011

The alarm clock sounds. A young man rises and makes a morning offering to his Lord and Savior. He will mark the rest of the day with remembrances of God: Mass in the morning, the Angelus at noon, grace before each meal, a brief prayer whenever it is time for a new appointment, or whenever he goes out or comes in. He will do some spiritual reading after dinner, and say a Rosary as well. Before retiring, he will examine his conscience and offer some final prayers. He has not only habituated himself to certain devotions at certain times; he is also practicing the presence of God.

Or take another image. A mother of three young children tries occasionally to take them to Mass, and she makes a point of her daily Rosary too. But she has also developed a number of “holy tricks” that help her keep a proper spiritual focus throughout the day. Each time she is interrupted, she uses it as a reminder to invoke God’s blessing. As she attends to her children’s needs, she asks Mary to help her to respond in union with her Immaculate Heart. When the phone rings (always at the worst of times) she prays for patience. At nap time, she takes a few moments deliberately to recollect herself, placing herself before the infant Jesus at one with her child, and gazing on Him with love.

Or perhaps each time a plumber is called to a home, he prays that the grace of baptism will reach and cleanse each member of that household. A loan officer at a local bank may ask God on behalf of each new client for the wisdom to use resources prudently and for His glory. A road worker might offer quick petitions for the safety of the motorists who must navigate the work zone. An elderly man could choose to invoke Saint Joseph every time he feels his age in the pain of muscle or joint.

Few of us live in religious communities in which the hours of the day are marked by calls to prayer, or in small villages in which a church bell reminds everyone of the divinely ordered passage of time. The rest of us need to do things all on our own. First, we must schedule certain regular patterns of prayer and meditation, set periods in which we deliberately place ourselves in the presence of God in an extended way. Second, we must take advantage of little things that occur in the normal flow of our day and make them “Church bells” that remind us to raise our minds and hearts to God.

As the examples above suggest, these little things can be anything we want to use—small triggers to which, with some effort, we can learn to respond by emerging

from the business at hand to acknowledge God. Some people set regular alarms on their computers, cell phones or wrist watches. But others use the normal pace-changers of the day: Opening or closing a door, getting up from one's desk, going to a meeting, shifting from one task to another, and so on. The key is to let something pull us out of our normal concentration from time to time so that we can take a moment to offer everything to God, ask his blessing, pray for any special intentions, or simply reaffirm our wish to live always in His presence.

When such calls to honor the supernatural world come to us from some source that affects everyone within a larger group—a family, a club, a company, a political entity, and above all the Church—they have an added value. The preeminent traditional example is the ringing of church bells. These bells are associated with God's work, and so they have a special power to remind all willing hearts that this temporal order is subordinate to a higher order. When the bells toll, we pause to acknowledge this deeper reality in prayer.

A truly rich and healthy culture will have such signs, such symbols of and occasions for the impenetration of grace into our daily round of duties. But amid the flat secularity of our own day, the traditional signs have largely been lost. It is up to us, then, to restore or reinvent such signs in the institutions over which we have some influence—in private schools, to take just one example—and also, again, to arbitrarily designate certain spiritual triggers in our own daily activities.

These inventions and designations may not carry the full power of inculturation. They may not serve for anyone else as potent signs of the primacy of the life of God in all human things, but that does not make them unworthy. For no matter how wonderful it is to live in a culture marked by widely-understood reminders of God, the more important purpose of such particulars is to help a person form the habit of practicing the presence of God. That is, they serve their best purpose, no matter what they are, when they enable us to remember God's active presence in our own lives, so that we might live at every moment in accordance with His will—and in continual supplication, gratitude and love toward Him.

Practicing this awareness of God's presence is always a work in progress. How easily are we distracted from our loving Father by responsibilities or even flights of fancy! How hard it is to be aware of Our Lord's role in all that we are and do! Because of our tendency to forget, we may make a firm resolution to remember God at the start of our day, and then become so immersed in the requirements of our occupation that we emerge at the end of a hectic and taxing day only to realize we have not turned toward God even once.

But it is precisely the purpose of these seemingly artificial “tricks”, this selection of specific triggers, at intervals to lift us out of our mundane absorptions and awaken us to opportunities to turn to God. It really does take practice to make these things work, lest we too frequently fail to notice the signs we have chosen, and so only rarely pause in moments of deeper recognition and simple prayer. We must habituate ourselves to the stimulus and the response, so that whether by pre-programmed alarms or other tokens randomized by the changing events of a busy day, we may be always ready to turn toward the One who made us.

This effort never ends, but it does grow easier. Gradually we learn to focus frequently on the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit, whether directly or through the intercession of Mary or one of the saints. This is a school of sanctity. In this school, we become ever more perfectly oriented toward God, and ever more finely tuned to His will. In the end, we become almost continuously aware of God’s presence, providence and love. The distance between earth and heaven grows short. We become ready, at last, for something more.

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Living the Will of God: Vocation, Avocation, and Moment to Moment

July 05, 2012

As many of my long-time readers know, I enjoy sailing small boats. As a result, I've also read a good deal of literature by and about sailors. Much of this comes from full-time live-aboard sailors or those who have circumnavigated the world in smallish craft. It's a life that brings one close to nature, with plenty of time for reflection, and that reflection almost invariably produces a sense of one's own smallness. As a result, such writing is generally insightful, often exciting and sometimes even poetic. But authors in this genre tend also to make unflattering comparisons between sailors and the rest of mankind. And that's where I draw an important line.

Everybody has a secret dream, so the argument goes, but few have the courage to live their dream. The sailor casts off his moorings and goes, and this (he too often claims) makes him a superior sort of person—a person who overcomes the petty restrictions of landlubber life, restrictions such as work, the monthly anxiety of meeting the mortgage payment, useless conventions and constant schedules. In book after book, sometimes sympathetic and sometimes not, sailing authors parrot that venerable American fraud, Henry David Thoreau, expressing the conviction that (unlike himself, of course) “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” Or, in the even more famous words of Dr. Seuss in his alphabet book, *On Beyond Zebra*: “Most people stop with the Z...but not me!”

Now it is a sad thing when any person, after reasonably concluding that some personal aspiration is consonant with his larger and higher responsibilities, fails to attempt to fulfill that aspiration out of a sort of debilitating timidity or, as is perhaps even more often the case, out of laziness. It is even sadder when we allow ourselves to be bogged down (as, yes, all of us do at times) in secondary, inessential and ultimately inconsequential or even damaging preoccupations, so that we lose sight of more important goals and even potential achievements. Put this way, the situation is almost a paradigm for what might be wrong with our spiritual lives.

But the sailor's conclusion (or any similar conclusion) does not follow. It is simply not the case that those who throw off all constraints in order to follow their desires are

superior to those who are unwilling to do so. For the truly superior person resolves not to do his own will but the will of God. He constantly tests his own desires against God's will, doing his best to discern the difference between purely natural inclinations and those interior movements of the Holy Spirit which indicate some solid and enduring aspect of God's plan for his life.

Vocation

Given this introduction, no reader will be surprised that another frequent theme in articles written by sailors is marital breakup. I have encountered many self-revelatory comments about how a sailor's love for his boat gradually separated him from his wife and his children until divorce became inevitable. The remarkable thing is a tendency to place the blame on the non-sailing party who, without doubt, really was by that point leading a life of quiet desperation. But this raises the key question. How do we discern God's will? When we are talking about setting out on a life-long course of following God's will, the answer begins with our response to a general vocation, a call by God to a particular state in life.

This notion of vocation is supremely liberating. Nobody can go through life attempting to learn and follow God's will with respect to every aspect of life at every moment. This just isn't possible. And if it is not possible, it means God does not ask us to do it. Instead, He ordinarily places us in a context in which the broad outlines of His will are clear. We all start out as children, for example, and while we are children, this state in life dictates and conditions nearly all of our responsibilities. Even as children, if we work at these responsibilities, doing the will of God can become habitual. In this as in any other "state-in-life" vocation, there can be upheavals. A parent may die, or have severe problems of one sort or another, and this may prompt new questions and responsibilities, especially if we are at an age at which our "purely" child status is nearing its end. But such upheavals are not continuous.

The same is true as we mature and prepare to strike out "on our own". We will not really be on our own, of course, for now the well-formed person—the person who knows that both accomplishment and happiness consist in doing God's will—seeks to know what new state of life God calls him to. It may be the priesthood, religious life, or some other form of consecrated single life; or it may be marriage and family; or it may be the single state with no formal consecration, which frees the person for kinds of service which are not as specifically pre-patterned as in the other states, or kinds of service that those in other states could never undertake. (I part company here with those who argue that there is no such thing as a vocation to a single life that is not formally consecrated.

But all of us are in the single state while discerning our vocations, and by its nature a vocation to the single state is more easily open to change.)

One discerns a vocation, as one discerns every not-yet-known aspect of God's will, in prayer. But once a person understands his or her fundamental call and follows it, fidelity to this state-in-life vocation really is tremendously liberating. Far from imposing petty restrictions which prevent a person from realizing his deepest aspirations, the vocation provides a framework within which a person can more easily realize his deepest aspiration to follow God's will more fully. This is precisely because a great many of the foundational decisions are now settled.

A priest knows that God's will for him is framed by obedience to an ecclesiastical superior and a life of sacramental ministry. A married person knows that his family provides the pattern for what it means to make all of his decisions in accordance with the will of God. Those in consecrated life inherit a spiritual regimen and a structure of spiritual authority. Even the person who is by vocation single will seek to serve others in a manner, or to a degree, not possible for those whose vocations by their very nature impose specific limitations on their ordinary activity.

Avocation

The single person will be left with more to discern, of course, and in any case no state-in-life vocation is necessarily permanent. A spouse may die, thrusting a married man or woman back into the single state; a person called to the single state for an extended period may, in time, find himself called to marriage or priesthood or religious life; religious orders sometimes fail or are suppressed; even priests, with or without personal fault, may be occasionally laicized. So conditions may arise in which any given person may have to discern again what his fundamental vocation is, that vocation which provides the basic framework for his overall pattern of life.

More commonly, however, within a well-understood vocation, each person must also discern what is often called an avocation. Unfortunately, this word can sometimes be used to refer to one's principal vocation, and at other times to a hobby. But I use it here to indicate, within a state-in-life vocation, the particular occupation a person will pursue. This too can change, usually more frequently than a vocation, but such moments of avocational decision are still relatively rare. In any case, like the vocation, the avocation or occupation must be discerned in prayer.

Generally a vocational decision will heavily color an avocational decision, and sometimes a very broad avocational decision will color a more specific one. For example, in some cases a person who is a priest or religious will be assigned particular

work, but there will often be an opportunity for both the person in question and the superior to discern what particular work God is calling the person to do. In a similar way, a person who joins the military may have greater or lesser control over the specific job to which he or she is assigned. Moreover, the daily work or even career of a husband or a wife will be (or should be, whenever possible) circumscribed by the demands of family life. A consecrated single person may make avocational decisions in part with a specific community in mind. An unconsecrated single person may have a wider scope for decision, but will rarely be free of external constraints (geographical location, ability, the needs of relatives or friends).

In fact, it is precisely through the full variety of possible constraints (including, of course, our own particular gifts) that God most commonly indicates to us the avocations He wishes us to pursue. Very frequently, several possibilities will come to mind in prayer and reflection, either all at once or over time. But quite often only one actual opportunity will present itself in a compelling way, or even in any way at all. God's will is perhaps more commonly—and more easily—read in the light of real opportunities than in any other way.

But even the real possibilities must be discerned in prayer. God is capable of communicating possibilities to us which we would otherwise miss. In addition, there still remains the sailor's dilemma: When is our desire to follow a certain path a temptation, and when does the temptation lie in our reluctance? When is our conviction that we are incapable of doing something an intuition from the Holy Spirit, and when is it the Holy Spirit's challenge to overcome our fear? Frequent prayer (including frequent and reverent reception of the sacraments), accompanied by spiritual direction whenever that will be helpful, is the only way to properly discern God's will. And even when receiving spiritual direction, it is never the director's place to make the decision, but only to help us learn better how to discern God's will.

The Sacrament of the Present Moment

Where are we now in our consideration? We have discerned what I call our state-in-life vocation, and within that we have discerned our avocation, that is, our ordinary occupation. Both of these decisions impose general and specific frameworks within which, as long as we are in this vocation and avocation, tell us a great deal about what we must do to fulfill the will of God in our daily lives. They will provide a system of devotion (or at least imply the general means by which we ought to develop our spiritual life). They will give us both an overarching mission and a fairly comprehensive set of specific responsibilities. They will very largely govern the use of our time. Within the

topic of this essay, “Living the Will of God”, they will invariably make our decisions far easier than they would otherwise be. Finally, they enable us to develop specific habits which ensure that we are busy with God’s will much of the time.

But we must also realize that the vocation and the avocation do not complete the process of living the will of God. For as long as we are in this vocation, and for as long as we are in this avocation, many of our decisions are fixed. But within the vocation and the avocation there are a million possible variations. Moreover, as a general rule, no vocation or avocation occupies all of our time with its specific set of concrete responsibilities. This means that even within these liberating frameworks, we must continue the process of discerning God’s will. Rooted firmly and serenely in our vocation and avocation, we must seek his will moment by moment. Or as Fr. de Caussade so admirably puts it in his masterwork of spiritual direction, [Abandonment to Divine Providence](#), we must seek to live always in the sacrament of the present moment.

Consider: Periodically I may have the opportunity to choose a new project or a new emphasis in my occupation; always I have this opportunity in my spare time. In addition, my direct superior may change, or my workload or habitual method of operation may be altered or even disrupted. Moreover, at any moment of the day there may arise a new possibility for me to consider. Or, very likely, I will frequently experience interruptions, which may be welcome or dreaded, but which (I may be sure) are Providential. How will I respond to each new possibility, each fresh interruption? What does Our Lord have to say about it? In which direction am I inclined by the Spirit of God?

Here the sailing analogy is fairly useful. The one thing sailors must learn to do is depend on wind and weather. This is why sailors tend to develop patience and a philosophical outlook on life, in the sense of discerning the difference between what they can and cannot control, and recognizing their inescapable dependence on many surrounding circumstances. Their progress, and sometimes their lives, will depend on making the right adjustments to these circumstances. And this is precisely what each of us is called to do, first and foremost in our spiritual depths, and then in every thought, word and action which flows from who we are and who we wish to become in Christ.

To refer to Fr. de Caussade’s advice again, the chief obstacle to discerning and doing God’s will—whether for our vocation, avocation, or moment to moment—will always be self-love. We are annoyed by something because of our complacency; we are offended by someone because of our pride; we put off doing this or that because it is outside our comfort zone; we rush hither and thither because we find it diverting or entertaining; we avoid some people because they strain our charity, and we avoid some causes because they strain our pocketbooks; and of course we curry favor here and there, wherever it

pampers our conceit. “Self love!” cries Fr. de Caussade, and he is right.

Self-love is in all cases the preeminent obstacle to spiritual advancement, and therefore to doing God’s will. If only Thoreau and my sailing exemplars knew what causes us to lead lives of quiet desperation! They would soon learn that they cannot long escape such a fate by changing their location on the face of the waters. They would learn the difference between fruitful recreation and flight from responsibility. They would, in other words, realize that both success and happiness in life come from seeking and doing God’s will. Remarkably, some do find this message blowing in the wind, even though they habitually separate themselves from the sacraments by living on a boat. But for most of us, the heavy spiritual lifting necessary to reach life’s true goals is done where we find ourselves, close to home—more firmly grounded than all those who are essentially at sea.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

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Spiritual Self-Reliance: The Enemy Within

August 11, 2006

I inadvertently switched parishes when I moved into my last home, but I didn't know it. When I found out, my kids were already in the old parish school, and the pastor of the new parish was less than orthodox. Wanting both the reduced tuition and the better preaching, I obtained official permission to remain where I was. In other words, I got what I wanted. What's at stake here?

Church and Sacrament

As Catholics, we have to beware of the congregational impulse. Protestants believe their relationship with God is formed primarily through direct, Scripture-centered inspiration by the Holy Spirit. In consequence, they form congregations only secondarily. They choose them based largely on personal preference, according to the preaching and pastoring styles they find most congenial or most helpful. There is nothing in Protestant principles to argue against such congregational patterns. Given Protestant beliefs, they are perfectly natural.

But Catholics understand their relationship with God to be mediated through the sacraments and guided by the authority of the Church, which speaks for Christ. In consequence, properly formed Catholics regard private interpretation and individual preferences as secondary and even dangerous. According to Catholic principles, we ought to welcome and revere the Church wherever we find her, and accept her ministry through the ordinary structures she herself has put in place to spiritually nourish Christ's flock.

Picking and Choosing

An excessive emphasis on one's own ideas and preferences is a characteristic of heresy, which comes from a Greek word meaning "to choose". In matters of Faith, worship and ministry, excessive reliance on one's own opinions is unacceptable. Unfortunately, in the generation following the 1960s a decline in the quality of priestly formation in the West led many priests to rely excessively on their own opinions, which has in turn created

tremendous pressure on the Catholic faithful to fall into the same trap.

The pressure is of two types. First, those who are lukewarm or ill-informed tend to follow their pastors into error whenever they echo the opinions of the world rather than the teachings of the Church. This has created a generation of Catholics who fail to understand or even value the cohesive unity of Catholic doctrine and worship. Second, those who are more committed and better-formed have felt a need to second-guess their pastors, relying on their own understanding—inevitably, their own opinions—far more than is spiritually healthy.

Habitual Self-Reliance

The result is that most of us, even those of us who are self-consciously committed to the “Catholic thing”, have gotten into the habit of spiritually “shopping around”. Not only do we feel justified in rejecting the ministry of heretical priests (whose wayward ideas can be measured fairly clearly against the teachings of higher Catholic authority), but we have actually gotten into the habit of preferring our own ideas on *nearly everything*. This is reflected in the complaints we make, the arguments we raise, the parishes we choose, even the expressions on our faces. In some cases, the deeply committed have become as negatively self-attached as the uncommitted.

One cannot be both fully-Catholic and habitually self-reliant in spiritual matters at the same time. As I said at the outset, part of being Catholic is accepting that our relationship with God is mediated through Church and sacrament. Excessive reliance on our own ideas and preferences inevitably weakens our ties with the Church, which is our preeminent source of grace. We begin to do things our way instead of the Church’s way or, to say the same thing another way, we open ourselves to the ministry of the Church only when it suits ourselves.

Spiritual Pettiness

Am I saying that there can be no good reason to lodge a protest or even to switch parishes? No. Am I presuming to set down hard and fast rules? Not at all. But I am suggesting that we must balance our perception of the dangers around us with a healthy perception of the danger we pose to ourselves. The Church militant, being populated exclusively by the fallen, will always exhibit various degrees of weakness in her ministers and in her parishes. This is neither new nor necessarily worse in our own time. If we think that our extraordinary circumstances justify an unusual or extreme self-reliance in matters Catholic, we are almost certainly wrong.

A healthy perception of the dangers we pose to ourselves can prevent this

self-reliance from getting out of hand. In addition to weakening our bonds of unity with the Church, we take a less obvious risk when we make ourselves into the supreme standards of spiritual judgment. Claiming that we do so only with the clearest understanding of past Church teaching or of “what the Pope really wants” generally staves off disaster only briefly. For the habit of spiritual self-reliance almost always leads to spiritual pettiness, as all of us are pretty small when compared with God. Here pride and pettiness invariably kiss, and the lion lies down only where he finds it comfortable.

Suspect Yourself

What, then, is the solution? I believe it is extreme caution born of humility and charity. We need to accept spiritual direction and learn to obey legitimate authority whenever possible without sin. We need to look for opportunities to embrace things that are not to our liking, supporting those who are trying to do good even when we dislike their “style”. We need to avoid attaching ourselves to favorite priests and avoid alienating ourselves from the others. We need to be quick to praise, slow to criticize, reluctant to choose what we prefer, and extremely reluctant to make any sort of break. In a word, we need to learn to be suspicious, not primarily of everyone else, but of ourselves.

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The Consequences of Not Fasting

February 27, 2009

In his [Message for Lent 2009](#), Pope Benedict focuses on just one thing: the revival of the ancient Christian practice of fasting. I certainly cannot improve on his presentation, so with respect to what Benedict says, I simply repeat an earlier recommendation to read it for yourself, and then act upon it. But taking a cue from what the Pope leaves unsaid, I intend to concentrate here on what it means when we do *not* fast.

The Pope describes fasting as “a great help to avoid sin and all that leads to it”, a means “to mortify our egoism”, a path for “conferring unity on the whole person, body and soul”, and a way to “open in the heart of the believer a path to God”. Now, if all this is true, we do well to consider the consequences of failing to fast. Might not those consequences include egoism, materialism, selfishness and self-indulgence of every kind?

Fasting and the Culture

All around us we see evidence of a self-indulgent culture. Especially in the West, society seems to be composed of an aggregation of individuals who believe, in their egoism, that the world exists for their benefit; who act, in their materialism, as if the highest good is physical comfort and pleasure; who ignore, in their selfishness, both the material and spiritual well-being of others; and who fall, in their self-indulgence, into extreme patterns of dependency on physical sensations (gluttony, drugs, alcoholism, pornography, sexual excess, and the like). And then, of course, they turn around and justify all this under the name of freedom and the rejection of past tyrannies, even while subjecting themselves ever more thoroughly to their own passions, lacking the self-discipline to recognize their own slavery.

Self-discipline comes by degrees, through practice. The first step is that slight independence of intellect which we call objectivity, the ability to stand at least a little bit outside and above our own feelings so that we can assess ourselves properly. A certain measure of humility is required, of course, for objectivity is always crushed under the immense weight of the almighty self. Still, properly encouraged, this objectivity leads to the recognition that we are not free but slaves to our passions. This objectivity then informs the will that it must take steps to free itself from domination by the passions, and

so objectivity proposes the first step toward what Christians call detachment. Gradually, by clearing away all those things which have enslaved us for so long, we begin to open ourselves to God and to grow in union with Him. And this we call grace.

Grace, of course, will have been active from the first hint of objectivity, but it takes some time for us to recognize what it is and to seek it for its own sake. When we do, we begin to realize what Our Lord meant when He said “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4), and when he told His disciples: “I have food to eat of which you do not know. My food is to do the will of him who sent me” (Jn 4:32,34). Thus is true fasting also true food. If you see spiritual insight here, it is because Benedict has slipped into the discussion again, and I have slipped out.

But speaking for a moment longer about our culture, is it not characterized by a refusal to fast, in every sense of the word? Does not the failure to fast shape nearly everything in Western culture, so much so that it even dominates our politics? When was the last time someone was elected to high office by telling the truth about what sorts of “fasting” Americans must undertake to put their affairs back in order? Hard messages come only after the election is over, if they come at all, and if this rhetorical hardness does not lead to immediate material benefit, the result is defeat the next time around.

Fasting and the Church

Sadly, this failure to fast—in both the literal and the deepest senses—lies also at the root of many problems within the Church. What else has caused the crisis in moral theology but a failure to fast from sexual self-indulgence? If you ever thought this intellectual crisis was merely a matter of conflicting theories, you were indeed an innocent babe. Homosexuality, extra-marital sex, serial monogamy, pornography, contraception: All have been theoretically justified precisely because intellectuals wished to enjoy one or another of their forbidden fruits. It should be no surprise that the Church Fathers saw God’s command to Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit of a certain tree in the Garden as the very first command to fast, even before the Fall.

And what else but an unbridled egoism lies at the root of the widespread failure, both on the left and on the right, to obey the Magisterium of the Church? How quick we are to elevate our own precious selves above apostolic authority based on the Revelation of Jesus Christ! How slow we are to see any virtue in obedience, which provides such a magnificent safeguard against the clouding of our intellects by passions and the hardening of our intellects through pride! Instead, we have factions in the Church fighting with each other, and all factions quarreling with those who are obedient, when through the simple expedient of obedience, such factionalism could be eliminated.

Again, what else but lack of self-discipline, as evidenced in laziness and the pampering of our own desires, causes the majority of leadership failures in the Church: Every bishop who fails to set and demand high standards; every priest who fails to set a good example and work hard for the salvation of his flock; every priest, deacon or catechist who ignores the wisdom of the Church in his own preaching, counseling and teaching; every lay person who leaves the job of becoming holy to somebody else. Even if we are among those who moan about the laxity of official Church discipline in modern times, how many of us are really living lives of detachment—lives that embrace true fasting, which the vacuum of rules makes so much more potentially rewarding?

Here the finger-pointing can start with me. Nothing in what I've said should lead the reader to think this is not also a problem in my own life.

What Lent is For

If nothing else, these reflections should increase awareness of what this season is for, and why we need it year after year. Benedict concludes:

Dear brothers and sisters, it is good to see how the ultimate goal of fasting is to help each one of us, as the Servant of God Pope John Paul II wrote, to make the complete gift of self to God (cf. Encyclical *Veritatis splendor*, 21). May every family and Christian community use well this time of Lent, therefore, in order to cast aside all that distracts the spirit and grow in whatever nourishes the soul, moving it to love of God and neighbor.

To which I will only add: Not only families and Christian communities, but all of us bloated individuals. If you're already well along this road, stop reading. But if not, I'm talking about you and me really trying this for a change, making a significant effort to use the specific self-discipline of fasting from food and other attachments to begin to turn our lives around, to free ourselves, to radically increase our ability to do the will of our Father. And I mean doing this seriously, not just obeying a few rules and playing with it around the edges. There is no need to make mighty resolutions or life-long commitments. We just need to make a beginning—and the Lord knows we've all seen the horrendous consequences of *not* beginning. So let's read Benedict's message and, at the very least, get started. Just this year. Just this Lent. Just this once.

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The Spiritual Peril of Our Own Sensibilities

May 30, 2013

Our “sensibilities” are our receptiveness to the impressions made on us by our environment. They manifest themselves as feelings based on these impressions, making us emotionally responsive either for or against the source of the impressions. When our “sensibilities” are shocked or offended by certain situations or behaviors, the result is very often a feeling of moral outrage, even when, objectively speaking, no moral issue is at stake. Alternatively, our sensibilities can be satisfied, even almost pampered, by other situations or behaviors which we find pleasing, even when these situations or behaviors are not morally better than others which we may find offensive—or even sometimes when a situation is actually morally flawed.

Our sensibilities are not necessarily “wired” to sound morality and sound spirituality because they are fundamentally sensual and psychological. To be of real use to us, they need to be subjected to rational control; they need to be schooled. Sometimes they will push us in the right direction, as when we are shocked by some brutality. But not always. When they are not carefully monitored and schooled, they can be spiritually dangerous.

Without this constant schooling, our sensibilities depend mostly on a combination of our particular personalities and the culture by which we are unconsciously conditioned. It will be helpful, I think, to examine the spiritual pitfalls which can arise from both sources.

Cultural Sensibilities

We all know that people in different cultures tend to be sensitive to different things. For example, we are gradually formed by our culture to be very aware of and have strong reactions to the moral content of some situations while being almost blissfully unaware of the moral content of others; or we are shaped to respond morally to many things which have little or no moral content at all. In the culture of the contemporary West, just over the past generation, we have seen a process of sensitization—a veritable shaping of sensibilities—regarding people with same-sex attraction. Similarly, over the past two

generations or so, we have seen a process of desensitization with regard to purity. We have also been desensitized with respect to violence against humans, but sensitized for animals.

In the same way, the culture of the Middle Ages fostered a great sensitivity to the mystery of the Divine which penetrated all of nature, whereas the culture of the Modern period has given us a much greater sensitivity to the natural processes themselves, and in each age most people react emotionally to different stimuli and different situations according to their unconscious formation. A medieval person would have been very likely to be revolted, for example, by advocacy for the dissection of bodies for educational purposes. A modern might be more often revolted by those who insist on any sort of reverence for the body which might stand in the way of medical advancement.

Or again, in the 19th century, most Westerners found the concept of deliberate contraception extremely unpleasant and unnatural, and they had a corresponding emotional reaction against it. By the mid-20th century, our view of sexuality had been largely severed from the concepts of reproduction and family, and the thought of contraception no longer violated our sensibilities. Now, in fact, the sensibilities of many are upset by any effort to link reproduction with sex.

Or yet again, some cultures have been extremely sensitive to courageous behavior by men in battle while being almost oblivious to the problems of theft and plunder. Some cultures have been deeply sensitized to the horror of suicide; others have embraced suicide with feelings of nobility. Some cultures have placed a high value on the good of the community or tribe, such that behavior which weakens the community shocks the sensibilities of most of the community's members. Other cultures (such as our own) place a high value on individualism, leading people to be more shocked and dismayed by the restrictions a community may attempt to place on personal behavior.

To take one final example, some cultures have instilled a great sensitivity to the differences between men and women, leading to a strong code of differential behavior, the violation of which most persons found offensive whether it touched any moral truths or not. Our own culture currently tends in exactly the opposite direction. We are more likely to be shocked when a young girl is not allowed to play football. And so it goes. All of these cultural tendencies shape our sensibilities.

The Problem of Modernism

The great insight of the Modernists was that the way we communicate the Faith in various periods is conditioned to some degree by the "categories" of our cultural perception. This insight accelerated the Church's interest in the problem of inculturation,

and the need to find categories and constructs in local cultures which could be used to more easily communicate the Gospel and Catholic doctrine.

But the great error of Modernism was rooted in what we might call its sin against the Holy Spirit—the denial that Revelation was capable of penetrating the human mind in ways which transcended and transformed culture, such that with appropriate effort we could build up a body of absolute truths which are not culture-bound. Instead, the Modernists advocated a culture-based spirituality, in which whatever they deemed to be the highest spiritual insights of a particular culture became the proper expression of the Divine in that culture, sweeping away all the allegedly culture-bound categories that had held sway before.

Now as anyone with a shred of common sense can see, Modernism itself was profoundly conditioned by cultural sensibilities. It was little more than the result of a rather puerile desire of Christians, especially clergymen and theologians, to avoid being counter-cultural, to retain the same status and “relevance” in a secular age as had been accorded them in a Catholic age. Therefore, by the mid-20th century, Modernism had become the quasi-spiritual and theological doorway through which a profound secularization entered into the Church, as Catholics at every level embraced the opportunity to reinterpret their faith and values in ways which made them more compatible with the larger surrounding culture—a culture which was no longer shaped in any significant way by the Faith.

The result was a rapid shift in Catholic sensibilities, beginning with a rejection of authority in favor of the *zeitgeist* (spirit of the times or cultural spirit). Where in 1930 parishioners would likely have been shocked if their priest undermined or contradicted a clear statement of the Holy See, in 1980 parishioners could very easily be moved to applaud the courage and vision such a contradiction seemed to them to embody. This broad infection of secularization in the Church led to countless abuses in preaching, in the liturgy, in catechetics, in theology classes, and even in social action and politics. In fact, as both the attitude of relativism and the power of the State grew during the same period, Catholics began to see things more and more in merely political terms. Every disagreement was understood to be essentially a partisan struggle.

In some universities and religious communities, these attitudes continue unabated even now that dioceses and parishes have begun to heal. Efforts by the Holy See to correct the wayward are a perfect example. The Holy See inevitably speaks in terms of the objective and absolute truths Divinely revealed through Jesus Christ, and the Holy See is inevitably dismissed as a bunch of old, celibate, white European males making a power grab for a party whose relevance has long since vanished from the world stage.

Modernist Sensibilities at Work in the Pews

Unfortunately, the sensibilities of many Catholics have now been thoroughly shaped by these cultural developments. When you combine this with the tempting prospect of being relieved of the obligation to engage in Christian spiritual discipline and to oppose the false values of the larger culture, this shaping of sensibilities has become way too easy and way too profound. Millions of Catholics attend Church at least occasionally with a grossly insufficient awareness of what their Faith really demands of them. More important in this context is the fact that millions of Catholics are in the unenviable position of being shocked by a clear expression of the truth, yet they are all too complacent (the word means “satisfied and unconcerned”) when the message of the culture is followed instead.

How often have we heard parishioners glibly dismiss priests who genuinely try to awaken people to this problem as “conservative” or “old fashioned”, with no effort to evaluate what is perennially true in their preaching and counsel? How often are Catholics offended by a pastor or a religion teacher who asks them to take a look at hard truths about sexual promiscuity, divorce, abortion, and contraception (the so-called life issues) on the one hand, and affluence, luxury, materialism and lack of concern for the poor (the so-called social issues) on the other? Western culture as a whole now schools us in acedia or sloth, one of the seven deadly sins, by continuously shaping us to react listlessly and even negatively to the things of God, while engaging eagerly with the things of this world.

All of us are culture-bound to some extent. This is inescapable, and it is a significant part of the business of sanctification to learn to recognize what the Psalmist calls our hidden faults (Ps 19:12), the faults we take for granted, which most often are the faults that “everybody” shares. In every age, distorted sensibilities—that is, a sensitivity to the wrong things and an insensitivity to the right things—seriously retard the growth of holiness and hinder the work of the Church. Too often we find evil comfortable and good offensive.

However, it can be argued that the second half of the 20th century created an acute problem in this regard, because of the rapid transformation of culture in general, and of the culture within the Church in particular. Our cultural sensibilities were rapidly altered in new and surprising ways, some of them good but too many of them bad, and we are still trying to sort out the difference. In terms of a Catholic culture, at least, we appear to be still in the early stages of schooling our cultural sensibilities. This problem surrounds us; it is quite literally everywhere.

Personal Sensibilities

Up until now, I have been emphasizing the ways in which culture shapes not only our values but our sensibilities, which can become particular impediments to both spiritual perception and spiritual growth. But I said at the outset that our raw sensibilities are also determined in large part by our particular personalities. Different people are simply sensitive to different things, reacting differently both in terms of the appropriateness of their emotional response and its intensity. I would like to relate this as well to life in the Church today.

Thus there are some of us who, while not counter-cultural by reason, are rather instinctively counter-cultural. We tend to react negatively to almost anything that is fashionable. Again, there are some of us who are strongly attached to certain ways of doing things, especially if they are old or traditional, and our sensibilities can be easily offended if others do things differently. Or again, we react positively to some personality types and negatively to others, with no particular reason (though usually we attempt to make arguments in favor of our reactions when questioned). Or for some reason we are sensitive to one kind of vice but not another. If we are counter-cultural in today's Catholic world, that will very likely mean, for example, that we will be very sensitive to the disobedience of not following the rules in every detail, while insensitive to pastoral inflexibility.

There is no clear demarcation between what we might call personality-based sensibilities and those inculcated by culture. They constantly interact, and once we realize what our sensibilities are, we may attempt to choose subcultures which reinforce them. Nonetheless, I think it is fairly safe to say that the classic divisions in the Church today are between those whose sensibilities tend to be formed more strongly by the surrounding culture and those whose sensibilities tend to derive more strongly from what we might call a dogmatic personality. Unfortunately, too many in both groups seem incapable of checking their sensibilities at the Church door.

Counter-Cultural Catholic Sensibilities

I am certainly instinctively in the latter category, but in the wake of my recent analysis of the validity of SSPX confessions (see [Warning: An SSPX Priest Is Incapable of Absolving You from Sin](#)), I was reminded of how spiritually misleading such sensibilities can be. Specifically, I received several extremely bitter messages in which Catholics who remained obedient to Rome derisively dismissed “Novus Ordo priests” in a way that definitely shocked what I like to think are my own severely schooled

sensibilities. The spirit of this dismissiveness is best captured by one description of these priests as “clowns without costumes”.

Everyone knows the background that has contributed to this discontent on the part of some Catholics with strong anti-cultural sensibilities. This is the flip side of today’s misshapen Catholic coin. It first arose when the reform of the liturgy was unfortunately accompanied by increasing heterodoxy and even spiritual frivolity among too many priests, who became unmoored in the period of rapid secularization. Most deeply-committed and strongly inner-directed Catholics found this period extremely painful. And some Catholics who were trying to remain true to the faith, and who clung accordingly to the older liturgy which better matched their personal sensibilities, ended up reaping bitterness rather than spiritual growth from their sufferings.

I will not debate the pros and cons of various developments. My interest here is the role of personal sensibilities, which I believe has been devastating. For these Catholics whose personal sensibilities were so strong, it was not enough to observe that Fr. X was not all he should be in terms of theology and doctrine, or that Fr. Y seemed more at home acting like a layman than like a priest (however these are conceived), or that Fr. Z did not follow the rubrics and clearly lacked reverence, or even that they themselves did not happen to appreciate the virtues of the *Novus Ordo* as much as they appreciated the virtues of the Tridentine Mass. Rather, even when the ordinary form of the rite was said strictly according to the rubrics and they were assured time and again by the Church of the legitimacy and efficacy of the rite, they found that their personal sensibilities were violated by attending the *Novus Ordo* Mass.

This has led to extremes. In addition to rightly reacting against clerical heresy and attempting to improve upon banality (fair enough), some people feel that the priest at Mass should never smile, never show exuberance or joy; that he should never ask the congregation to pray for something special or to applaud some accomplishment; that he should never give a folksy homily and never tolerate non-traditional music; that he should never dispense with due ceremony or an emphasis on priestly status on any occasion; and so on and on and on. All of these things, along with the absence of certain arbitrary liturgical elements from years gone by, the very use of the vernacular language, and even the ability to see the priest’s face as he offers the Sacrifice, seem wrong to them, and this is *primarily because these things violate their personal sensibilities*.

What I am arguing here is that, whether these Catholics have remained obedient to Rome or have spun off into various splinter groups, much of their reaction has been conditioned simply by their sensibilities. In this essay, which admittedly contains an over-simplified binary presentation to aid clarity, their personal sensibilities played the

same significant role in endangering their spiritual lives as the cultural sensibilities of those I discussed earlier. And of course there is always the corresponding attempt to rationalize when sensibilities are offended. On both sides, a whole vast scaffolding of justifying arguments has been erected which has been used to construct almost nothing of any lasting substance. If the first group's sensibilities have led to a terrible complacency about the grossly inadequate spiritual values of the larger culture, the second group has responded with a determined, labyrinthine and reckless insistence on the objective superiority, including the objectively superior sanctity, of their own personal sensibilities *per se*.

I do not mean to minimize any of the other problems in the Church. I have already outlined the general situation. But I am convinced that for far too many of us the battle lines are drawn primarily on the basis of sensibilities—even to the point that significant improvements in the health of the Church are ignored in favor of past judgments and pet peeves. In the first case, the result is an almost brazen contentment with the values of the world or what we might call being in the Church without being of the Church; in the second, the result is bitterness or outright rebellion against the Church.

Conclusion

And yet there are also innumerable examples of people who began in either of the sensibility camps, but who recognized that their natural sensibilities were dangerous. They responded to the challenge by schooling their sensibilities, and so they grew spiritually and became forces for authentic renewal in the Church. Their sensibilities still often condition their first reactions to much that happens in the Church—a daunting impediment in the human condition!—but they have learned to recognize the signs, and to exercise a certain self-discipline. Their very self-knowledge leads them to judge others less harshly. They demonstrate daily that we are not to be victimized spiritually by our sensibilities. Instead we must have the courage to expose them—again and again and again—to the light of Christ.

There is never anything wrong with working respectfully against genuine failings, whether heresy or vice, irreverence or laziness, laxity or severity, self-righteousness or ecclesiastical disobedience, as long as such charity begins at home. But what has happened is that too many critics have allowed their personal sensibilities to be the means by which they judge whether a priest (or any other person) is devoted, faithful, charitable, honest and orthodox. And too often the result is both derision and division.

We all have a grave tendency to class vices as virtues, or virtues as vices, and to turn trifling differences into major issues, all according to our sensibilities. This is a telltale

sign of spiritual immaturity. We seek somehow to indulge ourselves in a piety pleasing to our senses and emotions, often at the expense of others. And whenever we do this, our unrestrained sensibilities masquerade as the one thing we inevitably squander in the process. Our sensibilities masquerade as holiness.

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ECCLESIASTICAL RENEWAL

OK, so what sort of renewal did Vatican II prescribe?

April 19, 2013

Pope Francis recently insisted once again on the importance of implementing the renewal called for by the Second Vatican Council. Unfortunately, every time I insist (with the last five popes) that the Second Vatican Council gave us the program of Catholic renewal that we are supposed to be following, I receive messages which (usually at great length) run something like this: “If the Council was so great, why has the Church suffered so much since that time? I’m tired of hearing about the Council. Clearly we need to go back before the Council to find authentic Catholicism.”

It is really hard for me to accept that the answer to that question is not obvious by now. But to understand the renewal that the Council called for, I am afraid we need to answer this question correctly. Let me break it down into four clear and simple points:

1. The popes had been fighting a running battle with Modernism in the universities and seminaries throughout the first half of the twentieth century. (Modernism is essentially a secularizing of Catholicism in accordance with the prevailing ideas in the larger culture.)
2. There was an enormous revolution—or dissolution, really—in Western culture beginning in the 1960s. Suddenly it was no longer necessary to maintain an aura of religious respectability. The mainstream culture made its interior abandonment of Christianity formal and public and began praising and lionizing all those within the Church who would take the Church in a less Catholic direction.
3. The pre-conciliar Church was in serious need of renewal. She had gradually slipped into what we might call a comfortable institutionalism, with Catholics tending to live the faith prescriptively (“follow the rules, get to heaven”). There was an unfortunate lack of deep interiority with Christ and a lack of engagement with the Church as mission.
4. Under these circumstances, the pre-conciliar Church was powerless to protect itself against the cultural shift which occurred. This is why things changed

almost overnight in dioceses, parishes and religious orders around the world. Key personnel throughout the Church, who had either been formed by the faulty Catholic intellectual establishment before the Council or had a prescriptive notion of the Faith (“hey, if you can change this rule, you can change ANYTHING”), rushed to embrace a new and culturally-fashionable secularism. They wanted, after all, to appear *relevant*.

Now please note: *Pope John XXIII clearly saw these weaknesses of the pre-conciliar Church, and that is why he called the Council.* But the Church did not have time to implement the Council before the storm hit, and the Council was used as an excuse to gut the Church in favor of the ideas emanating from the surrounding culture. Ever since that time, those who care—including every pope—have been fighting a rear guard action to “recover the council” and implement the true renewal for which it called.

Moreover, the marked difference between what the Council actually decreed and what the same bishops returned home and did in the immediate aftermath is yet another stunning justification of the Catholic faith in the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in an ecumenical council. As a general rule, the contrast between the bishops in council and the bishops at home on their own could hardly have been greater.

That, in a nutshell, is the true story of Vatican II. This does not mean that the pre-conciliar Church was a terrible place, any more than the Church now is a terrible place. But it does mean that the pre-conciliar Church had certain specific deep problems which needed to be addressed (just as the Church does in every age), and it means that the first wave of alleged “renewal” after the Council did not, in general, address those problems. In fact, in many cases it actually made things worse.

Have you ever wondered how we fell instantly in the late 1960s and 1970s into a sort of institutionalized Modernism which almost totally ignored the rights of the faithful? Here is a clue: Simply consider the Church in the first half of the twentieth-century, with its division between “professionals” in religion and all others who were supposed to follow their instructions, and then replace prescriptive adherence to the old rules with a slavish following of the prevailing culture. *Voila!*

What Renewal?

Still, we have to be honest. All of us get sick of hearing about it. To paraphrase Patrick Henry on March 23, 1775, “We may cry, Vatican II, Vatican II—but there is no Vatican II.” When the popes insist, again and again, that the renewal proposed by the Council

simply must be carried out, what do they mean? It does no good to pound on the necessity of the Council if nobody really knows what we are talking about.

With this in mind, I decided to review my own series on the documents of Vatican II (on our website, the series starts with [A funny thing about Vatican II...](#); or get the [ebook](#)). My mission: Identify precisely what the Council wished to correct in the pre-conciliar Church and outline the specific program of renewal the Council decreed.

As a matter of convenience, I will simply proceed document by document in the order issued. Please note that in each “Problem” section, the identification of the problem is necessarily overbroad and somewhat simplistic, as demanded by a summary. Every era of the Church has a combination of strengths and weaknesses running side by side. The “problems” identified here are, in essence, tendencies “on balance”. They are hardly absolute; they inhibit without destroying the essential goodness of the Church.

1. *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*

- *Problem:* Many bishops were concerned, along with Pius XII, that the liturgy of the Church (usually called the Tridentine Mass) had devolved into a form which had lost the “noble simplicity” which is to be characteristic of the Latin rite, and had suffered a progressive decline in active participation among all the faithful.
- *Solution:* The Council emphasized that the Mass is supposed to be an action of the whole Church, a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy, the summit toward which all the Church’s activity strives, and the font from which it flows. The text insists on a distinction between unchanging and changeable elements of the Mass and prescribes the following: An increase of the use of Scripture in the readings and in preaching; increased participation by the laity through acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, hymns, actions, gestures and bodily attitudes; purification of the Tridentine rite by stripping away its needless repetitions and its tendency toward obscurity; extension of the use of the vernacular, while retaining Latin in the key Ordinary parts of the Mass and giving pride of place musically to Gregorian chant.

2. *Decree on the Means of Social Communication (Inter Mirifica)*

- *Problem:* Mass media in the contemporary world was developing rapidly and tending toward an increasingly pronounced secularism, and an increasingly monolithic control on the part of the rich, the powerful, and government. In

some places, the main problem was decadence; in others, totalitarian control.

- *Solution:* The Council Fathers emphasized the right to information, the need to establish a proper relationship between art and the natural law, the importance when depicting evil of doing so in a way that does not glamorize evil but illuminates the good, and the tremendous responsibility of those with influence in the media. They enjoined on the faithful the task of exploring all forms of media and applying them to the apostolate.

3. *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)* Note: *Lumen Gentium* is in many ways the cornerstone of the Council, so the treatment here is somewhat longer.

- *General Problem:* As I've already said, there was growing concern that the Church in the first half of the twentieth century suffered from a sort of prescription-based institutionalization (with bishops as junior administrators), an arbitrary professionalization which largely ignored the laity except as a source of funds, a failure to adequately engage the intellectual tendencies of the culture (think of Modernism), and a tendency to ignore key elements of the identity of the whole Church.
- *General Solution, Part 1:* The Council wished to increase the Church's self-understanding so that all the faithful would contribute to her mission. The text emphasizes that the Church is the kingdom of Christ "now present in mystery", and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. The Church "strains toward the completed kingdom and, with all its strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with its king" (5). She is both the body and the bride of Christ, emphasizing both the unity of the faithful with Christ and their nuptial relationship with Him. She is a visible society, a living organ of salvation: "Established by Christ as a communion of life, charity and truth, [the Church] is also used by Him as an instrument for the redemption of all, and sent forth to the whole world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth" (9). Given the centrality of the Church in God's plan, the Council went on to discuss all other human groups in relationship to the Church.
- *General Solution, Part 2:* *Lumen Gentium* is the core of the Conciliar corpus, though much of its teaching is already found in Pius XII. The Council emphasized that the concept of Mission is essential to the church in order to (a) fulfill Christ's command; (b) overcome the deceptions of the devil; (c) save

people from despair; and (d) “snatch them from the slavery of error and of idols...so that through charity they may grow up into full maturity in Christ” (17). The Fathers also emphasize that the Church “preserves from destruction and purifies whatever is good in the minds and hearts of peoples or latent in religions and cultures, raised up for the glory of God.” This concept of the Church as the embodiment of the mission of Christ was the understanding in which the whole Church was to grow in the work of renewal.

- *Specific Problem 1:* Bishops tended to be regarded as junior administrators serving under the centralized Church in Rome, and not as vicars of Christ in their own dioceses.
- *Specific Solution 1:* The Constitution contains a major, pivotal section on the nature and dignity of the episcopate which encourages bishops to come fully into their own as successors of the apostles and part of the college of bishops which presides, in union with its head, over the Church.
- *Specific Problem 2:* The laity tended to be regarded as second-class figures in the Church, whose job was to do whatever the clergy told them.
- *Specific Solution 2:* In a section on the laity, *Lumen Gentium* insists that the laity must regard themselves as fully called to holiness and responsible for engaging in apostolate for the good of souls and the renewal of the temporal order.
- *Final Aids:* To give point to its vision of the Church, the Council devoted a major section to the Church’s eschatological identity, seeing the Church as the body through which Christ, having been lifted up, draws all things to Himself. *Lumen Gentium* also includes a closing section on the importance of Mary and the role she plays in nurturing the Church and bringing the faithful to perfection in Christ. These concepts were to be at the core of a renewed understanding of the Church.

4. *Decree on the Catholic Churches of the Eastern Rite (Orientalium Ecclesiarum)*

- *Problem:* Essentially, Eastern Rite Catholics tended to be regarded as somehow inferior to those of the Latin Rite.
- *Solution:* The Council emphasized that they were not inferior, that they had legitimate traditions and liturgies in their own right, and that these traditions,

liturgies and also the full honor of their prelates were to be diligently preserved.

5. Decree on Ecumenism (*Unitatis Redintegratio*)

- *Problem:* The Church seemed to have fallen into a long period of contentment with division among Christians, where members of the Church were happy to be right without attempting to overcome divisions and foster unity.
- *Solution:* The Council emphasized the importance of Christian unity, both according to Christ's desire and as necessary for effective witness to the world. It encouraged efforts to open communication and explore differences with our separated brethren, and emphasized the goods within the separated bodies which led people to Christ and so impelled them to unity with the Church. Ecumenical activity must be "fully and sincerely Catholic, that is to say, faithful to the truth which we have received from the apostles and Fathers of the Church, in harmony with the faith which the Catholic Church has always professed, and at the same time directed toward that fullness to which Our Lord wills His Body to grow in the course of time" (24). Also note: "This Sacred Council exhorts the faithful to refrain from superficiality and imprudent zeal, which can hinder real progress toward unity."

6. Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church (*Christus Dominus*)

- *Problem:* As already indicated, there was tendency for the episcopate to regard itself primarily as part of the administrative apparatus of the universal Church rather than as successors of the apostles making Christ present and active in their local communities.
- *Solution:* The Council enjoined bishops to preserve and profess the truth, dispense the sacred mysteries, care especially for their priests, and be solicitous for the welfare of all within their jurisdiction, as well as understanding their collective responsibility for the universal Church. All in the Church are to collaborate with their bishops for the good of souls; local rights of presentation, nomination and reservation of pastors are to be suppressed; religious orders must be subject to the bishop in the matter of the care of souls. Councils of advisors should be established to assist the bishops. (There is nothing about vast bureaucratic episcopal "conferences".)

7. *Decree on Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life (Perfectae Caritatis)*

- *Problem:* Many religious communities had strayed from their initial charisms, both in their spirituality and in the kinds of work they had become involved in; many were also in need of adaptation to the changing conditions in which they found themselves in the modern world. Religious spirituality was increasingly unfocused, and there seemed to be excessive divisions into higher and lower ranks within many communities.
- *Solution:* The Council directed the religious institutes to review their methods of operation to ensure applicability to time and place, and to drop those activities which were not central to their spirit and nature (charism). In addition, concerns about rank were to be reduced, with all members of each community sharing a common dignity. The heart of religious renewal must be the evangelical counsels, of which the Council provided an extended treatment, and after that there must be a return to the sources and traditions of each community, all under the guidance of the Church. The ultimate norm is to follow Christ as set forth in the Gospels. Religious must strive “to foster in all circumstances a life hidden with Christ in God” and “must resolutely cultivate both the spirit and practice of prayer.” They must live and think ever more in union with the Church, becoming dedicated totally to its mission.

8. *Decree on Priestly Training (Optatam Totius)*

- *Problem:* The Council was concerned about a certain lack of quality in priestly formation and education, in terms of narrowness of focus, a tendency to rely on manuals without sufficient depth of study, and of course the somewhat hidden problem of Modernism.
- *Solution:* The Council mandated that priests were to be prepared for a threefold ministry: ministry of the word, ministry of worship and sanctification, and ministry of parish community. The essence of spiritual formation was neither pious practices nor priestly “affectation” but living according to the Gospel in faith, hope and charity. Priests should have a broad education in the disciplines typical of their cultures before entering the seminary. Once in the seminary, theology and philosophy were to be explored in a unified curriculum and should

be so “taught that the students will correctly draw out Catholic doctrine from divine revelation, profoundly penetrate it, make it the food of their own spiritual values, and be enabled to proclaim, explain, and protect it in their priestly ministry” (16).

9. Declaration on Christian Education (*Gravissimum Educationis*)

- *Problem:* Education was becoming increasingly fragmented with the explosion of knowledge and the emphasis on research, and also increasingly secular. This affected even Catholic schools.
- *Solution:* The Council insisted that Catholic students are to be always made aware of the gift of Faith, the importance of worship, and the need to be conformed to Christ the new man, so they can develop into the “mature measure of the fullness of Christ” and so they can bear witness to the hope that is in them, assisting in the Christian formation of the world.

10. Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*)

- *Problem:* As with the problem of ecumenism, there was a sort of complacency or even smugness in the twentieth-century Church, a contentment with the conventional distinctions concerning who is in and who is out of the Kingdom of God, and an insufficient emphasis on God’s love for all.
- *Solution:* The Council reminded us that we are all one community of the children of God, and we “all share a common destiny, namely God” whose “providence, evident goodness, and saving designs extend to all men.” The document insists that the members of the Church approach non-Christians with these profound truths of Revelation in mind, striving to recognize what is good in them, helping to situate them within God’s plan, and sacrificing to bring them into the fullness of Christ.

11. Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*)

- *Problem:* The classic charge that Catholics neglected Scripture certainly had some truth; there was a tendency to rely on authority without realizing its

relationship to the deposit of Faith.

- *Solution:* The Council dealt with both Tradition and Scripture, together containing the fullness of the Father's revelation in Jesus Christ. But the Fathers mostly focused on Scripture, with its ability to acquaint us with Christ, for we must understand that "to see Jesus is to see His Father." The Old Testament is completed in the New, and the Church's preaching must be nourished by Scripture. In addition to emphasizing the need for all members of the Church to explore and permit ourselves to be enriched by Scripture, the Council stressed that Our Lord consigned this fullness of Revelation to the teaching authority of the apostles. These in turn handed it on to the other bishops "to keep the gospel forever whole and alive within the Church" (7). Thus the Church is exhorted to fully recognize in our own time the connection of the apostolic succession and the authority principle with the full revelation of God.

12. *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (Apostolicam Actuositatem)*

- *Problem:* As previously noted, in the first part of the twentieth century, the laity were scarcely regarded as full partners with Christ in the mission of the Church. In Russell Shaw's famous phrase, the laity were "to hunt, to shoot, to entertain" and to follow the rules, though there was a limited sense of the lay apostolate in Catholic Action.
- *Solution:* The Council insisted on the importance of "apostolate" for every member of the Church, by virtue of baptism. It defined "apostolate" as all activity of the Mystical Body directed to the goal for which the Church was founded, namely "the spreading of the Kingdom of Christ throughout the earth for the glory of God the Father, to enable all men to share in His saving redemption, and that through them the whole world might enter into a relationship with Christ" (2). The Council insisted that the laity share in the priestly, prophetic and royal office of Christ, having an important role to play in announcing the gospel; explaining, defending and applying Christian principles; transforming the temporal order; and directing all things to God. The document prophetically emphasizes the importance of marriage and family, and insists that the lay apostolate is to be devoted to the mission of the Church, under the guidance of pastors and bishops.

13. Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*)

- *Problem:* In many places in the world, the Church and Christianity in general were being suppressed; in the West, Christianity and any connection with God was increasingly being excluded from both culture and public life. In some places, the Church seemed unaware of what would happen if religion were marginalized in a culture. Among some in the Church, there was also a tendency to insist on freedom for Catholics while denying it to others.
- *Solution:* The Council insisted that man's response to God must be truly free, and the document emphasizes the right to religious liberty within due limits. The text also insists that the Church herself must have complete freedom of operation, and that a healthy social and political order must be developed with this in mind, since the freedom of the Church is the fundamental principle of productive relations between the Church and the civil order.

14. Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church (*Ad Gentes*)

- *Problem:* We have already identified what we might call the Church's comfortable institutionalism and frequent failure to perceive herself in terms of mission. The Council wished to address this more specifically.
- *Solution:* The document states that missionary work proceeds on a basic incarnational principle, which requires the missionary to become one with the culture to which he is sent, rather than to seek to preside over it from a position of cultural superiority. The first principle of mission is "to lead a profoundly Christian life". Again, the rationale for missionary activity was stressed, not reduced, by the Council: "The Church, being the salt of the earth and the light of the world, is more urgently called upon to save and renew every creature, that all things may be restored in Christ and all men may constitute one family in Him and one people of God" (1).

15. Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*)

- *Problem:* As I have already noted, there was a tendency on the one hand to emphasize the priest's administrative role in the Church, especially with respect to the bishop, who alone had the fullness of orders; and on the other to stress the

priest's hierarchical superiority to the laity, a superiority which could be thought to confer a sort of automatic holiness from which others were excluded. These reasons, among others, contributed to a sense of isolation among priests.

- *Solution:* The Council insisted on the dignity of the priest, who by ordination is promoted to “the service of Christ the Teacher, Priest and King”. The priestly dignity derives from what is unique to priests, the “sacred power of orders to offer sacrifice and to forgive sins” (2). In this context, the priest has a spiritually rich and indispensable role in the Church, to proclaim the Gospel, to perform the sacred functions, and to gather the family of God together in Christ. The text also insists that fidelity to Christ cannot be separated from fidelity to the Church, and that priests must renew their lives and ministries through humility and self-emptying, celibacy, and detachment from material goods. The Council also noted that the key to avoiding what we might now call burnout was found neither in constant pastoral activity nor in constant acts of piety, but in union with Christ. As a practical matter, the Council enjoined upon priests frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance along with meditation on Scripture and suitable pastoral studies, and insisted on proper remuneration, social assistance and health insurance funds for priests, along with suitable opportunities for fellowship with each other and their bishop.

16. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*)

- *Problem:* Consider modern Catholic history, with the Church being increasingly marginalized over several hundred years, with one pope even refusing to leave the Vatican, and with the Church gradually becoming more closed in upon herself as her public and social influence waned. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Church as a whole seemed to have almost no idea of how to escape this trend of increasing irrelevance in the modern world.
- *Solution:* This is the second major constitution on the Church, the two together providing a virtual charter for the immediate future. This pastoral constitution, of course, is concerned not primarily with self-understanding but with strategy. It concentrates on how the Church can speak more effectively with mankind, and tries to identify key factors in fulfilling this necessary purpose. In particular, the Council identified the problem posed by the modern evolutionary and dynamic viewpoint (which tends to denigrate wisdom and tradition) and the growing hope

for total emancipation by human effort alone. But because this hope was doomed to frustration, it was offset by increasing despair over the lack of meaning in life. To this problem, the Council posed the person of Christ as the solution. Christ is the fulfillment of all human aspiration. It is in Christ that we find the nature and destiny of man, in Christ that Catholics insist on a fundamental reverence for man in all social situations and solutions, in Christ that we find an antidote to the false aspects of the contemporary stress on human autonomy, and in Christ that man is opened to his true goal.

- *Itemized Issues:* The Council also clearly insisted on the ultimate responsibility of the laity for the temporal order and rather prophetically identified five special problem areas which required priority of attention: (a) Marriage and the family; (b) the proper development of human culture; (c) the centrality of the person in the economy and social life; (d) the absolute necessity of opening space for God in politics and in attitudes toward human liberty; and (e) the need for peace.

Conclusion

As I indicated at the beginning, it would be unfair to insist that the Church in 1950 was all “this way” or “that way”, just as it is unfair now to do the same thing. What we are talking about is a series of characteristic deficiencies within the life of the Church in the period leading up to the Council, some of which had been developing and worsening for a considerable period of time as Western culture increasingly moved away from the Church. This is of necessity a very broad examination, but it should provide a concrete sense of what Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, and the Second Vatican Council saw—under the influence of the Holy Spirit—as the tendencies which the Church would have to correct if she were to effect an authentic renewal, so that she might more effectively manifest the fullness of Christ to the world.

Readers will vary in their assessment of how much of the Council’s program has been accomplished, how much has been ignored, and how much has been deliberately opposed and thwarted. Clearly, God has quite a sense of humor, and it is possible to identify some things which have changed for the better precisely because of the failure of other things. One thinks, for example, of the far more extensive involvement of lay persons in the life and mission of the Church now, which most likely came about not primarily through the Council’s teaching but through the failure of so many bishops, priests and religious to represent the Church properly, thus leaving the laity with no choice but to fill the breach.

If we were to seek a dominant theme in the Council's program of renewal, it would seem unquestionably to be the need to see everything in terms of the fullness of God's plan in Jesus Christ. This emphasis on the person of Christ, and the Church's embodiment of Christ's mission, is extremely clear. Pope Francis could not have been far off when [he preached a few days ago](#), after focusing on our tendency to ignore the Council, that "even in our personal lives the Spirit prompts us to take a more evangelical path." Indeed, the New Evangelization is a direct outgrowth of Vatican II.

Finally, this survey should suggest three things. First, it should indicate concretely what the popes since the Council have meant when they kept insisting on Vatican II, properly understood. Second, it should enable everyone to see that the spectacular failures within the Church in the first generation or so after the Council are very clearly not the work of the Council, but were merely symptoms of the inability of the Church to renew herself as the Council desired before what we may call the deluge.

And third, it should reveal the proper response to the question Pope Francis raised in that same homily. It is "not really the case," he asserted, that we are all happy about "the presence of Holy Spirit", because "there is still that temptation to resist." And then he asked: "After 50 years, have we done everything the Holy Spirit said to us in the Council?" Some may not have known what he was asking, but that question should not be hard to answer now.

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The Pope, Reform and Discipline

March 07, 2008

Since I began writing regular commentary for CatholicCulture.org, I've occasionally pointed out the need for reform and renewal in the Church. Often these remarks have focused on bishops, religious superiors, and their respective administrative staff. For the past 30 years, Pope John Paul II and now Benedict XVI have clearly articulated the direction this reform and renewal ought to take, but many bishops and long-established religious communities have been very slow to respond. What's the solution?

The Complexities of Reform

Religious communities can be very difficult to reform without highly dramatic outside intervention, because those who govern them are elected from within. Many of the older religious orders that secularized rapidly in the mid 20th century continue to be in desperate condition, even as their numbers rapidly dwindle. Female religious have been particularly hard hit, but as they have also abandoned many of their former fields of service, particularly education, the worst female religious have relatively little influence outside their own tiny circles. For men, the problem has not been quite so severe but, particularly as priests and theologians, dissident and lax male religious continue to have a significant impact on the laity, especially in higher education. It is perhaps also worth noting that the worst orders survive economically today only because they can sell off the impressive properties they accumulated in the past, when their numbers were much larger; there is a long, slow reduction of influence over time.

There are, of course, exceptions to these sweeping statements. Some older orders, or some sections or offshoots of them, are currently prospering in every way. In general, the number of vocations serves as a reasonable index of soundness. Most groups with excellent vocations are living their charisms well, and vice versa. But in any case, a great hope of religious communities is always new foundations. It may be difficult to reform existing orders from outside (though saints do sometimes arise who effect reforms from within), but zealous souls have considerable scope for new foundations, and these frequently play an enormous role in the renewal of the larger Church. One thinks, in this regard, of such disparate modern projects as Opus Dei and the Legion of Christ. There are many smaller examples as well.

But new foundations are not an option for the Church as a whole. If one diocese has problems, it is not an option to replace it with another one. Both the weakness and the strength of the diocesan system is that it is a direct part of the Church's constitutional hierarchy. The weaknesses are obvious, but it is also a great strength because every bishop must be selected, or at least approved, by the Pope. For this reason, if the papacy is sound, the appointment of new bishops can also be sound. Thus the single greatest practical hope for the reform of the episcopacy is the Holy See. If that's true, then, we have to ask why there has been so little apparent progress in episcopal/diocesan reform over the past generation, when the Church has been led by undeniably courageous, articulate and holy popes.

The Role of the Papacy

In a recent article in *This Rock* magazine, Fr. Robert Johansen of the diocese of Kalamazoo sought to answer this question head-on, under a highly appropriate title: [Why Doesn't the Pope Do Something about "Bad" Bishops?](#) The article is worth reading to avoid certain false patterns of thought about the question, and we have placed it in our document library for that reason. But in the end it begs the question, as we shall see. Fr. Johansen rightly argues that we must not view the Pope as a CEO or the bishops as managers. Bishops have the fullness of orders, which configures them to Christ in a special way. They are the fathers of their dioceses, as the Pope in turn is the father of the whole Church, including all the particular churches within it. Typically fathers must be very bad indeed to have their paternal rights taken from them, and this analogy retains some merit when applied to bishops. Moreover, the need for both charity in judgment and adequate evidence before taking disciplinary action is very strong in a Christian setting, and there is always a danger of schism, great or small, looming behind the decision to remove a bishop (or especially many bishops) from office.

For all these reasons, Fr. Johansen is prepared to endorse what he calls the "gradualist" approach taken by John Paul II, who avoided confrontation while teaching, correcting and exhorting, rather than resorting to discipline. So far Benedict has done the same. "The gradualist approach may turn out to have been a mistake, but I don't think so," concludes Fr. Johansen. "The majority of episcopal appointments under John Paul II have been very good, even outstanding.... These bishops, along with the many renewal movements, are beginning to reorient the Church." There is certainly some truth to this conclusion, but I think most concerned laity would find it over-stated. In any case, the weakness of Fr. Johansen's argument stems from the fact that, while he rightly recognizes the Church as a unique disciplinary setting (far different from a corporation,

for example), he concludes from this that the pope should not discipline at all.

But popes do have disciplinary authority over bishops (as do bishops over their priests). So the real question is not *whether* popes should exercise that authority but, given the nature of the Church, how and when they should discipline. Although I have repeatedly mentioned the possibility that there are aspects of the situation we do not see, that each pope has different strengths, that the Holy Spirit remains at work in the Church, and that we must be slow to judge the action or inaction of popes who are manifestly both spiritually deeper and wiser than ourselves (see [Why Don't Popes Discipline?](#)), we must also acknowledge that it is not consistent with the nature of the Church that the question “when should the pope discipline” ought to be answered “never”. It follows also that discipline should not be so infrequent that, in terms of its impact on the life of the Church, the answer is still essentially “never”.

Teach, Rule and Sanctify

Without going into theological detail, I think we can take the role and authority of the pope to be accurately summarized by the traditional dictum that the pope is to teach, rule and sanctify, with authority to match. It is difficult to claim that the order of these verbs is coincidental. The pope is guaranteed the protection of the Holy Spirit in teaching on matters of faith and morals to the whole Church. This authority to teach is obviously primary, for it is the means by which the members of the Church know the nature of the Christian life. The authority to rule is the authority to set the structures, personnel and requirements of the Church in the proper order to foster Christian life according to what is taught, and to exercise ongoing discipline to maintain that order. And the authority to sanctify, which certainly refers to power over the sacramental life of the Church, also includes the more general stimulation of holiness that occurs throughout the Church when both teaching and ruling are done well.

The condition of the Church varies greatly from place to place, and my familiarity is primarily with the West, particularly the United States. By every possible index, the Church has been in severe decline in the West for some time, and there has been an extremely rapid increase in the rate of decline since the middle of the twentieth century. At the same time, the pattern varies from diocese to diocese, and it is by now fairly clear that the Church is far healthier (again, by any conceivable legitimate index) in dioceses that have for some time been run by bishops who have taken their own traditional role of teaching, ruling and sanctifying very seriously (as both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have repeatedly exhorted them to do), as compared with bishops who have been primarily concerned with various secular agendas or with putting a bold face on

dissidence and sin. It is not too much to presume that, as good bishops have found ways to discipline wayward priests, to reduce the impact of problematic religious, and to isolate misguided lay groups, so should popes do the same thing at a more universal level to ensure that more bishops will behave in precisely this way.

This is, after all, a matter of both justice and charity. Fr. Johansen rightly notes the importance of charity in evaluating the question of papal discipline, but in so doing he tends to restrict charity to bishops. He also rightly notes the necessity of proceeding with ample evidence, but in so doing he also tends to forget other aspects of justice and other persons with a right to it. For reform is, ultimately, about the rights of the faithful. Both modern popes and the Code of Canon Law have stated repeatedly that the faithful have the right to sound doctrine, to the sacraments, and to liturgical life according to the Church's norms. When the faithful are not receiving one or more of these things through the fault of a priest or religious, the bishop or religious superior is expected to take appropriate disciplinary action. When the faithful are not receiving one or more of these through the fault of a bishop, then out of both charity and justice for the laity, the pope ought to do the very same thing.

The Purposes of Discipline

Discipline has four purposes: (1) Correction; (2) Admonition; (3) Example; and (4) Justice. For higher authorities, the very first purpose of discipline is to correct some unfortunate situation which has arisen from a failure of a lower authority to exercise authority properly. The immediate goal is twofold, to correct the problem and to change the behavior that led to the problem. The second purpose is admonition—to warn both the one in authority and all others in a similar position that a certain situation or behavior pattern will not be tolerated. It is useful to reflect on this purpose, because we may recognize that it is far better for a bishop (or anyone else) to internalize a new behavior pattern based on exhortation than to be forced into it unwillingly by discipline. This is certainly true, but to use this as an excuse not to discipline is to forget the primary purpose of discipline, which is to correct. By all means, popes should begin by exhortation. But if exhortation fails to bring a speedy result, the necessity of correction requires discipline.

Moreover, we should never forget that bishops are human. In the absence of clear signals from the pope, they may (like anyone else) fall into bad habits or even hold back from taking disciplinary actions of their own, based either on the pope's own example or on fear that such actions will not be supported by the pope. Once shown that discipline is expected, many bishops will be moved to act from their own internal sense of what is

right and just. And others will act because, though their hearts may not be in it, they can see that their superior demands it. By setting an example of discipline, therefore, the pope can actually strengthen the virtue of his bishops, and many may come to internalize a lesson which mere exhortation could not inculcate. Finally, if in the end some bishops still act only for the unworthy motive of protecting themselves from the pope, at least their people will be better served by the restoration of order in their dioceses, however ill-motivated it may be.

Under these circumstances, not all bishops will be driven by accurate perception, courage, and holiness but very few will actually resist. For those who do, the purpose of justice is most important. It is a matter of justice (for both the laity and the bishop) that those who do resist should be removed from their offices. While this will both increase the opportunity for repentance and serve as a powerful warning to others, the essential purpose of justice should not be overlooked, for justice is not only right but salutary. By clearly punishing the guilty, justice restores the moral order where that order has been upset. To sum up, then, we have four reasons to discipline: correction, admonition, example and justice. Moreover, all four work together for a fifth purpose as well: teaching. Every act of discipline powerfully reinforces the importance of the lessons of proper administration, right conduct, and virtue that the popes are presumably otherwise continuously attempting to communicate.

Sadly, modern papal practice with respect to erring bishops has generally been too lax to be considered just, and it has consistently taught the opposite of what the popes have attempted to communicate in other ways. Again and again, bishops who have behaved disgracefully (and whose transgressions are well-known both at home and in Rome) have been permitted to serve out their normal terms and to retire gracefully. In many cases, they have been rewarded with honorary posts in their retirement, presumably on the theory that this will keep people from the absolute certainty that something was very seriously wrong. As Phil Lawler has documented in *The Faithful Departed: The Collapse of Boston's Catholic Culture* (see our review [Why the Faithful Departed, and How to Get them Back](#)), this behavior pattern has been all-too consistent even in very recent years.

A Healthier Church?

To be fair, I share Fr. Johansen's belief that the Church—in the United States at least—is healthier now than it was thirty years ago, and that this is a direct result of both the ceaseless teaching and exhortation of John Paul II and the improvement of episcopal appointments during his pontificate. But progress has been both limited and slow. The

utter failure of the bishops to take serious personal responsibility for the sex abuse crisis (including their astounding effort to transfer responsibility to children through misguided safe-touch programs), the fact that they have not even perceptibly begun to recapture Catholic higher education for the Church, their inability to agree among themselves on how to deal with pro-abortion politicians, and the widespread continued existence of liturgical abuse and false doctrine in both parishes and parochial schools—these are all convincing proofs that discipline is absolutely necessary to hasten the progress of reform. The alternative is to perpetuate a manifest grave injustice to the laity through the continuing neglect of their souls—not to mention the particularly painful injustice to faithful priests attempting to serve under bad bishops.

There may be any number of difficulties, and undoubtedly there are some situations in which it is impossible to operate on the cancer within without causing greater harm, but this should not prevent each pope from asking himself repeatedly the fundamental question, “How can I effectively discipline in this particular case?” Again, the popes and everyone else must recognize that, for those possessing disciplinary authority, the right answer to “when to discipline” really cannot be “never”. In fact, the first rule for those with disciplinary authority must be this:

1. Those in authority must discipline whenever a problem cannot be quickly corrected by other means, whenever both justice and charity to those affected demands it, and (in view of the many short and long-term advantages of proper discipline) whenever the cure will not be *markedly and irremediably* worse than the disease.

Then, when all the fashionable doubts about discipline inevitably rear their ugly heads, a second rule must also be firmly followed. Rule 2: Refer to rule number 1.

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Ecclesiastical Culture: Walking the Walk

April 22, 2010

In addition to raising questions about Church-State relations with respect to ecclesiastical persons who have committed crimes (see [When Should a Bishop Expose a Priest to Civil Authority](#)), the [Castrillon Hoyos affair](#) demonstrates the degree to which the episcopal culture around the world reflects the curial culture in Rome. One step down, the same principle—that the rest of the Church largely reflects the episcopal culture—is demonstrated by Bishop Lawrence Brandt’s [exceptional refusal](#) to allow dissident nuns to advertise for vocations in his diocesan media. The sad truth is that, over the past generation or so, ecclesiastical culture from the very top down has been strong on talking the talk. But as for walking the walk, well, not so much.

When I refer to “walking the walk” I am talking about effective administrative discipline, which is the primary means any organization uses to ensure that it properly reflects its mission at every level. In my past commentaries on the need for discipline in the Church, I have frequently mentioned that Pope John Paul was not an effective administrative disciplinarian. I don’t expect great men—even saintly great men—to be good at everything, and it does seem clear that John Paul II left Benedict XVI with a considerably larger number of bishops around the world who are likely to respond properly to disciplinary instructions in the future. God alone can judge whether John Paul II did all he could have done. But the fact remains that administrative discipline was seldom effectively utilized during his pontificate.

Going further back, and skipping over John Paul I (whose pontificate was only a month long), we come to Paul VI, who frankly admitted that he was incapable of dealing with the crisis of Faith within the Church. Before him, John XXIII was clearly not yet aware of the extent of the crisis. The upshot is that for the past fifty years, the curial culture in Rome has not been a culture that sent strong administrative disciplinary signals. Clear administrative directives were seldom issued and even more rarely enforced, whether by pontifical wrath, careful control of ecclesiastical honors, timely promotion or timely demotion. While Magisterial teaching at the level of principle was generally very clear, there was little or no administrative plain-speaking to guide the

handling of specific cases.

The Gap between Teaching and Administration

The point I am making is that while concerned laity were on their knees begging their bishops to govern their local churches according to what the papal Magisterium taught, these same bishops knew that there was a substantial difference between what Rome taught and what Rome effectively insisted they do. It would be more accurate to state this even more harshly: What Rome taught was often actively undermined by the administrative example and administrative signals which routinely emanated from both the pope and the curia as to how local bishops should actually behave with respect to the many challenges the Church faced, especially those from within her own ranks.

In this light, the 2001 Castrillon Hoyos letter (praising a bishop who refused to turn a pedophile priest over to civil authorities) is very likely a perfect example of curial business as usual at the time. Fortunately, it represents a curial culture which Benedict XVI immediately made it a high priority to change, but it is further evidence of the problem that while still a Cardinal his efforts to change things were often unsuccessful because he simply did not have the necessary clout. It is also important to recognize that the flaws in this prevailing curial culture went far deeper than covering up sexual abuse. This was a culture which consistently permitted, and perhaps sometimes encouraged, the abuse of the rights of the faithful with regard to such things as the proper celebration of the liturgy, the teaching of sound Catholic doctrine, and the supervision of those organizations claiming to be Catholic (diocesan offices, parishes, Catholic schools, religious communities, retreat houses, Catholic charities, Catholic media, Catholic lay groups, and so on).

I don't mean to imply that the pope or most cardinals favored everything that went on. In fact they frequently made clear that they did not favor it. But even among the spiritually healthiest prelates in Rome, there was no effective culture of correction. Improvement was sought through the enunciation of principles and the exhortation to follow them. Intervention in concrete cases was exceedingly rare and always very quiet. Heads never rolled. What was acceptable to Rome was taught more forcefully by administrative inaction than by the positive expression of what, in the face of such inaction, could easily be interpreted as mere ideals.

The Administrative Obstacle to Reform

It is this deeply defective ecclesiastical culture which is thrown into stark relief by Bishop Brandt's refusal to allow the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden to advertise for

vocations in his diocesan media, because they failed to accept the judgment of the American Bishops that the recent American health care reform legislation must be opposed on moral grounds. In favoring the pro-abortion bill, the Sisters of St. Joseph were acting within the parameters of the curial and episcopal culture of the past 50 years. On that basis, they reasonably assumed that they could be as Catholic or as unCatholic as they chose to be in principle while still retaining both the approval of the hierarchy and the security of being officially, that is administratively, Catholic. But apparently the culture in the Diocese of Greensburg, Pennsylvania had already changed.

The consistent approval and the consistent official Catholic aura bestowed on all mainstream Catholic organizations, no matter how far they had strayed from their Catholic purposes since around 1965, has been the single most frustrating obstacle to those who have fought to convince people that there is far more to Catholicism than a name. Think about the impact of an ecclesiastical culture that never drew any hard-and-fast lines. How often have deeply committed laity been put in the nearly indefensible position of arguing that official Catholic status and episcopal approval are *not* enough to determine whether an organization is fully Catholic? How often have they had to say, “Yes, but...” when someone has insisted that some group must be a good Catholic group because it was “in good standing”, was approved by the Church, advertized in the local Diocesan paper, or had the Bishop on its board of advisors?

These questions illustrate how little incentive for change recent popes, cardinals and bishops have given to the millions of nominal Catholics in the many nominally Catholic organizations under their influence or control. It goes without saying that each of us has his own responsibility to live according to the authoritative teachings of the Church, but it also goes without saying that if you’re not yet self-consciously seeking perfection—which is perhaps inevitably the condition of most Catholics as it is of most persons generally—and you are part of the vast Catholic social universe, then you tend to do what everybody else does, following the prevailing patterns set, approved or permitted by your pastor and your bishop. Only very rare people try to refashion their Catholic commitments in a vacuum, seeking to follow seemingly distant and impractical principles enunciated in little-known public statements.

For most of us most of the time, local administrative pressure is the rule of faith. While all are called to deep commitment, few are naturally inclined to the task of deciphering Catholic theological, moral and social principles for themselves, and even fewer have both the courage and the ability to make a significant impact in the face of either the complacency or the active resistance of the “authorities”. This struggle is much like running through waist-deep water. Progress is nearly impossible, and everybody else

wonders what the heck you're trying to do. An effective administrative disciplinary culture changes the rules and patterns of Catholic life by aligning both authority and standard practice with Catholic principles. The result is extraordinarily rapid change for the better, and a dramatic increase in spiritual progress.

A Changing Ecclesiastical Culture

Slowly, ever so slowly, the culture of *saying* the right thing at the highest levels in the Church is being replaced by a culture of *doing* the right thing. This is evidenced most often now by the increasing number of positive disciplinary steps taken by various bishops in their own dioceses, steps which mirror the new culture higher up.

Unfortunately, things are tougher outside the diocesan structure. Many religious orders are so far gone that it is uncertain whether they can be brought back or will have to be jettisoned. What Rome will do about women religious in the United States, or the Jesuits internationally, or any number of other religious groups which possess their own internal hierarchical authority, remains to be seen. But it is clear that the ecclesiastical culture is beginning to change.

It is unquestionable that the great achievements of John Paul II—his ability to project a remarkably attractive personality through the mass media, his tireless teaching on every subject imaginable, his generally superior episcopal appointments (compared with his predecessors), his inspiration of an increasingly militant laity as well as a new cadre of committed young priests—all established a firmer foundation for this transformation from talk to action. But for whatever combination of reasons, John Paul was not generally able to make the transition himself. It is somewhat ironic that the elderly and supremely professorial Joseph Ratzinger is now emerging as the first pope in fifty years to move beyond talking the talk and actually begin to walk the administrative walk. The two high profile areas in which this progress is most evident are the handling of sexual abuse and the liturgy.

There is, of course, a very long way to go. But *doing* trickles down faster than *teaching*, though it must be acknowledged that doing also has its own problems. The danger of effective administration is that it tends to breed mechanical followers (witness the Church that disintegrated in the 1960's). Inspired teaching carries with it a better chance of effecting deep transformation through personal initiative. For this reason the Church can never substitute doing for teaching; nor will there ever be a Church in which everyone follows the good out of deep interior conviction. There can be no Catholic golden age this side of heaven. But for all that, the Church must not confine herself to teaching. She must also do. If she wishes to be institutionally on point so that she can

sanctify on a far larger scale, the Church must not only teach but rule.

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On Discipline, Again

April 03, 2009

From time to time I've considered the question of ecclesiastical discipline (or the lack thereof). Several recent occurrences have drawn my attention once again to this issue. Of course, I am in the position of a zealous subordinate (and a zealous lay subordinate, at that). Typically subordinates feel more free to advocate decisive measures when they are advising others than when, after promotion, they find the buck firmly riveted to their own desks.

Most parents are familiar with this same syndrome: Discipline always seems so obviously called for when it comes to other people's children, but that does not stop most of us from hesitating to be too strict with our own kids. It also goes without saying that every situation is different. So it seems that advice about discipline always needs to be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. That's fine. But it should not stop us from thinking about the problem, and it should not stop those in authority from striving mightily to exercise effective discipline.

Notre Dame

The current scandal at Notre Dame (I refer to University President Fr. John Jenkins' invitation to President Obama to give the commencement address and receive an honorary degree) occupies an interesting place in the history of sad, critical, abhorrent, and repeated scandals (let's call them SCARS). Inviting the single most powerful advocate of unlimited abortion to address Catholic students on the occasion of their transition from study to work is a singular insult to graduates. When coupled with the University's conferral of an honorary degree, it is very difficult to avoid the supposition that Fr. Jenkins desires either to tear down Catholic values or to gain worldly prestige by currying favor with our political elites.

This supposition is reinforced by the naming of a new Dean of the Notre Dame Law school—a position which says much about the attitude of the University toward law and public life. The candidate selected, Nell Jessup Newton, has given thousands of dollars to further the campaigns of politicians who favor abortion. Thus we have two SCARS in quick succession at Notre Dame, which is widely regarded as one of the flagship universities representing the Catholic Church in the United States. These SCARS have

been inflicted in direct defiance of both the Vatican (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, 1990) and the U.S. Bishops (*Catholics in Political Life*, 2004). The President of the USCCB has stated point blank that Fr. Jenkins' action is insupportable and has called for opposition; numerous other bishops have condemned the decision; and the Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend intends to boycott the graduation.

So naturally the question arises: Should somebody actually apply some discipline? Universities are fairly independent entities, governed by their own Board of Directors, and Notre Dame has long since ceased to be controlled by the Holy Cross Fathers. The Church is not in a position to enforce a change of policy. But two key ecclesiastical figures are in a position to discipline Fr. Jenkins: His superior in the Holy Cross Fathers, and the Pope himself.

Admittedly, for the Pope to do so would be a major diplomatic statement, not to be approached lightly, but it would be wonderfully clarifying to Catholics, even though a great many Catholics would unfortunately be appalled. But the Vatican has reportedly rejected President Obama's proposed ambassadors to the Holy See (as it does all proposed Catholics who are not in good standing with the Church), so it ought not to be impossible to hope for something more. After all, if nothing is ever done about such things, we will never get beyond the situation in which we find ourselves—a situation in which, whenever the abortion culture is seriously opposed, a great many Catholics are unfortunately appalled. It would seem obvious that this particular scandal is great enough to warrant serious consideration of ecclesiastical discipline at the highest levels.

Sound Advice

Recently I've been reading some very sound advice on how ecclesiastical governance should be handled. Here is a key passage:

Let ecclesiastical leaders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching; for Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." Never admit any charge against an ecclesiastical leader except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.... Keep these rules without favor, doing nothing from partiality....

Teach and urge these duties. If anyone teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching which accords with the

will of God, he is puffed up with conceit, he knows nothing; he has a morbid craving for controversy, and for disputes about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling among men who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain....

Shun all this; aim at righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called.

This striking text comes from a letter containing extensive advice to a young bishop in the very early Church. The young bishop's name was Timothy. The author's name was Paul (1 Tim 5:17-6:12).

You don't have to be an exegetical genius to see that St. Paul's primary focus in his advice to Timothy is on faithfulness to Christ for its own sake. An ecclesiastical leader must seek to do the will of God, to teach only what Christ has revealed, and to exercise prudent discipline in order to prevent others from being led astray. A few verses later he sums up nicely: "O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the godless chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith" (1 Tim 6:20).

Vocations

But though Christ certainly deserves our fidelity in and of Himself, there are other good reasons for the Church to exercise sound discipline, even if the other reasons are somewhat more pragmatic. Perhaps the most important of these is the extremely negative impact that a lack of discipline has on vocations. It is no surprise that vocations plummeted in the West from the 1960's through the 1980's, not only in general because of increasing secularization but also in particular because so many dioceses and religious communities failed to maintain discipline in their own ranks. It is by now clear to even casual observers that vocations are relatively numerous in dioceses and religious orders known for their disciplined fidelity to the teachings of the Church, whereas they have dwindled to almost nothing in dioceses and religious orders which are known for the opposite.

Indeed, many have traded the Faith for the latest secular fashions, have permitted their priests and religious to preach and teach heresy, have failed for many years to properly form those under their jurisdiction, and have allowed various sins to deeply infect their communities. The result is lost vocations, for the lax offer the young no

reason to make a vocational commitment. Thus, in terms of vocations alone, the Church as a whole has paid a very high price for her failure to deal more decisively with laxity and infidelity within her ranks.

In this connection, a striking observation by St. Thomas Aquinas is particularly appropriate. Raising the question of whether God will ever permit the Church to be without the vocations she needs to continue Our Lord's mission, St. Thomas answers as follows:

God never so abandons his Church that suitable ministers are not to be found sufficient for the needs of the people; provided the worthy are promoted and the unworthy are set aside (*Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, q.36, a.4 ad 1).

Provided the worthy are promoted and the unworthy are set aside! It is difficult to conceive a phrase more calculated to unsettle the mind of modern Churchmen. All ecclesiastical leaders who are themselves spiritually sound have a serious obligation to meditate on these words of the great Common Doctor in order to find within themselves the counter-cultural wisdom, courage, resolve and patience to restore discipline: Wisdom to discern what to do, courage to do it, resolve to see it through, and patience to await the results. I stress resolve and patience in addition to wisdom and courage because, in a flabby ecclesiastical culture, the fruits of discipline will be reaped only over an extended period of time.

In the meantime, those who are willing to discipline must also be willing to be criticized loudly by the very people whom they wish would fawn over them. It never ceases to amaze me how many leaders find this difficult. In a spiritual wasteland, the beasts of denunciation and rebellion feed on the first tender shoots of discipline, but let a few of these shoots establish themselves and they will fence the beasts out, allowing the entire field to be put to good use once again. Apparently St. Thomas knew how this was to be done: Promote the worthy, he counseled, and set the unworthy aside. Easier said than done, perhaps, but it does sound like a plan.

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Loving to Discipline: The Case for Excommunication

June 06, 2013

It seems to me that it is time to reconsider—again—whether bishops ought to excommunicate Catholics who lead the way in promoting or implementing policies which are clearly contrary to the moral law. Just now Andrew Cuomo would make an excellent case study. Should he be the poster boy for all those who secretly want to get themselves kicked out of the Church? At least we may take him as a type.

Cuomo is a radical and outspoken advocate for both gay marriage and abortion. He campaigned for Governor of New York on a platform which included support for gay marriage, he spearheaded an intense lobbying campaign in favor of a bill to recognize it, and he signed the bill into law. He has also now [introduced a bill](#) which expands access to abortion, and undermines current legal restrictions on the practice in New York State. In other words, there is no question of Cuomo merely tolerating these things in a culture which is seriously ill; he is constantly pushing the envelope.

Now it is true that there is not much left of Cuomo's claim to be a Catholic. He divorced his wife, Kerry Kennedy, in 2005. According to [Wikipedia](#), as of 2011 he was living with his girlfriend. That alone is supposed to stop you from receiving communion, though Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany is [unwilling to make a point of this](#), citing the need to keep what is private private. Unfortunately, it is public scandal and not private sin which lies behind the Church's canonical obligation to refuse communion to figures who, by their public reception of that sacrament, bring the Church's seriousness about the Faith into disrepute.

But I do not insist upon Cuomo; he just happens to be in the news again today. There are plenty of other negative poster boys and poster girls, if the Church would only put them on a poster. Indeed, wayward theologians are an even better target, except that in today's world prominent public figures have far greater teaching value. Indeed, the excommunication of a political figure will immediately bring out of the woodwork certain theologians, priests, religious, and lay leaders eager to perform for the media their well-rehearsed denunciations of such an egregious abuse of ecclesiastical discipline. Call it a strategic initiative to flush out the snakes.

In any case, the key question is this: Why do I think excommunication in extreme public cases should be the disciplinary measure of choice for bishops?

The Privatization of Religion

Paradoxically, my first argument is based squarely on a repudiation of this notion that spiritual matters must be dealt with privately. This is simply another case of the cultural privatization of religion in the modern world, by which even many Catholic bishops have become convinced that religion is essentially a private and personal affair which ought not to be intruded into public life in any way, let alone in policy decisions. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Catholicism is **inescapably a public thing**. The Catholic Church has real authority to protect and interpret the moral law, and Christ Himself has an absolute claim on all of man's allegiances, both public and private. It is true that there are many policy disputes which the Church hierarchy ought not to adjudicate. Most policy questions are matters of prudence; good people can disagree over the best specific ways to secure the common good; and it is the province of the laity to work these things out in the light of Christ. But any policy which includes an objectively immoral provision is in fact an objectively immoral policy, something that the Church can judge, and which Catholics are obliged to oppose. An objectively immoral provision is one which seeks to extend or protect in law an objectively immoral practice.

Abortion and gay marriage are two such practices, and all policies which protect or extend them are gravely immoral. The Church has a public authority to declare their immorality and to teach, rule and sanctify accordingly. The fact that these measures are being implemented in the political arena, ordinarily the province of the State, is nothing to the purpose. For it is the Church, in her competence to adjudicate the moral law, which alone determines the proper ends and means for which and by which the State may rule. In fact, the State has no such public competence in the matter of morality. The State does not have the least authority to define right and wrong. With respect to morality, the State has only the authority to prohibit what is otherwise known as evil and enjoin what is otherwise known as good.

For these reasons, the Church strengthens a false understanding of her authority whenever she proposes moral doctrines without a willingness to make and enforce public determinations of their violation in specific instances. Catholicism is very much a public thing. It demands public judgments and public enforcements—not indeed political enforcements, but spiritual ones—and especially concerning the rights and privileges of membership in the Church of Christ. Failure to do this fosters a further secularization of

the concept of religion generally, and of the Church particularly.

The Law of Charity—and the Law of Justice

Even if the Church did not have a genuine public authority all her own, anyone who has ever managed groups of people has learned that human groups deteriorate rapidly if there are no consequences for bad behavior. Suppose you are a member of a club, and the club takes no steps to eliminate the influence or even the membership of people who seek to undermine the purposes of the club. After a relatively short time, you throw up your hands in disgust and go elsewhere. Or suppose you are in a particular class at school and you really want to learn, but there are one or more disruptive persons in the class who consistently destroy the educational atmosphere. This goes on for an extended period of time without correction. You quickly become dispirited; your own performance suffers; you wonder: What is the point of persevering?

The responsibility to counter or eliminate subversive influences in groups (I use the word “subversive” advisedly) increases geometrically in proportion to the necessity of the group and the spiritual goods at stake. If we are talking about serious disruption to the faith, morals and spiritual commitment of other members of the one true Church, the responsibility is very great indeed.

We would typically say that the Law of Charity demands that those in charge of the group must protect the well-being of other members of the group, which first and foremost includes restraining or excluding those members who are disruptive of the group’s common good. But really, as is obvious by this reference to the common good, such a response is actually demanded by justice. Bishops who refuse to discipline, including excommunication as needed, fail not only at the level of charity but at the more basic level of justice itself. This is not merely a failure to supply something optional or extra; it is a failure to supply a *due* good. It is a serious sin of omission.

Loss of Substantial Membership in the Church

One interesting development in ecclesiology since the mid-19th century is the growing articulation of the distinction between what we might call formal and substantial membership in the Church. For example, this distinction is the key to understanding the Church’s teaching that “outside the Church there is no salvation”, a statement which does not refer to what we call juridical or formal membership. In reality, as St. Paul taught, anyone who is joined to Christ by whatever means is joined substantially to the Church in a manner sufficient for salvation. Christ and the Church are one.

This raises the question of whether one can substantially *separate* oneself from the

Church. It seems that one can, and this may be one reason for excommunication *latae sententiae* (by a sentence already passed) in Canon Law. Traditionally, theologians have regarded such things as formal schism and heresy (formal, that is, deliberately chosen) as ways in which Catholics can separate themselves from the Church, ceasing to be “members” in any and all senses.

But it is at minimum confusing if such *substantial breaches of ecclesiality* are not recognized formally when possible, that is, if those who are guilty of such breaches are still received as if nothing has happened. Whatever might be the case of a formal decree of excommunication in serious cases that do not in and of themselves rupture one’s membership in the Church, it is difficult to see why a bishop would hesitate to juridically recognize such a rupture if and when it unmistakably occurs. And it is equally difficult to see why a sustained, conscious effort to implement and/or protect intrinsic evils in the legal and political order—in clear defiance of widely-known Church teaching—should not constitute such a breach.

While in this world, the Church does not enjoy a clear and obvious relationship between formal and substantial membership. If she did, the distinction would be unnecessary. There are innumerable cases in which evidence is insufficient for human judgment, and sheer numbers render ecclesiastical judgment of every person impossible. But in widely-known cases where sufficient evidence exists, surely the *formal* should be brought into line with the *substantial*. If only to ensure the effectiveness of her own mission, the Church should seek as little as possible to uphold the formal membership of those who have rather clearly and deliberately severed their substantial membership.

Strong Medicine: God’s Charity and His Justice are the Same

Owing to the unity and unchangeability of God, we may return to the concepts of charity and justice by observing that God’s justice and His charity are simply different views of the same thing. Happily, it so happens that ecclesiastical discipline is a fairly clear demonstration of this principle. Punishment is the best possible demonstration of the need for repentance and reconciliation. If clear teaching does not work, if prayer does not work, then punishment may well be the only way to “get through”. Just as this is often the case with children, so it is typical with older unreflective souls.

Excommunication is a clear and obvious penalty, the ultimate penalty imposed by the spiritual authority of the Church. It could, of course, be unjust, but in any case anyone who is not wholly given over to contempt for the Church’s authority must inescapably wonder if there is any reason why such an imposition could actually be just in his own case. Anyone who cares deeply about unity with Christ and the Church must be in theory

grateful for such an intervention should he go astray—offering as it does a clear chance to correct grave error and sin before death intervenes to make repentance impossible.

Indeed, here justice and charity are one. I can only pray that some bishop would be kind enough to formalize my excommunication, were I to go so far astray, rather than to allow me to continue in a state of confusion, perhaps slightly concerned by the Church's teaching, but persuaded through the irenic embrace of ecclesiastical authority that all is really well, and very well.

Any good parent applies discipline primarily because of its medicinal benefit. Bishops are bound by their office to do the same. I have already said that the failure to discipline is a failure of justice. Let us further reflect that a failure of justice is a failure of love.

Conclusion

It would seem, then, that the only significant argument against excommunication is that the lack of Catholic cohesiveness in the modern world makes its effects doubtful. It will be met with scorn by the secular media, and the one excommunicated may have no firm community of believers to make him more sensible of the disadvantages of his position. All of this is true, and bishops are not alone in regretting the lack of a strong and vibrant Catholic community which more perfectly reflects the essence of what it means to be the Church.

The paradox, of course, is that neither will it be possible to rebuild a strong sense of Catholic community without discipline. A community that cannot sustain legitimate discipline is decidedly unhealthy; it may not be a community in the full sense of the term at all. In the beginning, Catholic politicians who do not at all think with the Church, who derive their values more or less exclusively from the larger secular culture in which they seek their power and influence—such politicians may thumb their noses at their bishops, as they have been doing all along to the Church anyway, and drift contentedly into a formally non-Catholic identity.

But the most important thing is that it will not be a new identity. It will simply be a clarified identity. And for every ten who do not care in the least, there may be a small number who repent and return, if not immediately, at least before their deaths. Meanwhile, the lukewarm will have a wake-up call; and the faithful will be encouraged. Bishops should yearn for this possibility. They should highly value the means at their disposal to offer it. They may not love to discipline, but they absolutely must discipline to love.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

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Not Just Teaching, but Change

May 24, 2011

There was a time—and it has extended through most of my adult life—when deeply committed Catholics could cling only to those aspects of the Church which are divinely guaranteed. If Catholic publications strayed into dissidence, at least we could reassure ourselves that the Magisterium did not agree with them. If a local priest preached heresy, at least we could find a Church document which contradicted him. If Catholic education broke down all around us, at least we could found our own schools rooted in sacred Tradition.

But during this period, our lament was always that of Psalm 13: “How long, O Lord?”

During the extended pontificate of John Paul II, we witnessed a protracted intellectual battle over the meaning of the Second Vatican Council and even over the nature of the Catholic Faith itself. Perhaps the greatest victory of this campaign was the promulgation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which immediately gave the lie to so much preaching, so much religious education, and so many Catholic textbooks. But although the battle for Catholic institutions was waged intellectually (one thinks, for example, of John Paul’s prescription for Catholic universities in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*), we saw very little effort to actually take disciplinary control over wayward dioceses, Catholic agencies or Catholic schools.

The Vatican’s hands-off response to the widespread loss of an authentic Catholic identity set the pattern for most bishops. Although the episcopacy improved through the appointments of John Paul II, few bishops did more than teach. Discipline was rare; public confrontation rarer still. But roughly four to five years into the pontificate of Benedict XVI, this finally started to change. More and more bishops developed plans to rebuild their dioceses from within, to challenge the universities within their jurisdiction, and to publicly confront wayward politicians. Recently some bishops have begun even to remove irresponsible priests from ministry (in the United States, for example, this has been done by [Bishop Robert Finn](#) and [Cardinal Francis George](#)). Such shifts strongly suggest that Rome has been sending a more aggressive message for some time.

And now, in the sixth year of Pope Benedict’s pontificate, the Pope himself has finally begun to set an example by removing at least some notoriously bad bishops from office, which he has done three times in the past year (see [The surprising outcome of](#)

[Bishop Lahey's trial](#)). It is true that other initiatives were already in progress, such as the Apostolic Visitation of American women religious and the Visitation of the Diocese of Toowoomba, Australia, but an investigation is not always a harbinger of punishment. So the actual removal of several bishops from office in a short time is a sea change.

They say a rising tide lifts all boats, and so we are gratified (but, thankfully, no longer totally shocked) to see the Vatican also begin to put pressure on Catholic social agencies. The keynote speaker for the assembly of [Caritas International has just been vetoed](#), a fact rendered even more significant in that he was a very prominent Dominican priest. Moreover, the Vatican Secretary of State [Cardinal Bertone has now rather thoroughly lectured](#) Caritas International on what it means for a social agency to have a Catholic identity. The significance of this escalation of what is at last a pragmatic disciplinary battle cannot be overestimated.

Some would argue that the horrors of the sex abuse scandal have played a major role in bringing churchmen to their senses. Absent the invigorating pontificate of John Paul II and the steady assurance of Benedict XVI, that scandal could just as easily have caused things to spiral further out of control, but it is in the very nature of Divine Providence to use the very timing of earthly events to bring good out of evil. I have no wish to minimize the importance of the frightful mirror that has been held up before the ecclesiastical establishment over the past ten years.

Regardless of the exact combination of causes, which God alone knows, the vital point is that we can point to more than just Catholic teaching as an indicator of the importance of Catholic identity. We can point to specific contemporary disciplinary cases. We can look at each other and nod and say that at last the hierarchy is beginning to “get it”. It is very clear that the current Pope is slowly learning how to choose disciplinary battles he can win, and encouraging his bishops to do the same.

We must of course remember what every good parent already knows, that there is a great deal of the art of the possible in discipline. Therefore, we have no warrant to expect a landslide, or even a controlled torrent of discipline, at least not yet. But being actually able to point to any track record at all of internal discipline is a huge gain and a significant comfort. It seems to me certain that it is also a hopeful foreshadowing of real and concrete changes yet to come.

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Have the Popes Written Enough? A Sharp Turn in Renewal

May 12, 2014

In a discussion with family members gathered for Mother's Day yesterday, the question arose as to why modern popes have tended to write so much. One of our number suggested that perhaps enough had been written, and it was time for something else. The discussion then turned to whether Pope Francis might be of the same mind.

One reason modern popes have written so much, of course, is that the modern world has drifted so steadily away from the Catholic faith. This has had all kinds of repercussions within the Church, leading popes to attempt to clarify many different questions by writing encyclicals to all the bishops of the world, and dense apostolic exhortations to the whole Church.

But in the second half of the 20th century, another reason seemed to emerge. We might take the pontificate of Pope Paul VI as a kind of turning point. Pope Paul will be beatified in October, but this is hardly an honor arising from his effective ecclesiastical leadership. On his ninth anniversary, he himself admitted, with considerable sadness, that all he had been able to do for the Church was to suffer. The rapid secularization which roared through the Church in the 1960s and 1970s made it very difficult for the Pope to be an effective administrator. Paul VI, in fact, was widely ignored and even ridiculed by theologians, priests and even bishops.

When Pope St. John Paul II was elected in 1978, he must have recognized that the lines of ecclesiastical authority were in such disarray as to render effective ecclesiastical discipline nearly impossible. In any case, John Paul clearly set himself the long and patient task of attempting to reunite the Church around the See of Peter and to teach the bishops around the world how to be good bishops. He was both a great public presence and a great teacher, issuing an enormous body of papal texts. The current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was also produced on his watch.

If Pope John Paul II was a philosopher, his successor Benedict XVI was a theologian who carried on this tradition with many more teaching documents. He even developed a conceptual framework for the implementation of the renewal called for by the Second Vatican Council, a renewal to proceed as Catholic renewal always proceeds, through a

hermeneutic of continuity with the entire Tradition, not through the dissident hermeneutic of rupture that was so characteristic of the first generation following the Council.

But, again, this was primarily a teaching phase. Both John Paul II and Benedict XVI even used their Wednesday audiences to give systematic instruction in the Faith in weekly installments. They also wrote personal books while in office. And while Benedict began to devote himself to ecclesiastical administration in ways which probably exceeded expectations for such a prodigious scholar, he ultimately resigned when he became convinced that he no longer had the strength to see through all that needed to be done.

There were several important practical results of these two pontificates which stretched from 1978 to 2013, a period of 35 years. One was the emergence of a vigorous laity, as called for by Vatican II and necessitated by the collapse of the clergy shortly thereafter. Perhaps even more important, the quality of the Catholic episcopate was improved markedly, and the quality of the priesthood as well. Call it a slow process, but the worldwide episcopate is a very different body now than it was in, say, 1968, and it has better priestly tools to deploy.

This may be just the context for a different sort of pope, one less interested in teaching and writing, and more interested in the implementation of concrete reforms.

Pope Francis

As a Jesuit, Pope Francis has the intelligence and academic background to have become another scholar-pope. But he seems to be unfitted by personality and preference for such a role. Francis did wish to complete Pope Benedict's trilogy of encyclicals on the theological virtues, using the former Pope's notes to issue [Lumen Fidei](#) last July. But he is known more for his interviews, short homilies and practical criticisms than his major contributions to Catholic thought, and he seems more interested in evangelization and pastoral reform than scholarship.

There would seem to be two alternatives to the predominately pedagogical program of the recent past, the attempt to explain everything in great detail. Pope Francis shows a deep interest in both of them. The first alternative is evangelization. Francis constantly emphasizes the sacrificial, redeeming love of Jesus Christ. He insists that we must ignite a fire of yearning and hope before souls can grow, under the influence of sacraments and catechesis, into spiritual and moral maturity.

The second alternative is practical ecclesiastical change. Picking up the gauntlet which Pope Benedict threw down just before his resignation, Pope Francis is obviously

serious about transforming the Curia into a kind of leaven for the service of the whole Church—whether this involves elimination of bad apples, or structural change or profound attitude adjustments. He has also said he wants to transform the synodal model from a program that simply follows the initial curial outline to a more aggressive process that surfaces workable proposals for actual pastoral change.

Pope Francis' focus seems almost unrelentingly pragmatic. His questions are invariably simple and direct: What are our motives? How are we acting? What are we trying to accomplish? He seems to want to shake up our attitudes toward the Faith and our ecclesiastical habits in order to prompt a new sense of the wonder of our Redemption and a new determination to act on that wonder in the deepest possible service to others. As he has so often warned, ecclesiastical careerists need not apply.

This is not a question of escaping words, of course, nor is it a question of proceeding carelessly. It is more a question of proceeding at all, of doing something with our time and energy besides intellectualizing everything. In this sense, active evangelization and concrete pastoral reform ought to be effective substitutes for any number of long, official explanations—explanations which, ironically, can stall us in a constant cycle of digestion, as we break down each point to the last molecule.

Though I ask this as a *writer*, might we not hope that such a departure from writing is exactly what Pope Francis envisions, desires, and will succeed in setting in motion? Would it not be wonderful if the question of whether enough has been written could be taken as rhetorical, with an obvious answer? In that case, then, effective action would be the next logical step.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=1193>

Meatless Fridays?

May 17, 2011

By now you're probably aware that the bishops of England and Wales have [reinstated Friday abstinence](#). The majority of CatholicCulture.org users probably applaud this development, as do I. This applause is prompted by a number of closely related considerations.

The first is that Friday abstinence symbolizes a renewal of ecclesial discipline. All discipline—whether discipline of formation or discipline of punishment—sends a message, but not all can serve as a symbol. If the Pope removes a wayward bishop from office, that sends a message to other bishops. If a bishop removes or laicizes a wayward priest, that sends a message to other priests. (I can remember observing to friends over thirty years ago that things won't change rapidly until heads roll.) But the imposition of a visible and regular penitential pattern on the faithful is not only a discipline but a symbol. It symbolizes that Catholics ought to be characterized by a specific and publicly discernible corporate identity which distinguishes them from everyone else.

In a perfect world, there would be no need to go beyond the identity projected simply by living an exemplary Christian life, but then in a perfect world, there would be no need of Christ in the first place, let alone the scandal of his crucifixion. This brings me to a second consideration. In an imperfect world, we all need help, and among the many forms of help we need is the help of being habituated to reaffirm our Catholic identity without embarrassment. For example, the discipline of ashes imposes on us a visible identity once a year, though we may rush nervously home to clean up. Friday abstinence is only a small penitential sacrifice, but it is also both a corporate activity and visible mark of one's Faith. If we follow this discipline we remind ourselves that we are part of something important, and insofar as others notice this peculiar habit, we remind them as well. As we do this repeatedly, we become less self-conscious concerning our special relationship with Christ, and more comfortable affirming it even in a bemused or hostile environment.

A third consideration is *esprit de corps*. When we do things in common with a group, we strengthen our ties with that group and increase both our commitment to it and our positive feelings about it. So too with the Church. Abstaining from meat on Friday may not be a spectacular penance, but it is in some measure a common

affirmation of our membership on the team—our status as active, contributing members of the Body of Christ. Thus every group which wants to be cherished in the minds and hearts of its adherents, and desires moreover to thrive over time, establishes little traditions in which its members enjoy a common participation. These generate not only an increased sense of identity but a sense of positive commitment to the strength and importance of the group as a whole. The Church is no different with respect to this basic psychological reality, except that even as we increase our *esprit de corps* by our participation in the little marks and patterns of our Faith, she channels grace to us.

My fourth and final consideration is the benefit—even the necessity—of specific outward practices if we are to escape the tragedy of so much of contemporary spirituality. On every side, we find the worldly-wise affirming that they are definitely spiritual but not at all religious. By this they mean that they do not follow the narrow tenets and restrictive rules of any particular creed; instead, they follow the superior path of thinking high thoughts and keeping, as it were, a rosy outlook on life. This attitude not only deceives others; it deceives the self. Lofty as it sounds, it is really an excuse for not making any commitment to what God has revealed. It is an excuse to slide into any habit of thought we wish, and to live however we desire. Yet we are not purely intellectual like the angels; we must live a specific Faith in our bodies, or we will not live it at all. God has a plan for us, body and soul, a plan that involves a concrete and practical daily acceptance of His will. The hard edges of simple penitential practices enjoined by religious authority, however small in themselves, awaken us to this reality.

It will be interesting to see how quickly Catholics in England and Wales habituate themselves once again to the adoption of this particular penitential practice, or whether for most it will remain a dead letter. Time will tell. But it would be a very good thing if it were to take hold, simple as it is, and an even better thing if it were to spread to other countries that have similarly abandoned this venerable practice. May this tiny gesture initiate us afresh into what it means to root Catholicism in our very bones.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=814>

On the Crisis of Theology and the Need for Rulers

August 29, 2011

Fr. Thomas Weinandy caught my eye last week when he [complained of a “crisis” in Catholic theology](#) characterized by a rejection of Catholic faith and morals. Fr. Weinandy is the chief staff aide to the US bishops’ committee on doctrine. What are we to say about this crisis?

The first and most important thing to say is that the crisis is of the bishops’ own making. I do not claim that the profound secularization of culture which has eroded Catholic theology on every side is primarily the fault of the bishops, but it is certainly their fault—including the fault of Rome herself—that a pitched battle was not waged in the 1960’s to keep Catholic universities and colleges from succumbing to this secular spirit. For the institutions of Catholic higher education are in fact the collective seat of theological studies, and what Fr. Weinandy rightly calls “a radical divide over the central tenets of the Catholic faith and the Church’s fundamental moral tradition” would far better have been nipped in the bud than allowed, for now nearly fifty years, to grow from strength to strength.

Given the long percolation of Modernism in Catholic theological circles from the late 19th century and the rapid secularization of Western culture in the 1960’s, this battle would have been long and hard. But it is difficult to imagine that it would not now be over, instead of just beginning on far less favorable terrain. The key to victory would have been to make sure that heretics were clearly and forcefully declared to be where they belonged—that is, *outside* rather than *within* the Church, so that they could attack Catholic faith and morals only from secular institutions. You may recall that this was finally done with one premier dissenter, Hans Küng, who is no longer permitted to teach theology at any Catholic institution, with the result that nobody any longer cares what he thinks.

That is, unfortunately, only one very small historical lesson. But a larger historical perspective may shed further light. I wish to turn again to Blessed John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University*, and before you sigh in exasperation at yet another citation from the great 19th century cardinal, let me hasten to add that, in this particular

instance, he was wrong.

In one of the later sections of the book, Newman addresses “A Form of Infidelity of the Day”. His purpose is to demonstrate the main technique that secularists outside the Church use to eliminate the influence of religion, namely the technique of ignoring religion rather than attacking it, and supplanting it with other studies while ignoring it. In other words, secularists outside the Church assume that religion has nothing to do with their own disciplines and that, in fact, their own disciplines will ultimately disprove religion, and so they need not engage religion in controversy, which would only draw unfortunate attention to it.

Now thus far, of course, Newman was absolutely right. He understood down to the least particular the nature of the “infidelity of the day” which he sought to delineate and answer. But Newman’s error (if failing to foretell the future may legitimately be called an error) was his assumption that the death of Christendom had happily placed all the enemies of Christ outside the Church.

Newman saw very clearly that there was a great advantage to having the Church’s enemies all on the outside. He knew that in the age when Christianity was culturally dominant (that is, the age of Christendom), the result was that there were very many within the Church who lacked commitment to her teachings, and who were quite content to create severe problems from within. He accepted it as a gain—at least in the matter of controversy—that the secularization of the larger culture up to his time had made it supremely comfortable for the Church’s enemies to thrive outside her borders—because they no longer had any reason to be enemies within.

Newman believed that much was gained for the Catholic university when the secularization of culture made it unnecessary for there to be great battles *within* the theological schools of Christendom (which were in fact the settings for some very great battles). Consider his argument:

It is one great advantage of an age in which unbelief speaks out, that Faith can speak out too; that, if falsehood assails Truth, Truth can assail falsehood. In such an age it is possible to found a University more emphatically Catholic than could be set up in the middle age, because Truth can entrench itself carefully, and define its own profession severely, and display its colours unequivocally, by occasion of that very unbelief which so shamelessly vaunts itself. And a kindred advantage to this is the confidence which, in such an age, we can place in all who are around us, so that we need look for no foes but those who are in the enemy’s camp.

Such, indeed, was the case when Newman conceived his theory of a Catholic University in the middle of the 19th century. In those days, Protestants and secularists alike separated from the Church with an honesty we can now admire only in retrospect. They separated themselves and attacked her from without. But the crisis of contemporary Catholic theology to which Fr. Weinandy refers is, in fact, a grave crisis only because this clear separation is no longer the norm. The history of the growth of the “radical divide” is precisely a history of deceit and betrayal, by which a great many have been led seriously astray precisely by putting their trust in those who were assumed to be allies within the Church.

I would very much prefer to convert those who betray the Faith by example and argument. But example and argument are never enough for those who do not wish to be converted. Newman may have been too sanguine in his expectation that a secular world would be sufficient to keep those who stray from the Truth outside the Church, but he was right about the principle in question: It is much better for the Church if those who despise the tenets of her Faith and her fundamental moral tradition are on the outside looking in, and not theologians in good standing.

That is why it is necessary to *exclude* those who are no longer Catholic from theological positions within the Church. But exclusion requires more than teaching and sanctifying. Exclusion requires that bishops learn once again how to rule. By their failure to rule, the bishops have participated in the creation of this radical divide. Only by ruling now can they once again close that yawning chasm—or rather put that chasm and its other side outside the borders of the Church of Christ.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=851>

The Pope and the Jesuits: Explaining the Problem

February 26, 2008

In my last *Insights* message I linked to an excellent Catholic World News story on Pope Benedict's final words to the General Congregation of the Society of Jesus in Rome on February 21st (see [Remember 4th vow, Pope urges Jesuits](#)). The Pope's message is even more striking when you consider what preceded it.

Before the Pope's final address, the new Superior General, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, greeted the Pope and attempted to anticipate his concerns. He stressed the Order's "commitment to the service of the Church and of humanity" inspired and impelled by "the Gospel and the Spirit of Christ." He assured the Holy Father that "in communion with the Church and guided by the magisterium, we seek to dedicate ourselves to profound service, to discernment, to research." For these reasons, Fr. Nicolás lamented, "it saddens us, Holy Father, when the inevitable deficiencies and superficialities of some among us are at times used to dramatize and represent as conflicts and clashes what are only manifestations of limits and human imperfections, or inevitable tensions of everyday life."

It is not the first time the new Superior has sounded this note. Apparently that's his story and he's sticking to it. But is the massive failure of the contemporary Jesuit Order to defend and explain the teachings of the Church nothing more than a human imperfection? Is the widespread Jesuit refusal to weed out candidates with homosexual tendencies only a tension of everyday life? Is the near total failure of Jesuit educational institutions to maintain a Catholic identity nothing more than an inevitable "limit" on the performance of deeply committed Catholics guided by the Magisterium?

Benedict does not appear to think so. In his response, he said in effect: "Don't try to play this game with me." Let's list a few of the points he made:

- The Jesuits must seek "that harmony with the magisterium that avoids causing confusion and uncertainty among the People of God."
- They must "adhere completely to the Word of God as well as to the magisterium's charge of conserving the truth and unity of Catholic doctrine in its

entirety.”

- The Order must realize that “the option for the poor is not ideological but rather is born of the Gospel” and so the Jesuits must “fight the deep roots of evil in the very heart of the human being, the sin that separates us from God.”
- The Order must again become “capable of challenging cultural historical adversities to bring the Gospel to all corners of the world.”
- Its members must defend Catholic teaching on precisely the points that are “increasingly under attack from secular culture.”
- The Order must “regain a fuller understanding of [its] distinctive ‘fourth vow’ of obedience to the Successor of Peter.”
- And the *pièce de résistance*: “I well understand that this is a particularly delicate and troublesome issue for you and for many of your colleagues.”

Inevitable tensions of everyday life be damned. Granted, it is as yet unclear whether Benedict will (or can) actually enforce a reform, but he is under no illusions as to the need.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=218>

None So Blind: Obedience is an Antidote to Stupidity

November 11, 2011

Except with infallible doctrines, obedience is not an infallible safeguard. But it can go a long way toward knocking the stuffing out of us, by which I mean the sheer stupidity we generally fall into when we are too fond of our own judgment and our own will. To paraphrase Psalm 14:1: The fool says in his heart, “I need not obey.”

A person who lives in a glass house should not throw stones, but we see this in Protestantism all the time. Lacking any authority principle, relying instead on the principle of private judgment, many Protestants hold strong opinions on religious issues despite a near total lack of study of the sources of Revelation. Their view is often that Scripture is as plain as a 21st century newspaper and so whatever they think it means must necessarily be true, no matter how much it conflicts with other parts of Scripture or the Christian tradition, or even with the alternative views of many other contemporary Protestants, or even with what we might at times justly call common sense.

The absurdities to which this leads are legion. Yet, sad to say, we all have a tendency to assert our own lame theories wildly. To take a modest case, a man who does not wish to fast will frequently rail against the damnably authoritarian nature of Church rules. Yet if he is wise, he will obey them anyway. What he will find is that this act of obedience will help him to detach himself from his own will. Once sufficient detachment is achieved, his view of both the rules and the fasting itself are almost certain to change.

In a contrary fashion, Modernism was born among those who, being essentially worldly, also did not like (in a very broad and general sense) to fast. But these were intellectuals. So, instead of obeying, they developed a cosmic theory about religion and cultural perception to prove that fasting does not suit the consciousness of modern man and therefore no longer has value as a religious practice. Believe me, I am oversimplifying only slightly. I am reminded of the priest who complained that he disliked the Stations of the Cross because they were such a penance.

Well, yes. We understand the rebellion of the natural man. We understand how rationalization occurs, and how capable it makes us of spinning out theories to justify this rebellion. But if we obey even the non-infallible disciplinary decisions of those set

over us in the Church, we are much more likely to see our theories for what they so commonly are: Excuses for inordinate attachment.

The need for obedience is most obvious with respect to doctrinal issues on which the Church cannot err, and here too the habit of obedience tends to detach us from an excessive fondness for our own judgments. A moment's reflection enables us to realize that this actually makes us more objective, and therefore more open to truth.

But infallibility is not essential to the ability of obedience to serve its purpose, as my brief discussion of fasting suggests. This purpose is also served in prudential matters, about which good people can disagree. Nor is obedience valuable only for those who would prefer to do less than the Church requires. There are many who would prefer to do more, and who are prone to condemn authority for not demanding enough. Note that on either side, the prudential judgment of the objector may at times be better than that of the ecclesiastical superiors. This is hardly impossible. But those who object will still benefit more by cheerfully following what the Church prescribes than by insisting on doing things their own way, because the key value of obedience is that it detaches us from our own wills.

The dangers of such attachment are very great. The fallout spreads rapidly from practices and attitudes to ideas and doctrines. Again and again we observe a pattern in those who, having denounced legitimate authority for its failure to implement the right set of requirements, go on over time to deny authority altogether, or to contradict not only disciplinary norms but infallible teachings. To those who remain obedient, it soon becomes evident that insofar as someone is frequently or habitually disobedient to legitimate ecclesiastical authority, the extremism or even absurdity of that person's views and assertions increases at a very high rate.

Liturgical disobedience is a perennial case in point. Those who obediently make proper use of the liturgy the Church imposes, even when they find it lacking, and whether or not they are priests or laity, invariably grow spiritually. As a direct result, they remain at least somewhat detached from their own views, preferences and passions; they are prone to assess the views of others more charitably and prudently; and in consequence they generally avoid putting themselves on display as fools and idiots. Not so those who insist on saying or hearing Mass in their own way, certain that their own preferences constitute a superior norm. These are soon ready to condemn anything that interferes with their own predilections, to judge every issue according to their own passions, and to assess every virtue by their own lights. They almost invariably soon begin to voice extreme and absolute opinions that are absurd on their face.

An excellent example would be the Modernist distortions of the ordinary form of the

Roman Rite that drove obedient Catholics nearly mad a generation ago. These distortions were accompanied by a whole litany of doctrinal and social assertions as shallow as they were outlandish. But for obvious reasons we here at CatholicCulture.org do not currently hear from all that many Modernists. We still hear with some frequency, however, from those who are not slow to speak foolishly on the other side. Thus I have seen it roundly asserted on more than one occasion that Modernism itself will not be driven from the Church until we have a pope who will make the Tridentine Mass the sole form of worship. This change alone, they claim, will eliminate Modernism.

The mind boggles. One wonders what such persons think the prevailing form of the rite was when Pope St. Pius X became so appalled by the inroads of Modernism that he felt the need to condemn it. Or again, one wonders what form of the rite was in effect when Modernist theological advisors attempted to hijack the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council and, failing that, hastened to report the Council falsely in the world press. Unfortunately, when people *on any side* fail to cultivate a true spirit of obedience through the actual positive and ungrudging practice of the virtue, they cannot help but to multiply stupidities to the point of scandal. This happens to all who fail to learn not just outward obedience, but obedience in their hearts.

And why? Because they are increasingly attached to their own judgment and their own will. Thus they have no remedy for their own weakness, their own blindness. This never takes long to show.

Church authority may at times seem to us too strong and at other times too weak. It may even seem on the whole to be prudentially ill-suited to the times. Yet it is truly marvelous how obedience even to an arguably poor disciplinary authority will invariably breed wisdom and general spiritual health. It is no wonder: By this virtue and this virtue alone do we become increasingly detached from our own wills. In contrast, disobedience almost infallibly makes one ever more a fool. Moreover, it does so quickly and, to everyone else, obviously. There really are none so blind as those who refuse to see.

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Episcopal Reform and the Rights of the Laity

March 01, 2006

In the wake of our recent reflections on reform of the episcopacy, some readers have asked how a layman's efforts to reprove, correct or resist a bishop can fit into the Catholic obligation to be faithful to the Magisterium and obedient to those in ecclesiastical authority. That's a very good question, but it also has a very good answer. Like all such answers, this one is rooted in the nature of the Church herself. We need to understand the Church's special relationship with truth, the nature of her teaching authority, and the rights of the faithful which grow out of these two things.

The Mystical Body, One in Truth

The Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, and all its members are joined to Christ. All Catholics share by their baptism in Our Lord's threefold dignity of priest, prophet and king. Their share in the priesthood of Christ draws them to offer all that they are to the Father for the sake of the Church (Col 1:24). An essential, defining feature of the Church is the unity of Christ's body in the truth, for it is through truth that Christ is known, loved and experienced. Our Lord Himself prayed that his disciples would be one in the truth (cf Jn 17). He also declared that the Gates of Hell would not prevail against the Church, and He promised to be with His followers until the end of time.

Clearly, Christ's intentions would be void if this *unity in truth* of the Church were to be broken—if the Church were to embrace falsehood. To ensure that this does not happen, Christ established Peter as the head of His Church, with the power of the keys and the obligation to confirm his brethren in the faith. Indeed, Christ guaranteed Peter's fidelity by praying that he might not defect in faith (Lk 22:32). Again, this guarantee is for the sake of the unity of the Church in truth, which must persist until Christ comes. For this reason, it is clear that Peter's authority was intended to be passed on to his successors.

Sharing with Peter in this power to nourish and govern the body of Christ in truth were the other apostles. These apostles and their successors were sent out to represent the fullness of the Church's authority and sacramental power in various regions of the

world. In union with Peter and his successors, these bishops therefore also share in the teaching authority of Christ. But it is Peter's faith which was guaranteed by Christ, and it is Peter's role to confirm these brothers in their faith. Therefore, bishops enjoy such teaching authority only when in union with the Pope.

The Magisterium, Its Glory and Its Limits

This ability to teach truth, possessed by the bishops of the Catholic Church in union with the Pope, is called the Church's teaching authority, or *Magisterium*. As already noted, the purpose of this Magisterium is to preserve the unity of the body of Christ in truth, and this essential purpose is the key to understanding both papal infallibility and the authority of bishops when teaching in union with the Holy See. It is also the key to understanding the nature and limitations of the Magisterium itself.

First, the Magisterium is concerned with faith and morals, the areas in which a failure of the Church to remain true to Christ would be tantamount to the failure of Christ's promises. The Magisterium is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit to be free from error in faith or morals whenever it formally binds the whole Church to the truth. Thus, when the Pope or bishops in union with him clearly intend to exercise their special authority by teaching on a matter of faith or morals to the whole Church, the resulting teaching is infallible and demands the submission of the minds and wills of all the faithful.

But when the pope or bishops express private opinions or address only small groups of people, Magisterial guarantees are not at work. Nor are they necessary, because these less weighty utterances do not bind the Church. Neither are these guarantees at work in the decisions of popes or bishops regarding Church procedures and disciplines. Procedures and disciplines are designed to address specific problems for a given time and place according to human wisdom. While humility and good order requires the faithful to obey the legitimate disciplines of the Church with regard to the practices of the spiritual life and the administration of Church institutions and personnel, there is nothing to prevent Catholics from believing that some of these disciplines are ill-advised, or from working respectfully for change.

Such disciplines, of course, would not generally be sinful even if less than ideal. There is no excuse for a Catholic to disobey his bishop or the pope (or his religious superior in a religious community) just because he does not agree with certain disciplines, the following of which cannot lead to sin. Here, there is great virtue in setting aside one's own will in favor of the will of one's religious superiors. One ought to remain obedient in such matters, even while working respectfully for such changes as may seem advisable.

The Rights of the Faithful

With regard to the prudential judgments of popes and bishops on this or that human situation, less deference is required. There is nothing to prevent a layman from believing a pope or bishop to be wrong, for example, in his assessment of social, economic or political policies, or of broader cultural issues. Here a layman may prefer to follow his own judgment, and even to argue against the position of a pope or bishop. Charity is especially required in such cases, but ultimately it is a matter of prudence how seriously to take a given episcopal or papal opinion on such policy matters.

Indeed, in most areas relating both to family life and life in the world, the responsibility of the laity to make judgments and implement the best possible policies cannot be legitimately ceded to churchmen. This is the layman's province. He benefits greatly by understanding the authentic principles taught by the Church's Magisterium about man and morality. In fact, he is obliged to follow these principles. But within this moral framework, he is also obliged by his state in life to make the final decisions in prudential matters of policy, for which he has ultimate responsibility.

Such matters are outside the essential life of the Church, but the laity have rights even within the Church herself. We recall again the purpose of the Magisterium to serve the unity in truth of the body of Christ. Indeed, the purpose of all ecclesiastical authority is to serve the building up of this same body. Within the Church herself, therefore, the purposes and duties of spiritual leadership are linked to corresponding rights among all the faithful. Thus, the faithful have the right to sound Catholic teaching, proper administration of the sacraments, reverent liturgies in accordance with due norms, and, in general, authentic Catholic nourishment in the spiritual life.

These rights are the basis of many of the provisions of Canon Law. Regardless of the mechanisms for enforcement, Canon Law has always been concerned with the ordering of the Church, the rights of the faithful, and the duties of ecclesiastical persons with respect to these rights. The first part of the current Code of Canon Law devotes two major sections to the rights and responsibilities of all the faithful and of the laity in particular. Moreover, Canon Law also recognizes the right of the faithful to make their views known on matters affecting the life of the Church. This is stated clearly in Canon 212, Section 3:

They have the right, indeed at times the duty, in keeping with their knowledge, competence and position, to manifest to the sacred Pastors their views on matters which concern the good of the Church. They have the right also to make their

views known to others of Christ's faithful, but in doing so they must always respect the integrity of faith and morals, show due reverence to the Pastors and take into account both the common good and the dignity of individuals.

Acute Problems

This right and duty of the faithful to make their views known can become acute when, on a matter of faith or morals, a bishop, theologian, pastor or religious superior actually teaches contrary to the Magisterium or attempts to impose programs or liturgical rules which contradict or undermine what has been taught or otherwise put in force by the Holy See. Direct contradictions of Church teaching which demand the assent of the faithful are thankfully rare, but preaching, teaching, writing, programs and liturgical practices which deviate from or undermine the official positions of the universal Church are not so rare. Such deviations are frequent wherever bishops, theologians, pastors and religious superiors are sadly influenced by the mindset and values of the prevailing culture.

These deviations put the faithful in a difficult position, leaving them little choice but to passively or actively resist. In some cases, there may be complex matters of interpretation at stake, and for this reason the benefit of the doubt must always be given to those in authority. But at other times, false teachings, broken rules, or compromised values are so clear that fraternal correction, passive resistance, or even public protest and organized opposition are not only justified but required. Canon Law itself provides procedures for redress of grievances, as well as penalties for ecclesiastical persons who fail in their duties or abuse the rights of the faithful. If there is at times a lack of zeal in enforcement of the provisions of Canon Law, this is simply further evidence of the need for reform.

Conclusion

The faults of bishops do not exempt lay people or other ecclesiastical subordinates from their own responsibility to remain faithful to the Magisterium of the Church—their weighty responsibility to do their part to preserve and protect the *unity in truth* of the body of Christ. With all these considerations in mind, a well-formed Catholic will know when he is required to submit his mind and will to formal teachings of the Magisterium, when he may work for change in disciplines which he believes could be improved, when he may disagree with the prudential judgments and policy preferences of bishops, and when he must sadly resist and even attempt to correct a wayward ecclesiastical superior

in one way or another.

It takes theological understanding, spiritual formation, personal detachment, prudence and humility to make the right judgments in these matters. Because of their own weakness and fallibility, faithful Catholics ought to be slow to criticize and slower to act against their bishops. But for all that, the faithful are not without responsibility in spiritual matters. They too are called in some way to share in the roles of priest, prophet and king. At times they may correctly feel compelled to exercise the right, or even perform the duty, of making known to their pastors and to others their views “on matters which concern the good of the Church.”

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Vatican Reform: Time for a New Inquisition

February 25, 2014

Do you remember the Roman Inquisition? Unfortunately, when people today think of “the Inquisition”, they think of the Spanish Inquisition, which was unduly influenced by the Spanish crown. Even so, its weaknesses were horrendously exaggerated by hostile English historians in what has come to be known as the Black Legend. It is this which gives the term “inquisition” such a bad sound.

But do you remember the Roman Inquisition? Back in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, the Roman Inquisition operated throughout significant portions of Europe, firmly under the control of the Papacy, with the purpose of protecting the faithful against priests, religious and bishops who did not fulfill their obligations under Church law. It was an ecclesiastical judicial system and, as such, it was primarily used for cases involving ecclesiastical persons, who in those days were universally accorded the right to be tried by the Church instead of by the Crown. This was called “benefit of clergy.” Indeed, it was a significant benefit, because the ecclesiastical justice system protected the rights of the accused substantially better than the secular systems of the day.

Along the path to modernity, however, the Church’s judicial system withered. Canon Law is still in place, and some cases are still brought before diocesan courts and then appealed to Rome (especially marriage cases). But the prosecutorial role in the ecclesiastical justice system has largely disappeared. All you need to do is consider the widespread abuse of the rights of the faithful in the areas of the liturgy and Catholic education over the past fifty years to realize that internal prosecution of ecclesiastical persons has been virtually non-existent in modern times. This lack has been apparent in all kinds of abuse including, as all the world now knows, sexual abuse. Ecclesiastical trials seem to have become a thing of the past.

Time for Change

This has to change, and there are cases on the horizon that could mark the beginning of such a change. By now everyone is familiar with the abuse case involving the apostolic nuncio to the Dominican Republic (see Phil Lawler’s recent update in [On transparency in](#)

[handling abuse charges, Vatican is facing a big test](#)). Transparency, of course, is a key issue, but effective ecclesiastical justice is even more important—and it would raise transparency to a new level.

It is an extremely serious matter for priests, deacons, religious and bishops to violate the rights of the faithful to authentic Catholic teaching, liturgy, pastoral stewardship and pastoral care. When false doctrine, liturgical aberrations, greed, and personal abuse go unpunished, it is a failure of both justice and effective governance. This is true even when something is done behind the scenes, such as causing an ecclesiastical person to disappear quietly, perhaps through timely retirement. I've said for years that as a matter of both justice and effective management, serious guilt demands that heads roll, and that the rest of us see them rolling.

And now we are facing a new problem caused by the failure of the Church's judicial system. In those matters which interest the secular world, a reluctant Church is beginning to have its heads rolled by the State. This obscures the nature of the Church as a public authority in her own right. Back when the Church's judicial system was effective, if the Church found an ecclesiastical person guilty of a serious crime which ordinarily fell to secular authority to punish, the Church could strip those she convicted of the benefit of clergy, "relaxing" them to the secular arm. All the options were open, and the Church led the way.

But the key point is this: The Church absolutely must bear the responsibility of keeping her own house clean. We ought to reflect, in this light, on the recent comments by Roger Cardinal Mahony on [his mishandling of the notorious sexual abuse](#) committed by Fr. Nicolas Aquiler-Rivera: "This case highlighted errors made by us in the Archdiocese in those early years..." Excuse me? Errors? We are talking about giving a wayward priest a heads-up so he could escape secular punishment instead of already having tried and convicted him in a Church court for his crimes against the faithful—before these crimes even came to the attention of secular authorities.

Triggering True Reform

Given the lack of an effective prosecutorial wing in the ecclesiastical judiciary, such problems were endemic throughout the 20th century. But now Pope Francis has the former nuncio to the Dominican Republic in the Vatican, and perhaps this affair will lead to an ecclesiastical trial rather than an extradition. *[Note: The nuncio was laicized in June of 2014 and now faces a criminal trial]*. The nuncio was found guilty and laicized, and will be sent. Similarly, Scottish priests have brought charges of sexual predation to the Vatican's attention against Cardinal Keith O'Brien, who was recently forced to

resign and leave Scotland because of what the Cardinal has called “indiscretions”. This too could lead to a canonical trial.

My point is that these cases *should* lead to Church trials, and that such trials ought to mark the beginning of a major shift in the Church’s judiciary system. The Church should revive her prosecutorial arm so that she can be proactive in bringing charges against ecclesiastics who appear to be guilty of significant crimes as defined in Canon Law. Those who abuse their positions of ecclesiastical authority should be prosecuted and tried by ecclesiastical authority. The wounds should not be allowed to fester unless and until some secular authority decides enough is enough. Nor, as I indicated above, are we talking only about sexual crimes. After all, these have been substantially less frequent than some other kinds of abuse.

Since the Pope is in the midst of reviewing proposals for Vatican reform, I would like to suggest a modest proposal of my own. Let us have a reform with teeth. It would be wise to avoid the old name, of course. “Inquisition” can no longer be the term of choice. But I propose a Church which takes responsibility for its personnel by prosecuting, trying, and convicting those who seriously and systematically violate the rights of those they have been charged to serve.

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The Church's Jurisdiction Today: Action Trumps Inaction

May 05, 2014

Two stories in the news today demonstrate problems with the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church as it is currently understood and implemented. The first concerns attacks on the Vatican by a [UN Panel charged with implementing the UN Convention against Torture](#). The second concerns the rebellion against renewal by the [Leadership Conference of Women Religious](#).

It seems that many at the United Nations would like to punish the Vatican for sexual abuse of children by clergy, and the Vatican's representative for the Holy See at the UN would like to argue that Church personnel are subject to the laws of the nations in which they work. One must ask whether there is any desirable position in this debate.

Even supposing that sexual abuse can legitimately be construed as "torture", which is at least a strange conflation of language to serve an ideological purpose, it is not clear why a UN Committee is seeking to hold the Vatican responsible. Is the UN going to hold each government responsible for any sexual abuse perpetrated by anyone who holds a government job (which would include, for example, roughly twenty percent of the American public)? Does the UN wish to board the Catholic gravy train by seeking some sort of monetary penalties? Will it seek the same damages from other member states? Considering that most sexual abuse is perpetrated by relatives or other friends and lovers admitted to positions of trust within the family circle, and that abuse rates are higher in public schools than in the Catholic Church, just what exactly is the point?

So much for one side, but things do not look much better on the other. Granted, the Vatican has argued that *as conceived in the UN Convention on Torture*, jurisdiction in these cases applies to the territorial power that is sovereign where the abuse has taken place. But the Church must be very careful about denying her own jurisdictional responsibilities. Perhaps it does seem that she has tried very hard over the past fifty years to pretend that she has no jurisdiction over her own staff, or even that she desires none. But everyone recognizes the Church's authority when it suits their purpose, such as when extracting large settlements. More important, both basic morality and the nature of the Church teach that she should never desire to evade her jurisdictional responsibilities.

The Church, in other words, should be very reluctant to suggest that any civil government has legitimate authority over her own affairs. In the old days, the Church used to “relax” heretical clergy to the “secular arm”. Having rendered a judgment that only she can make (a judgment of heresy), she withdrew benefit of clergy from those who were convicted, leaving them to punishment by civil government. Today, there would be no punishment for heresy, but there would be for sexual abuse. (In the late Middle Ages, the secular punishment for heresy would have been confiscation of property and sometimes execution.)

The two swords of spiritual and temporal authority never function perfectly, but a renewed emphasis on both ought to be carefully considered by the Church. Even without an enforcement agency or a military, the Catholic Church possesses authentic jurisdiction in spiritual and moral matters.

The LCWR

In the other case, the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has spoken rather harshly to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and no wonder. In the midst of a process of supervised reform arising from profound doctrinal irregularities, the LCWR has deliberately circumvented Vatican requirements in order to give its highest award to a theologian whose work has been judged heretical by the American bishops. So Cardinal Müller has reminded the LCWR that it is “a canonical entity dependent on the Holy See.”

In other words, here the Vatican is claiming jurisdiction, and rightly so. The Church may not be able to put LCWR officers in jail. But it can excommunicate them individually or disband the organization altogether as a Catholic entity. Things being as they are with women religious in the United States, it is possible that life would go on as usual, as it apparently did with the [Pontifical Catholic University of Peru](#). But life might get a bit bumpy if every bishop in the United States were ordered to explain the judgment in no uncertain terms. There would be some blowback, of course, but blowback provides useful information.

Perhaps it goes without saying that the Church must be mindful of what can be lost through decisive action as well as of what might be gained through, say, another generation of attempted renewal through supervision. But there is another and better leadership organization for women religious in the United States, the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious. If marginal communities had only one choice—and if the CMSWR could be selective in which groups it would admit—then the result might well separate the potential wheat from the irretrievable chaff far more quickly.

In any case, it does little good to claim jurisdiction if one intends to exercise it only in ways acceptable to those under it. In the final installment of my [Smaller Church, Bigger Faith](#) series, I insisted that the effective exercise of ecclesiastical discipline is very difficult today, and I do not mean to minimize those difficulties. But one of the benefits of the proper use of jurisdictional authority is clarity. And clarity is not only a worthy goal; it is an achievable goal. Moreover, difficult is not the same as impossible. With God, all things are possible.

Here, then, we have two very different matters of ecclesiastical jurisdiction. But they have two important things in common. The first is that the Church does indeed have the jurisdiction necessary to act appropriately. The second is that today the gravest dangers lie on the side not of acting rashly, but of not acting at all.

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Spiritual Worldliness: Pope Francis' Critique of the Church

March 27, 2013

My use of “pope” in the title is a little misleading, because I am going to write about what Cardinal Bergoglio said of the needs of the Church in the congregations preceding the conclave at which he was elected. But amid all the speculation we have heard in recent days about the new pope’s priorities, only one report has struck me as particularly interesting.

This was the report by Cardinal Jaime Ortega of Havana that he had been authorized by Pope Francis to release the notes he had made for his address during the meetings of the cardinals leading up to the conclave (see [Cuban cardinal: before conclave, Pope Francis challenged Church not to be narcissistic](#)). The complete text of these notes, as presented by Cardinal Ortega, has been [provided by Vatican Radio](#).

I will not speculate whether these notes are, in effect, an outline of the intended course of Francis’ pontificate, but they certainly contain some strong language. Because some of that language is a bit abstract, however, it will be useful—after briefly summarizing his notes—to provide some concrete examples of what Jorge Mario Bergoglio meant as a cardinal, and has now released publicly as Pope.

He advised that the next pope needed to overcome a tendency within the Church to be self-referential or narcissistic. The Church, he said, needed to “come out of herself”, moving not just to the geographical but to the “existential” peripheries (the troubled material, moral and spiritual edges on which people live their lives), in order to evangelize effectively. When she fails to do this, the Church becomes self-referential, which is a kind of sickness. This leads her into a very serious spiritual evil, which the great theologian Cardinal Henri de Lubac called the worst evil that can befall the Church, namely “spiritual worldliness”.

Now it is important to understand this properly. The Church in her essence cannot be sick. Essentially speaking, she is the body and the bride of Christ. She becomes sick only through her members, and especially those among her members who represent her in the specifically hierarchical capacities demanded by her Divine constitution. So when the future Pope Francis referred to being self-referential, to narcissism, and—speaking very

plainly—to spiritual worldliness, he was not criticizing the Church “without spot or wrinkle” as described by St. Paul in Ephesians 5.

No, he was talking about a certain attitude among the Church’s members—narcissistic, self-referential, worldly in their very spirituality—which makes the Church as an institution extremely ill.

A Partial List of Examples of Spiritual Narcissism

This critique of a certain malaise in the Church can refer only to one thing: When we start defining the Church according to how we ourselves are, we are committing this sin of narcissism; we are being self-referential. And in this sense, we are making the Church self-referential in all of her operations, which must be carried out through her members. Let us consider some practical applications of the Pope’s thesis.

- When theologians and academicians redefine faith and morals according to their own desires (chiefly, in our day, through the cancer of Modernism), they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.
- When laymen use the Church for their spiritual comfort while rejecting whatever Catholic teachings they do not like, they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.
- When people at any level in the Church decide they are not called to express the way, the truth and the life of Christ to others because it is outside their personal comfort zone, they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.
- When affluent Catholics constantly find excuses, including legal and political excuses, for not stretching themselves to serve the poor, including immigrants, they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.
- When those with strong feelings about certain traditions and the liturgy claim that they alone are the bearers of the true light of Christ, dividing themselves from others and from obedience to ecclesiastical authority, they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.
- When cardinals and bishops refuse to speak truth to power, preferring to enjoy life with “people who matter”, they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.

- When Catholics invest their emotions and their sense of mission in unapproved apparitions or other similar phenomena, as if these hold the key to everything, they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.
- When priests alter the liturgy to suit their tastes or fail to teach the fullness of Catholic doctrine, they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.
- When religious communities depart from their founding charisms and pursue essentially secular goals with a spiritual veneer, they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.
- Whenever anyone defines right and wrong in terms of chronology (“Come on, it’s 2013! Don’t be so medieval!”), he or she is being narcissistic and self-referential, and making the Church sick.
- And when Catholics fail to seek constant enlightenment from both the Church and the Holy Spirit in prayer, preferring to go on spiritually without making any real effort to lay bare their own spiritual weaknesses—preferring the comfort of an apparently serene but half-hearted and surely one-sided Christianity—then they are being narcissistic and self-referential, and they are making the Church sick.

This is what Cardinal Bergoglio was explaining to his brothers just before they elected him pope. He may have used some academic language to refer to the problem. Indeed, Pope Benedict had done the same, calling it “self-secularization”. But it really is not so difficult to understand. When we make the Church into what we see in the mirror, instead of stretching ourselves to the “existential peripheries”, we plunge the Church into spiritual worldliness. We make the Church sick.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=1066>

Who Is the Enemy? A Growing Emphasis on Changing Ourselves

January 29, 2014

Those who have followed the history of the Church over the past 50 years, and have also followed my own writing, will have noticed some significant shifts. When I began to develop a sense of Catholic mission in the 1960s, this mission was shaped by the widespread failure of the hierarchy of the Church to maintain a strong Catholic identity in the face of a rapidly secularizing culture. But as I grow well into my seventh decade, I find my mission shaped increasingly by the pressing need for holiness among all the Church's members.

As Western culture rapidly abandoned public Christian values in the 1960s, the Catholic intellectual establishment revealed its hidden fascination with Modernism, and bishops and priests throughout the West readily adopted new secular habits of thought. Fidelity to the teachings of the Church was abandoned virtually overnight. It seems that Pope John XXIII's prescient convocation of the Second Vatican Council came too late to effect the renewal that is only now hitting stride fifty years later, the renewal which might have enabled the Church to rise above the mid-to-late twentieth-century deluge. Instead, Catholic identity was washed away across the board: Dioceses and parishes; seminaries and universities; religious orders; Catholic social services.

The overwhelming complacency of the leaders of the Church in the West made them easy to shift, just as soon as the larger culture no longer paid lip service to Christian values. It was in exactly this atmosphere that little Jeff Mirus, just off to college the year after the Council closed, read the documents of Vatican II for the first time, was deeply inspired, and saw much of the Church swept away before it even had a chance to respond. Indeed, emerging from a respectful 1950s culture into the libertine secularist maelstrom of the 1960s, Church leaders could not divest themselves too quickly of Catholic beliefs and traditional practices in an effort to retain their "relevance" to the new status quo.

But the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways. Just as the Council was calling for the full-fledged participation of the laity in the life of the Church, including their active involvement in her mission by virtue of their baptism, the failure of the hierarchy left that

mission to the laity by default. Too many, of course, followed their pastors in their own complacency, like lambs to the slaughter. Nonetheless, the most vigorous defense of the Catholic faith, and the strongest calls for authentic renewal in diocesan and parish life, religious communities, and the university came from a growing body of lay leaders who had finally found their proper voice.

It seems that the Holy Spirit, through the Council documents themselves, had given Magisterial definition to the apostolate of the laity in the nick of time. Thus it was that from 1965 to roughly 1995 the target of genuine renewal was easily defined. The wholesale downgrading and even abandonment of the teachings of the Church, usually under the guise of Modernist culture-speak, rapidly eroded the very understanding of what it meant to be a Catholic. Priority one was the fight for orthodoxy against the clerical Catholic intelligentsia. We had seen the enemy, and it was them.

The Changing Battlefield

But Catholic perceptions began (or should have begun) to change at least by the 1990s. By the end of the decade following the 1985 Synod of Bishops, at which Pope John Paul II formally launched what has often been called the battle for Vatican II, it became clear that the episcopate was gradually improving throughout the West. By the early 2000s, the trend was impossible to miss. It was at last becoming difficult to find a bishop who was not openly committed to orthodoxy, and many bishops also began to distinguish Catholic social teaching from an excessive reliance on the State. Dioceses, seminaries and priestly leadership improved dramatically. While Catholic social services, Catholic universities, and some religious orders were definitely lagging, it became clear that the institutional structures of the Church were becoming healthy again. Popes began to call for a New Evangelization; bishops and priests began to echo the call.

Oddly enough, this tended to divide the laity into three groups. There are those who continue to drift but can be expected to feel increasing pressure to take their faith more seriously. There are those who, having so sadly learned to distrust the hierarchy of the Church, are convinced that they must continue to hold out against any authority which does not say exactly what they want to hear. And there are those—and I am one of them—who have gradually realized that the game has changed. Even with the continuing recalcitrance of the universities, the crisis of fidelity among the Catholic leadership is no longer the primary impediment to the Church's mission.

When I say that the game has changed, I am quite serious. There is a tremendous difference between reform-minded laity targeting their bishops to make them Catholic again and a keen sense that bishops, priests and laity are all imperfect and must all work

together to become holy. This difference demands a major shift in tactics, including the adoption of a posture that is more cooperative than oppositional. I grant that my sense of this shift may be partly a function of age and (I hope) increasing spiritual maturity. I see more clearly with each passing year that without personal holiness in the heart of the Church even the noblest of ends are impossible to attain. But I am also convinced that there really has been a visible and important change—albeit gradual and ongoing—in the situation of the Church between, say, 1975 and 2005.

This conviction is reflected on CatholicCulture.org by a changing mix of pointed commentaries, especially in my own writings. What good will it do my readers if I write only against topics, persons and institutions we love to hate? Instead, I have begun—part of the time—to emphasize that we are all frequently our own obstacles to renewal, our own obstacles to evangelization, our own obstacles to a healthier culture. So I try at times to diagnose our own failings, the ones to which we are so often blind. I realize that this rubs against the grain, and I hope my readers can get used to it.

There are still many battles to be fought *ad extra*, against ideas and movements and even people beyond the borders of our own personalities. But nobody is exempt from the need for renewal. In deepest communion with our brothers and sisters in the Church, we very much need to realize that the target is not so simple any longer. In ways that are at least sometimes worth noting, we have seen the enemy and it is us.

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<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=1152>

SOCIAL RENEWAL AND EVANGELIZATION

From Scandal to Catholicism

December 21, 2010

In one of his major statements of the year, the Christmas address to the Roman Curia, Pope Benedict XVI was (as our Catholic World News Service put it) [unsparing in his analysis of the sex abuse scandal](#). By this we mean that he put full blame on all the bishops and priests who played any role in fostering or protecting a culture of abuse, as well as on those who were actually directly guilty of abuse. The Holy Father also had the courage to point out the moral failure endemic to modern culture, which ultimately infected the Church herself.

Many commentators believe that we Catholics should not point out larger cultural problems, because it looks too much like special pleading. But in fact it goes without saying that clerical sexual abuse is an abomination, and it takes no moral courage at all to condemn it vehemently. The way of courage lies in pointing out what either is not obvious or is deliberately obscured, and in fact too many commentators still refuse—I use the word advisedly—to recognize the connection between priestly sexual abuse and the larger culture, just as they refuse to take their share of responsibility for the creation of a culture which is profoundly sexually abusive in general—a culture actually built to an astonishing degree on the quest for selfish sexual gratification.

Therefore, while it may be more important for cardinals, bishops and priests to read the parts of the Pope's address which blame the Church, it is far more important for the rest of us, and especially all those in the media who so delight in the Church's discomfort, to read the part in which he analyzes the very culture which fosters the problem in the first place. This is worth quoting at length:

But neither can we remain silent regarding the context of these times in which these events have come to light. There is a market in child pornography that seems in some way to be considered more and more normal by society. The psychological destruction of children, in which human persons are reduced to articles of merchandise, is a terrifying sign of the times. From Bishops of developing countries I hear again and again how sexual tourism threatens an entire generation and damages its freedom and its human dignity. The Book of Revelation includes among the great sins of Babylon—the symbol of the world's great irreligious

cities—the fact that it trades with bodies and souls and treats them as commodities (cf. Rev 18:13).

In this context, the problem of drugs also rears its head, and with increasing force extends its octopus tentacles around the entire world—an eloquent expression of the tyranny of mammon which perverts mankind. No pleasure is ever enough, and the excess of deceiving intoxication becomes a violence that tears whole regions apart—and all this in the name of a fatal misunderstanding of freedom which actually undermines man's freedom and ultimately destroys it.

In order to resist these forces, we must turn our attention to their ideological foundations. In the 1970s, pedophilia was theorized as something fully in conformity with man and even with children. This, however, was part of a fundamental perversion of the concept of ethos. It was maintained—even within the realm of Catholic theology—that there is no such thing as evil in itself or good in itself. There is only a “better than” and a “worse than”. Nothing is good or bad in itself. Everything depends on the circumstances and on the end in view. Anything can be good or also bad, depending upon purposes and circumstances. Morality is replaced by a calculus of consequences, and in the process it ceases to exist. The effects of such theories are evident today.

Indeed they are, and in two ways. First, from the use of contraception through the unending sexual titillation of today's video entertainment, including commercials, we see in our culture at every level a determination to package nearly all of reality in terms of private sexual pleasure, divorced from larger human purposes, divorced from nature, and above all divorced from God. Indeed, it hardly seems too much to say that even the pressing and progressive secularization of the modern West has been driven primarily by the desire for unlimited sexual gratification—sex without responsibility.

Second, it is clear that this Pope is keenly aware how much Church leaders over the past fifty years have forgotten the Church's special identity as the Bride of Christ and opened themselves, and therefore the Church as a whole, to the patterns of the surrounding culture. This is implicit in the quotations and imagery used throughout his entire address, but especially so in these words: “We must accept this humiliation as an exhortation to truth and a call to renewal.”

This emphasis on truth and renewal is not just a matter of purging a few of the Church's ministers of one particular sin. This is a matter of erosion of faith, contempt for sound doctrine, irreverence in the liturgy, perversion of moral theology, decline in the

sense of personal sin, loss of devotion, and consistent trampling on the right of the faithful to full access to the goods of the Church. At the level of theory, this erosion afflicted Catholic academia starting at least in the middle third of the twentieth century, and Catholic practice was subsequently eroded throughout the West in the final third. The process was first slowed and then gradually reversed through the efforts of Pope John Paul II.

But note this well: The 1970's and 80's were not just the height of sexual abuse; they were the height—or perhaps the depth—of all these things. They marked the deepest influence of a very sick surrounding culture on the intellectual, moral and administrative leaders of the Catholic Church.

This is the lesson of the scandal. And when the Pope said to the Curia that “we must ask ourselves what was wrong in our proclamation, in our whole way of living the Christian life, to allow such a thing to happen,” he is pointing precisely to this lesson. For it is the entire ecclesiastical culture that must change. Ministers and faithful alike must throw off their cultural sycophancy and learn once again what it means to be Catholic. Although the desired renewal is underway, we still have a long way to go.

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Evangelization, Apologetics, and the Incarnational Difference

November 22, 2013

One of the most striking things about the constant call for a new evangelization is that it represents such a sea change from the prevailing attitudes in both the immediate pre-Vatican II and the immediate post-Vatican II Church. It's as if our sense of the Faith has finally clicked into place, and the whole "spiritual machinery" of our lives is beginning to turn again. Once again, the Faith has begun to seep into our bones so that it can find expression across the whole range of our human nature. Once again, the Faith is being perceived and expressed in incarnational terms.

Short of Our Lord's Resurrection, there was nothing that He did as man on earth that was beyond the power of human nature infused with grace. His miracles, for example, have been performed again either through charismatic grace or the sacramental power of the Church. How much more does this apply to the wonderful manifestation of the Divine life in everything He said and did as a man—in all the ordinary human things which can be informed by grace without resorting to the term "miracle" at all.

Insofar as we have all sinned, this wonderful integration of body, soul and Spirit is not manifested perfectly by any one of us. In a similar way, it is not manifested perfectly in the societies and cultures we form, nor even in the Church herself, which in this life must divulge her very real glory through the veil of her members. But all of us, along with the social orders and cultures we create, and the Church herself, are called to achieve the deepest and most comprehensive integration we can. Catholicism is not to be compartmentalized or distorted in us, so that it has only a partial grip, or a very tenuous grip, or no real grip at all on how we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

The last few generations have marked a particularly difficult time of compartmentalization and distortion. Of course, the experience of individuals varies greatly in each period; one can only characterize particular periods in terms of generalities. But there was a deep need for renewal in the Church by the mid-20th century because so many, from top to bottom, had come to live the Catholic life *prescriptively*. By 1950 in the West, the predominant Catholic habit was to find a certain spiritual comfort in those external forms and requirements which were easily

enumerated for “the practicing Catholic” (sometimes tellingly referred to as the “practical” Catholic). Too few were plumbing the depths of the spiritual life (though, surely, there are always too few in every age).

The result was that when the culture began to secularize rapidly and the identifiable rules and customs began to change, the Church was swept to near ruin. Amid the standard practices—the liturgy, the holy water, weekly Mass attendance and monthly confession, regular contributions, the major feasts, the fasting and abstinence and ashes—Catholicism was largely taken for granted. To illustrate with just one example, consider that during the time of cultural transition, countless “good Catholic” families sent their kids off to a whole series of collapsing Catholic colleges and universities. What we found very quickly was that the kids hadn’t the least spiritual clue that they were being led wildly astray, and the parents had no clue about what was happening at all.

The problem was revealed in the crisis which followed. A pervasive spiritual rot came to the surface at every level of the Church except where her prerogatives were infallibly guaranteed. Huge numbers of Catholics, clergy and laity alike, responded to the growing secularization with a kind of crazy euphoria about the possibilities of identifying Christianity with the predominant social interests of the larger culture. People really did think that if they stopped worrying about the old questions of Catholic identity, everybody could agree on grand moral imperatives, such as racial equality and the elimination of poverty. People really did take cover in the rhetoric of secular sweetness and light, concluding that the messy details of the Faith could be glossed over or reinterpreted in terms of the spirit of the times.

In a sense, then, the Church in 1950 had an external identity without much of a theory to go with it, and the Church in 1975 substituted a theory without much of an identity. The problem in both mini-eras was that priests and people alike lacked what we might call “spiritual bottom”. In Christian humanist terms, they had disintegrated. They just didn’t see that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ changed everything in an integral way: Body, mind and soul.

A Sea Change?

The Catholic rhetoric of our time is very different, and I think that means something. The constant calls at every level for a new evangelization indicate, at long last, an awareness that there is something distinctive about the Christian message which is supposed to transform the whole person, not to mention the social order, human culture and the Church herself. There is a Gospel identity which is supposed to underlie everything we do, and which will accordingly change how we pray, how we think, how we speak, how

we act and how we live.

This was brought home to me today by our [news story](#) about a recent address given by Archbishop Augustine Di Noia, the Assistant Secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Consider this one sentence alone: “We need a confident, evangelizing spirit and robust but not overbearing apologetics.” What Di Noia is saying is that Christian life is rooted in a very concrete message, a message which must be not only proclaimed with confidence (evangelization) but carefully explained and defended (apologetics). He then goes on to warn against viewing or living Christianity as some sort of sentimental comfort:

The emotional sense the Christian faith creates is rooted in convictions, principally that God wants to make a place for us in the life of the Blessed Trinity and that Jesus Christ opens the way to this communion and that our transformation into his image gets us through the muddle of sin but also launches us into the life of glory.

This is put extraordinarily well, and I note that it profoundly represents the Incarnational sense of the Faith which is growing so rapidly again today, a deeper grasp of the Faith that really can attract and transform the whole person. Put in terms of a popular expression, whether “your father” was at his Catholic peak in 1950 or 1980, this is simply no longer your father’s Church.

God knows we have a long way to go. But it makes all the difference to be headed in the right direction. It makes all the difference to live the faith incarnationally, in both the Church and the world. It makes all the difference to start with the one inescapably concrete and even scandalous reality—the very hallmark of the Spirit of God—that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (1 Jn 4:2).

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Using Ecclesiastical Penalties to Shape Both Souls and Culture

September 24, 2012

The recent declaration by the Archbishop of Shkodrë-Pult that [Catholics who participate in traditional Albanian revenge killings will be excommunicated](#) calls to mind many other efforts by the Church over the centuries to use spiritual sanctions to purify human culture. Such disciplines as excommunication and interdiction have been combined with teaching and preaching to pressure those who claim to be Catholic to place the moral teachings of the Church above mere cultural traditions.

Our Lord was talking about this same tendency to subordinate the Faith to human culture when He accused the Pharisees of using their own traditions to circumvent God's will:

And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.' You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men." [See the entire passage, Mk 7:6-13.]

An interdict prohibits the person or persons to whom it is applied from participating in much of the sacramental life of the Church, particularly holy communion, typically with the exceptions of baptism, confession and last rites. An excommunication actually expels someone from the body of the Church altogether. Both have occasionally been used, for example, in the effort to deter American Catholics from racist behavior with respect to worship and education, as when Archbishop Joseph Rummel of New Orleans put a chapel under interdict because white parishioners refused to admit a black priest in 1955. Thus Mass could not be celebrated there by *anybody* until an important lesson had been learned.

Sometimes whole regions have been affected, as when Pope Innocent III placed England under an interdict between 1208 and 1213 because King John refused to accept Innocent's appointee to the See of Canterbury, instead attempting to bully the English clergy into accepting his own candidate. The goal, obviously, was to bring both spiritual

and popular pressure to bear on the King, such that the freedom of the Church to form people in the Faith would be honored by the government. Interestingly, the medieval Church in Europe also used special daily observances over a period of centuries to gradually reduce the violence endemic to feudal culture, proclaiming certain days to be free of fighting in honor of Christ, under what came to be called the Truce of God. Canonical penalties were used to shape these new habits.

Excommunication has been used more frequently than interdict, resulting in the expulsion of public sinners from the Church in the hope of bringing about their conversion. Excommunication quite literally cuts the sinner off from the body of Christ. Thus St. Paul pronounced the excommunication of an egregious sinner in Corinth when the community failed to exert itself to correct the evil:

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Cor 5:1-5)

Canon Law provides for automatic interdict and excommunication under certain circumstances, which calls attention to the primarily spiritual purpose of these canonical penalties. But when the penalties are applied publicly, they can have a powerful teaching effect, putting all Catholics on notice that they have a serious responsibility not only to avoid certain sins but to work against those sins socially. In this way, canonical penalties can be not only spiritually but culturally purifying. They force people to stop equivocating and to make a direct choice for or against the Church, which represents Christ.

Obviously the Church forms the personal virtues of her members most frequently through preaching, teaching and the administration of the sacraments, by which her members grow in the graces necessary to resist temptations of every kind. Similarly, through her cycles of feasts and fasts, the Church strives to inculcate in her children important habits of resisting evil and celebrating good, so that our Catholicism might seep steadily into our very bones. But sometimes stiff canonical penalties are necessary, first in order to bring a sinner to his senses, and second to form the larger culture in which

sinners and saints alike participate.

Thus the Albanian bishops are attempting to use direct ecclesiastical discipline to wake up those who claim the name of Catholic while still permitting themselves to be caught up in the practice of *gjakmarrja*, which is the of killing those who have killed one's own family members or stained the family's honor in some way (divorce is an example). This is a Hatfield and McCoy (or Capulet and Montague) problem rooted in the larger Albanian culture.

In the same way, it has been frequently discussed in the United States whether pro-abortion politicians should be excommunicated as a spiritual wake-up call to themselves and to the many Catholics who have slipped and slithered into political acceptance of grave immorality. On rare occasions, some politicians have been refused communion (which might be called a partial form of interdiction); in Corpus Christi, Texas, Bishop René Gracida placed an unnamed politician under formal interdict late in the last century, and he died in this unfortunate state. Excommunication has been frequently advocated by pro-life Catholics, but I am not aware of its use yet on this issue, though members of the dissident "Catholic" Call to Action group in Lincoln, Nebraska were excommunicated in the mid-1990s by Archbishop Fabian Bruskewitz—a decision that was upheld in Rome.

For these remedies to achieve their primary purpose, which is always the correction of the sinners to whom the penalties are applied, those affected must still have sufficient faith to recognize through the punishment the grave danger into which their ill-considered attitudes and actions have led them. In order to achieve their secondary purpose, which is to purify and strengthen the Catholic culture in which grave offenses have been tolerated, it goes without saying that there must be enough semi-healthy Catholics to internalize the larger lesson and make a real effort to reduce or eliminate the community's tolerance of—or in many cases even approval for—the evils in question.

There is no guarantee, of course, that ecclesiastical penalties will be prudently applied. They are disciplinary measures, not definitions of faith or morals. But when they are prudently applied, such penalties can definitely help to reform Catholics and shape the culture of which they are a part. Clearly success also depends on a certain critical Catholic mass, both in the individual soul and in the putative Catholic community of reference. If that critical mass does not exist, then preaching, teaching and heroic witness—including martyrdom—will have to come first. Spiritual penalties, to be salutary, need something with which to work.

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The Impossible Reform of Catholic Universities

December 23, 2013

It comes as no surprise that the faculty of Jesuit-run Santa Clara University [has overturned the President's decision to eliminate abortion coverage](#) from health insurance there. The vote was 215 to 89, and it throws the decision now to the Board of Trustees. Many onlookers will attribute the faculty vote to the particular failure of the Society of Jesus to uphold the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Catholic Church in recent decades. That certainly is part of the problem, but its roots go far deeper into Catholic higher education than that.

In fact, the roots penetrate to an identity crisis which was already being keenly felt in Catholic universities shortly after World War II, and definitely from 1950 onward. The shape of this crisis was outlined in a 1955 article, later a small book, by Fr. John Tracy Ellis, an historian at the Catholic University of America. Ellis argued that Catholic universities had fallen considerably behind their secular counterparts in “important” indicators like Nobel Prize winners on their faculties. In other words, Catholic faculties did not seem to have a proportionate share of internationally-recognized scholars.

This and similar observations proved to be a catalyst for major faculty “reform” by Catholic university leaders throughout the United States (Fr. Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame, as described in Ralph McInerny’s memoir, *I Alone Have Escaped to Tell You* (see my [review](#)), was an exemplar of this trend). The assumption, to put the matter crudely, was that the Ivy League represented authentic excellence in education, and that Catholic universities had to imitate the faculty-recruitment patterns of the Ivy League if they wanted to compete. No one seems to have considered whether internationally-known scholars were such in part because they tended to be secular voices in a rising culture of secularity, or whether the genuine deficiencies of the Catholic educational experience at that time could have been overcome by a markedly Catholic renewal.

The result was that all major Catholic institutions of higher education rapidly diversified and secularized their faculties over the next generation. And even where sound Catholics remained on these faculties, their institutions gave them a new and very

pragmatic vision of what it meant to be a successful scholar—of what sort of distinction was to be both prized and rewarded. This notable shift dovetailed with the public emergence of Modernism among Catholic academics beginning in the 1960s, an endemic failure which came to light as soon as it became culturally advantageous to repudiate traditional understandings of religious faith and morals. It did not take long in most universities for secularized faculty majorities to emerge—a combination of non-Catholics and Catholics who no longer had deep commitments to the Catholic intellectual tradition.

What Can Be Done Is Not Clear

So now we are left with the question of what to do about these faculties. Compared with reforming an administration, which can be done fairly quickly under the right circumstances, reforming a faculty is a long-term process unless one can succeed in mass firings, which under most circumstances is legally impossible. Academic faculties tend to perpetuate themselves, having won considerable authority over hiring. It is at least very difficult for a university administration to reject the candidates selected by faculty search committees. And so the way forward, even for a long term plan of recovery, is not at all clear. In the immediate future, for example, we will see increasing efforts by administrators to move institutions toward authentic Catholic moral standards. And faculties will resist these efforts.

This will be the dominant pattern, I suspect, for the next ten to twenty years. Where a renewed board of trustees puts a decent president in place, and this decent president is determined to initiate reform, we will witness sustained conflict. Over time, the outcomes of the various fights will reveal which strategies work best. As I indicated a few days ago in “[Can there be too many good Catholic writers?](#)”, we are blessed with a growing crop of Catholic intellectuals in many different fields who can fill positions as they become available. But positions will come available only slowly for fully Catholic scholars because of the in-built prejudice against orthodoxy and devotion as signs of a parochial, or perhaps even a stunted, mind. What is in fact the key to a superior understanding of all of reality (though admittedly it does not have this effect in every scholar) is actually now regarded as an impediment.

But the Church as a whole must find effective ways to renew her colleges and universities. Such a renewal will place the minds and hearts of countless students within easy reach of truth, students who are now more often led astray, and students in numbers that cannot possibly be reached even by the most admirable of the new and inescapably tiny foundations. I repeat, then, that the vote of the Santa Clara University faculty comes

as no surprise. But it does demonstrate the battle before us, which is very likely the next most important battle for Church renewal following the reform of the episcopate and the diocesan seminaries, which has been ongoing over the past twenty years with considerable success.

It will take the power of grace to cut through the intractability of contemporary Catholic universities, which in the main are now organized for spiritual failure. Again, success is not just a matter of finding the right strategy; it is rather a matter of finding the right strategy when it seems that no strategy can possibly work. Precisely because such a reform appears humanly impossible, serious prayer will have to form the very center of the effort. It is, in short, as difficult for a university to be saved as for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. But as Our Lord said of every kind of worldliness, “With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God” (Mk 10:27).

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Ex Corde Ecclesiae in America

January 21, 2011

This year each Catholic college and university president [will meet with his local bishop](#) to review institutional progress in implementing [The Application of Ex Corde Ecclesiae in the United States](#), which the American bishops put into effect in 2001. This application grew out of Pope John Paul II's promulgation in 1990 of [Ex Corde Ecclesiae](#), an Apostolic Constitution on Catholic universities, which was the first shot in a slow but systematic effort to renew and reform Catholic higher education around the world.

“Ex corde ecclesiae” means “from the heart of the Church”. The title represents the traditional Catholic perception, and John Paul II's firm conviction, that an authentic Catholic university can develop properly only in a filial relationship with the Church, accepting her doctrines and values, guided by her Magisterium, and fostering a deeply Catholic understanding of all of reality. As the opening paragraph of the Apostolic Constitution states: “A Catholic University's privileged task is ‘to unite existentially by intellectual effort two orders of reality that too frequently tend to be placed in opposition as though they were antithetical: the search for truth, and the certainty of already knowing the fount of truth’.” The quotation is from an address in 1980 by Pope John Paul II at the Catholic Institute of Paris.

Specific Norms

The entire document is well worth reading, but the most important juridical portion of it is contained in Article 2, “The Nature of a Catholic University”, which enumerates the following norms:

1. “A Catholic University, like every university, is a community of scholars representing various branches of human knowledge. It is dedicated to research, to teaching, and to various kinds of service in accordance with its cultural mission.”
2. “A Catholic University, as Catholic, informs and carries out its research, teaching, and all other activities with Catholic ideals, principles and attitudes. It is linked with the Church either by a formal, constitutive and statutory bond or by reason of an institutional commitment made by those responsible for it.”

3. “Every Catholic University is to make known its Catholic identity, either in a mission statement or in some other appropriate public document, unless authorized otherwise by the competent ecclesiastical Authority. The University, particularly through its structure and its regulations, is to provide means which will guarantee the expression and the preservation of this identity in a manner consistent with §2.”
4. “Catholic teaching and discipline are to influence all university activities, while the freedom of conscience of each person is to be fully respected⁴⁶. Any official action or commitment of the University is to be in accord with its Catholic identity.”
5. “A Catholic University possesses the autonomy necessary to develop its distinctive identity and pursue its proper mission. Freedom in research and teaching is recognized and respected according to the principles and methods of each individual discipline, so long as the rights of the individual and of the community are preserved within the confines of the truth and the common good⁴⁷.”

The U.S. bishops took nine years to develop a specific approach to the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, and two more years to implement the norms. During this process there was considerable consultation with Catholic university administrators. This undoubtedly made the bishops more sensitive to some of the unique problems faced by American institutions, but it also gave them a preview of the excuses some universities are using to resist the process of regaining their Catholic identity. In any case, in addition to the broad outlines of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the bishops’ *Application* document emphasized a comprehensive list of specific points relating to the boards of trustees, administration, faculty and students, of which the following are a representative sample:

- Each member of the board must be committed to the institution’s Catholic identity.
- The university president should be Catholic and each member of the staff and faculty must be informed of the institution’s Catholic identity, mission, and practices, as well as encouraged to participate in the institution’s spiritual life as much as possible.
- The university should strive to appoint Catholics to faculty positions and,

wherever possible, the majority of faculty should be Catholic.

- All professors must exhibit not only competence and good character but respect for Catholic doctrine.
- Theology should be taught at each institution, and formal theological discussions and events should be planned to address key issues.
- Both the university and the bishops have the right to expect theologians to present authentic Catholic teaching. Theology professors have a “duty to be faithful to the Church’s Magisterium as the authoritative interpreter of Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.”
- Catholics who teach theology must have a *mandatum* (a license or approval to teach) from the competent ecclesiastical authority.
- Students should have the opportunity, and Catholic students have the right, to be educated in the Church’s moral and religious principles and social teachings and to participate in the life of faith.

Excuses

I mentioned that the bishops have had ample opportunity to become acquainted with the excuses various institutions would use to resist the process of Catholic reform and renewal. It may prove useful to review the four principal excuses here.

Academic Freedom: The first and most common is the claim that *academic freedom* necessitates the complete independence of professors in all universities from any prior intellectual commitment to truth, let alone submission to the Magisterium of the Church. This excuse misunderstands not only the nature of intellectual inquiry but the liberating effect that the proper understanding of some truths has on the effective exploration of others. Not even secular scholars start from a position of complete ignorance or agnosticism in examining each new academic question. If they did, they would be starting over with each new question—or with each new day and even each new moment—and they would never make any progress at all.

Moreover, once one grasps any given truth, that understanding becomes an important step in investigating and understanding other truths, which must always fit together in describing one seamless reality. In addition, Catholics recognize, as John Paul II put it, “the fount of truth”. There can be no more certain source of truth than Divine Revelation as authentically interpreted by the Magisterium of the Church. The truths brought to our understanding through Revelation shed a magnificent light on reality, and so ought to

enable Catholics, all other things being equal, to make greater progress in exploring other aspects of reality than anyone else. Finally, it is naturally the defining note of a Catholic university that its professors generally start from a position of accepting and understanding Catholic doctrine, viewing this as an important foundation for a fruitful intellectual life. Thus academic freedom can never be properly cited either as a reason to avoid prior truth commitments or, in a Catholic institution, as a way of “protecting” oneself from the influence of truths known and taught by the Catholic Church.

American Peculiarities: The excuse most likely to be encountered in the second place arises from the so-called peculiarity of the American situation. The argument is that US law restricts something, or Federal policy requires something, or American custom demands something that prevents American universities from maintaining a Catholic identity. In general, however, these requirements relate either to the type of institutional governance required to grant degrees or the ideological disposition of programs which operate under governmental grants. (But in the latter instance academic freedom might well be threatened, and we have a right to expect a resistance which is only too often erroneously directed against the Church.)

The requirements of institutional governance to grant degrees in the United States typically relate to keeping ultimate institutional control in a board of trustees rather than in the employees of the institution; this has nothing to do with what is necessary to maintain a Catholic identity. And any Catholic institution, if it is to maintain its integrity, must refuse grants which require it to compromise its institutional identity. This is true even if it means the sacrifice of an important program or of leadership in some particular area. It will undoubtedly be true that authentically Catholic institutions, in an increasingly militantly secular society, will operate at a disadvantage in one respect or another. But it can hardly help a *Catholic* institution to become less Catholic to gain a material advantage. The result would be to make society as a whole more militantly secular.

Elite Status: The third excuse is the need to maintain an institution’s “elite status”. Many allegedly Catholic universities (Notre Dame is a well-documented case) have made a point in recent decades of hiring a broad range of professors with non-Catholic (or even anti-Catholic) commitments, whether secular or alternatively religious, on the grounds that, first, the university is getting the very best people for each position and, second, the university thereby presents a truly diverse academic image to the world, which somehow makes it a better representative of what a university should be. Unfortunately, both of these reasons rely heavily on understandings of “excellence” borrowed from secular culture.

Clearly someone might have reached the status of a leader in his or her field as much for fitting in well with the prevailing secular cultural atmosphere as for truly being the one clear “best” practitioner of an art or science. And when it comes to seeking truth, there can be no intrinsic superiority in populating a faculty with people who hold as many different ideas and beliefs as possible rather than with those, primarily, who accept the Catholic Faith. To be sure, intellectual diversity can help in avoiding those academic pitfalls which arise from complacency or narrowness, but it can also set people back a good distance on the path of understanding reality, and this very frequently has enormous negative consequences for fruitful scholarship. Catholic universities should not allow “excellence” to be defined for them by secular approbation, which so often takes its cues from fads or the support of favorite causes; they should seek the best faculty to fulfill their own internal purposes; if they do so, their faculties will almost always be predominantly—though at times not exclusively—Catholic.

Theological Autonomy: The fourth and final major excuse is the demand for theological autonomy. Here it is argued that theologians have a vital role to play in the development of Christian understanding, and that this role will suffer enormously if the decisions of those outside the theological fraternity (that is, popes and bishops) have a controlling voice in the ongoing discussion. Theologians who think this way, and university administrators who agree with them, frequently talk about the absolute necessity that review and criticism be restricted to their theological peers. Of course by “theological peers” they mean other mostly Modernist academic theologians like themselves, not a group of theologians which professes complete obedience to the Magisterium of the Church.

Be that as it may, such theologians misunderstand the very nature of their craft. It is certainly true that a new theological idea or development can sometimes be misunderstood or unfairly mistrusted by those in ecclesiastical authority, who might in consequence wish to put the brakes on certain lines of thought. This has happened and it will happen again. But it is not nearly so damaging as the fundamental refusal of Catholic theologians to recognize that their very discipline depends on the existence of a deposit of Faith, in Scripture and Tradition, which can be authentically interpreted only by the authority of the Catholic Church. Lacking this, there is no basis for theology to be anything but idle speculation—or what Modernists would perhaps prefer to call the articulation of the religious consciousness of each particular age. This is an argument requiring no intelligence to resist. Courage to oppose the Lollipop Guild is all that is necessary.

Conclusion

A number of Catholic colleges and universities which had somewhat gleefully downgraded their Catholic identity during the heyday of secularist euphoria in the 1960's and 1970's have since begun to take seriously their need to restore that identity, especially since the promulgation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. The [Cardinal Newman Society](#) monitors these developments, reports on them, and maintains a slowly growing list of institutions it thinks have gotten their identities back. The process is taking a very long time, of course, and that is probably mostly because the rest of the Church has not been healthy or strong enough to apply the necessary pressure.

But it is also true that Catholic universities, in the United States and elsewhere, tend to be tough nuts to crack. Most of them are now independent of direct ecclesiastical control, so it takes a long process of rebuilding relationships with university leaders and trustees to effect change. Some of them are in the hands of religious orders which themselves have deep, perhaps insurmountable, problems with fidelity to the Church; Jesuit schools are the leading example. Moreover, this year's initiative of having each president meet with his local bishop will inevitably have spotty results, because the American episcopate is still so varied in its own degrees of fidelity and courage. Add to this that there is only so much that even the best bishops can do without the good will of the institutional leaders in question.

For all those reasons, the 2011 round of meetings will likely be simply one more small, incremental step. That may not be ideal, but it is still a good thing. It can only hasten the day when most Catholic universities will again derive their missions from and seek their successes within the living and infinitely fruitful fount of truth, which pours forth from the heart of the Church.

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The Credibility Wars: Where We Go From Here

January 06, 2014

Contemporary Catholics find themselves at a bit of a turning point, without being quite sure which way to turn. It has become clear over the past few years that the emphasis on “culture wars” has done little or nothing to reverse the flight of Western culture from Christian values, even though the concept was initially perceived as a sort of rubric through which the public morality essential to the common good might be recovered. During this same period, the Church has called repeatedly instead for a “new evangelization”. The apparent clash between the two phrases has come to a head in the insistence of Pope Francis that we must proclaim the whole Gospel rather than concentrating so much on public battles over the Gospel’s most contested moral points.

This conceptual shift has been bewildering to many, who wonder whether their public witness to the faith is unappreciated in Rome or, worse, whether they have somehow been wrong to screw their courage to the sticking point in precisely those controversies where contemporary society is most opposed to the Church. I hope by now that sufficient distinctions have been made to enable everyone to see the larger issue. It is not that working for the public acceptance of Christian and natural morality is wrong, but that the failure to recognize and respond to the need of our contemporaries for the full Gospel is self-defeating. Our moral efforts are often undermined by a kind of tunnel vision.

The public culture is increasingly anti-Christian not primarily because of political manipulation but because the private culture is, on the whole, not significantly Christian at all. People do not support divorce, contraception, abortion, homosexual behavior, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, and, *inter alia*, the primacy of secularity and the State over religiosity and the Church primarily because they are evil, but primarily because they are wounded and lost. There are reasons enough over the past several hundred years for what we might call our deep civilizational loss of faith. Even for those called to emphasize public battles, it is useless to proceed as if we are just a few votes away from the Age of Faith when, in fact, we live in a period where effective awareness of the Gospel is largely non-existent.

Such considerations have led quite a few recent Catholic commentators to stress the need for a service-based evangelization. As I have written elsewhere ([The New Evangelization: What Does It Look Like?](#)), it is necessary to lay aside the “culture wars” paradigm for two reasons. First, despite the use of the term “culture”, it is essentially a political slogan, and the Catholic goal is always personal and salvific before it is legal and political. Second, a sacrificial service to others in their self-perceived needs, while not the only possible manifestation of Christian love, is the best possible starting point for initiating others into relationships with Christians and, through them, into a relationship with Christ and a knowledge of the Gospel.

Love and Credibility

There are huge potential gains (as well as a fundamental rightness) in approaching people as friends to be helped rather than as enemies to be defeated. To take a common contemporary example, one need not be a genius to perceive that supporting a woman in a pregnancy is a Christian witness superior to condemning her as a potential murderer. It is superior not only spiritually (which ought to be the deciding factor) but tactically (which is never to be ignored). It is a tactic that says “I care about you” instead of one which says “I care about being right.” Both are legitimate values, but true care always includes rectitude, whereas rectitude does not necessarily include care. Caring about the other is both the superior value and the superior message.

In this light, it is paramount to foster the development of more apostolates which serve the needs which people recognize in themselves. Such apostolates serve at once as a concrete manifestation of Christian love and as a means to respond to other needs which people may not yet recognize. Almost any form of genuinely Christian service and support will seek to address root problems affecting the whole person. It will also seek to incorporate the one served into a supportive community, within which that person can also serve others, and through which he or she can begin to see the value of virtuous habits—and the attractiveness of Jesus Christ.

One danger in explaining things this way is that it can lead to a facile assumption, the assumption that we ought to prefer forms of service which do not make waves. On this assumption, everyone breathes a sigh of relief and says, in effect, “Good: I can reduce risk and quit beating my head against the wall at the same time.” Then we can all go to work in food pantries, where the only quarrel will be over who gets the last can of beans. But this assumption is false. As we see even among families and friends, love usually does smooth out much that is ragged and rough, but it also very frequently leads to tension and conflict. The point is not to avoid conflict for the sake of avoiding conflict.

The point is to serve in a wholehearted and personally sacrificial way that creates a relationship with credibility. The credibility factor will not always be enough. But often it can make the difference between creating a tension that breaks a relationship, and creating one which strengthens it through spiritual and moral growth.

Personally, I am praying for a new generation of Catholics that can embody credibility rather than merely write about it. The age-old Catholic approach to this would be to live lives of obvious renunciation before we challenge others to renounce the false attachments they hold so dear. Obviously this has to be in accordance with one's state in life. But it explains, for example, why St. Dominic and his friars were successful in reconverting the Albigensians in 13th century France even though the glittering visits of wealthy bishops to the same region had only made matters worse. Or to take just one contemporary example, it explains the substantial success of FOCUS missionaries on college campuses in our own day, where so many previous programs had borne so little fruit.

Christian effectiveness does not grow through the crusade, by which the heathen is to be defeated, but through the cross, by which the heathen is to be saved. There is no escaping the tension and the conflict, nor are we meant to escape them. But personal sacrifice for another increases both grace and credibility. These are the Divine and human gospel-starters, bearing fruit when even the most successful war will fail.

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Eucharistic Lives of Love

February 17, 2008

At Eucharistic Adoration the other night, I was reminded again of how central the Eucharist is to Catholic life. It is the key to the right ordering of both our interior and our social lives. It is nourishment for the journey and a foretaste of eternal life. It is at once the means by which we have been saved and the means by which we continue to be sanctified. It is Christ Himself, given for us, and given to us.

Christ's Staggering Claim

Recently a reader expressed doubt about the priest's ability to transform the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. He feared this was a made-up power, and wondered whether it was found among the first Christians. My answer was that not only was it found from the very first, but it was the very source of all Christian vitality. Christ made this intention clear in His Bread of Life discourse (Jn 6:22-71) immediately following His multiplication of the loaves. Recall how He increasingly challenged the Jews to give up their false claims to righteousness and instead put their trust in Him. He alone is the Manna from Heaven, the Bread of Life: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world" (Jn 6:51).

His Jewish listeners found this a great stumbling block, but He drove the point home:

Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. (Jn 6:53-56)

Many of those following him said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" And so they followed him no more. But Jesus did not call them back; he did not try to explain that he was speaking only metaphorically. Instead, he turned to the Twelve: "Do you also want to leave?" And Peter answered rightly: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn 6:67-69).

How Our Lord's staggering claim was fulfilled is recounted in the three synoptic gospels, and is also recounted by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. I refer to the Last Supper when Christ instituted the Eucharist. Taking the bread, he said: Take and eat; this is my body which will be given for you. Taking the wine, he said: Take and drink; this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you. (See Mt 26:26-29; Mk 14:22-25; Lk 22:14-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26.) In his extended instruction on the Eucharist, St. Paul makes the literal meaning of these words crystal clear: "Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Cor 11:27). The first Christians took Christ at His word. They knew that Jesus Christ—body, blood, soul and divinity—is really made present in the Eucharist at each and every Mass.

Sacrifice and Communion

The Eucharist is therefore the key to the whole Christian life. It is through the Eucharist, to once again cite St. Paul, that we can say "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20). First, Christ's body and blood are given for us at each Mass through the unbloody perpetuation of the sacrifice of the Cross. This is the preeminent means by which Christ's act of redemption is activated and applied in each succeeding generation. Second, each time His body and blood are given anew, we are invited to take and eat so that we may have life in us—Christ's life.

In ordinary eating, we assimilate food to ourselves. When we eat the body of Christ, however, He assimilates us to Himself. Through the Eucharist, Christ lives in us, and in this communion of love we are also united to both the Father and the Spirit. While grace can and does work in other ways, the perpetuation of Christ's sacrifice in the Mass makes present the central act of our redemption, from which all other graces flow. Moreover, the reception of Christ's body and blood in communion is the single most powerful means for the transformation of our lives in Christ, the means of which he spoke when he promised: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me" (Jn 6:56-57).

But the Eucharist does not stop with the interior, the private, the personal. Note that the Eucharist is one of two manifestations of Christ which are called His "body". The other is the Church herself which, while it is not the Real Presence, is nonetheless Christ's body in a mystical sense. This is more than an analogy (*i.e.*, if Christ is the head, the Church must be His body), and it is also more than the general animation of the Church by the graces which flow through the sacraments (even though in her sacraments

the Church possesses the life of Christ in a preeminent way). More than both of these, the Church is the body of Christ because her members are united to Christ through the Eucharist. Christ actively lives in these members; therefore, taken all together, the Church is His mystical body. Insofar as Christ lives in us, especially as He lives in us through the Eucharist, we are an integral part of the Church, that is, members of the mystical body of Christ.

The Social Reality

It is precisely in this aspect of the Eucharist that we begin to see its profound social dimension, for it is through the Eucharist that we are all joined in bonds of supernatural love for each other, and that the Church herself stands as a beacon of love to all the world. This life of Christ into which we are all assimilated through the Eucharist is the strongest imaginable source and motive for charity toward one another and toward all. Our intimate sharing in Christ's very being creates a special reciprocal movement of love among the members of the Church; this movement of love also reaches out to all those who are not yet able to join themselves directly to Christ through His Church.

It is here that the private devotional life and the public life of charity meet. The one emanates from the other as light and warmth emanate from the sun. Of course, it is important not to attempt to reverse the flow, as if our own commitment to this or that cause could itself be a source of love for the Church. For though we may commit ourselves to all kinds of noble causes, how will we sustain them through love if we are not first filled with the love of Christ? And what possible love can we offer by our own power that is greater than the love Christ can offer through us when we are first conformed to Him? No, it is not we who are love; it is God. We must first unite ourselves to our Blessed Lord, primarily through the Eucharist, and then we will have love enough to share—as well as the zeal to share it generously and the wisdom to share it well. If we instead seek to cut our own channel, we will quickly find that the torrent has dried up. We may make a certain noise, but that is all—the sound of brass, perhaps, or the tinkling of cymbals in the breeze (1 Cor 13:1).

The Eucharist is truly the source, center and motive of the Christian life. It roots the Kingdom of God within us (see Lk 17:21) by the indwelling of God Himself. By transforming both ourselves and the Church into a furnace of Divine love, this great Sacrament gives us a foretaste of eternal life. All of this happens through the liturgy of the Church, which has accordingly been called, in its Eucharistic essence, the source and summit of the Christian life—the liturgy at which Christ is both priest and victim precisely because His priests are empowered to “do this in memory of me.” Thus is

Christ's sacrifice perpetuated; thus are we joined to Him in communion; thus is the Church strengthened as His body; thus does His love go out to all the earth.

There is a famous anecdote in which a Muslim tells a Christian that, if he believed God were present in the Eucharist, he would crawl on his belly to receive Him. But Christ has not given the Eucharist to emphasize His transcendence. He has given it to fill us with His love. It is far more telling to say that if we really believed God is present in the Eucharist, we would be able neither to fathom nor to tolerate our own lack of love. Truly our hearts must be very hard indeed if we can partake of the Eucharist and remain unchanged. Are we not in a fiery furnace with one who "looks like a Son of God"? (Dan 3:92) Do we profess not to know why Our Lord offers Himself in the Eucharist? "I came to cast fire upon the earth; and would that it were already kindled!" (Lk 12:49) For love and love alone does Love command: This is my body; take and eat.

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Toward an Incarnational Culture

December 30, 2008

In a recent article on Catholic health care and Catholic culture, I referred to Catholic culture as the “incarnation of Catholic ideas in the concrete circumstances of the social order.” I used the word “incarnation” advisedly, for Catholicism possesses a supremely incarnational vision of reality. Another way of saying this is to recognize in Catholicism an intensely *sacramental* view of reality. This has profound significance for the formation of culture. It is worth exploring in greater depth.

The Word Became Flesh

It is perhaps not surprising that the same God who created us seeks to communicate with us primarily by using natural things as conduits of grace. God knows—none better—that the human person is a composite being, a unity of spiritual soul with material body, and that the body serves as our ordinary means of perception. Thus it is typically through the soul’s interpretation of bodily experience that we seek to apprehend the universe in its entirety, both material and spiritual. Moreover, to be out of the body—as, for example, after our bodily death and before the Resurrection of the body—is to be incompletely human, yearning for the glorified body that will make us at last whole through a perfect union of body and soul with God himself.

The most striking example of God’s determination to communicate with us through engraced matter is, of course, the Incarnation of the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, Christ Our Lord. In Christ we see the perfect fusion of the material and spiritual: the body, blood, soul and divinity of Him who alone has seen and can reveal the Father. Thus does graced matter become the pattern for the entirety of human life, and the model for the entirety of human culture. A proper understanding of Catholic culture, which leads directly to the creation of that culture, is a simple extension of the principle so perfectly represented by the Incarnation.

This Incarnational principle was intended to be extended in history through the sacraments. In the Eucharist, Christ nourishes us for eternal life by feeding us His body and blood so that we are assimilated into Himself. So also with all of the sacraments, which extend the Incarnation by appropriating natural things to become both signs and conduits of Divine life. The water of baptism; the speaking of our sins to a man who is

more than a man; the oils of confirmation, Holy Orders, and the Anointing of the Sick; above all the committed bodies of the faithful as seen most clearly in a bride and groom: All these natural things are transformed into instruments of grace as the Church repeatedly touches us in very particular ways with the Incarnation itself.

Protestants lost much of this notion of sacramentality when they rejected the institutional Church and most of the sacraments in the sixteenth century; this had immediate and profound effects on the secularization of the West. Since that time, most Catholics have also lost the habit of sacramental perception, at least beyond the defined mysteries of their Faith. We live in a world dominated by the secular, the material and the mechanistic; our vision is truncated; we typically fail to explore the deeper meaning which exists in all of Creation. The loss of a sacramental sense—an Incarnational sense—vastly diminishes the primary impetus of Catholic culture, that is, the drive to shape all aspects of culture into human extensions of the life of the Risen Lord. We now live in a cultural desolation, a culture of death, and so I suspect that most serious Christians yearn to recover that impetus, that sacramental vision.

Church, State and Culture

And what of the Church herself? Is she not also an extension of the Incarnation? Both through her specific formal sacraments and her very being as the body of Christ in history, the Church too is a sacramental reality. She is a monumental impenetration of matter by grace, Divine within the very lines and features of a human institutional form, called to body forth the Incarnate God to the world. When religion is reduced to mere congregationalism or, worse, a social organization controlled by the State, we lose that keen sense of Christian institutional presence which ought to characterize all Christian thought. The Church—an independent and subsistent reality extending the presence of Christ through time—is herself the most complete visible representation of that fundamental Incarnational reality which must be the reference point for every aspect of a Christian culture.

This Incarnational reality of the Church does not mean that there can be no separation of Church and State, for the State has its proper sphere in temporal affairs, while the Church seeks only the freedom to sacramentalize the temporal through her own spiritual work, so that temporal things offer nourishment to the soul and tend to lead all men and women to God. The Church and the State are separate institutions with separate ends. But if there can be (and ought to be) a legitimate separation of Church and state, there cannot be (or ought not to be) a separation of religion and culture. When culture fails to be infused by grace, when it fails to be a fresh extension of the Incarnational principle, then

it loses its ability to engender life. It is no accident that the root meaning of “culture” comes from “cultivating”, from the tilling of the soil so that good things may grow.

For the Catholic, human culture cannot be defined apart from its profound need to be impenetrated by grace. And this impenetration by grace is, as I noted from the first, accomplished only by the incarnation of Catholic ideas in the concrete circumstances of the social order. A culture becomes truly Christian only insofar as a Christian people embody their Faith in countless habits, customs and institutions, touching every area of life for the common good. Nothing—no procedure or rule, no art or craft, no school or business, no custom or law—should be left untouched by the Incarnation, abandoned by grace, left impotent as a material vehicle for man’s true good, which is always both a material and a spiritual good.

Ultimately, then, while the Church does not arise essentially out of culture, the State does. Each culture must inevitably give rise to its own kind of State (as we have seen all too clearly throughout the last hundred years), and a culture impenetrated by Catholic principles is no exception. When Christianity informs a culture and that culture develops a political form, the resulting State will be representative of the culture, and even politics will be transformed. But when the State seeks to secularize culture in order to make itself the source of all life and good, then culture erodes and the human person, whose engraced activity can alone engender culture, is marginalized. Only the Church and, connected to her, all men and women of faith, can supply the sacramental vision so essential to the shaping of a culture which is both material and spiritual, natural and supernatural; for the naturally human is also natural to Catholicism, but it is only one half of what it means to be a Catholic.

A Sacramental Culture

It is a profound Catholic truth (another truth blurred or rejected by original Protestantism and now forgotten by nearly everybody) that grace perfects nature; it does not supplant it. Nature is not depraved that it requires supplanting, nor is grace characteristically divorced from nature in God’s eternal plan. It is precisely the naturally human in any culture that is to be infused with grace, and it is precisely the role of the human person, who is a unity of body and soul, to devise the myriad cultural patterns through which this infusion can be both facilitated and reaffirmed. In this connection I should make a specifically political point that is much misunderstood today. For if grace must replace nature, then the fears of the culture of death would be partially justified, for the only proper government would be theocracy. It would be necessary to institute a Godly order from above, imposing it upon the beaten bodies of its unworthy citizens. But because

grace perfects nature, good government is engendered by good culture. Theocracy is a temptation, always rejected by the Church, which arises in the hearts of those who do not understand the importance of the Incarnation. It is utterly alien to a sacramental vision.

Hence, faced with rampant secularization, authentic Christians yearn not for theocracy but for the impenetration of the culture by an Incarnational—an embodied—Faith. All Christians (Catholics not least among them) must develop a far keener appreciation of this need, and it is no abstract proposition. We must begin to think and plan sacramentally, to develop the habit of figuring out how to create or shape customs and institutions to reflect this improvement of natural things by grace. The purpose is not at all to supplant a temporal end with a spiritual end; no, the point is that even our temporal methods and goals must be enriched by an unfailing spiritual sense, and so serve the good of the whole person.

To take but one obvious example, it would be both false and useless to abandon the temporal end of feeding the hungry so that we might preach to them the glories of heaven instead. But to feed them in a personal way, interacting with the hungry in the full dimensions of their personhood, feeding them not only with material food but with meaning and hope: This is how true charity is distinguished from mere “social programs”. Authentic culture begins with the recognition that men and women are persons, not things and certainly not mere numbers; as persons they have both material and spiritual needs and are destined for great ends. Engraced institutions of culture, if directed principally at material needs (whether feeding the hungry, licensing drivers or investing funds), must take into account both the whole person, including his essential spiritual identity, and the common good of all.

The Cultural Process

Never, above all, should a natural goal obscure a supernatural reality. A scientist is a better scientist if he recognizes the continual impenetration of nature by grace, part and parcel of God’s creative act, than if he sets up false dichotomies between nature and grace, seeking to supplant the latter with the former in the public mind. A teacher is a better teacher if she notices the despondency of a student and tries to serve that student spiritually as well as marking down test scores. A medical practice ought to resist the mistaken thirst for “treatments” which facilitate an irresponsible life, and ought to console the minds, hearts and spirits—as well as the bodies—of their suffering patients. An auto mechanic is surely a better mechanic if he keeps the safety of the car’s owner in mind. A government employee is a better representative of the government if he sees himself as working to help those who visit his office, rather than desiring only to enforce

regulations or enhance his sinecure.

From running a lunch counter to passing laws, the same cultural goals ought to find creative implementation. How can I do this job better by recognizing more deeply the nature and ends of those I serve? If I am establishing a new enterprise of any kind, what will be its personal hallmarks, its spiritual priorities? How will the organizations and institutions I help to shape be different? How will they (presumably) serve a material need while remaining always open to the discovery of grace, the experience of love? If I am an employer, what company policies will address the full human and spiritual well-being of my employees? How will my company afford opportunities for both employees and clients to develop a richer, deeper and more purpose-driven life? If I am an artist, will I ignore or seek to portray the redemptive quality of human life? If I play a role in advertising, what message do I seek to convey? All of these questions are really one question: How can the Incarnation be extended into today's habits, rules, and institutions? How should a truly sacramental vision of life shape how I live and all that I influence or create in the larger social order?

It is neither necessary nor advisable to sweep away everything below in order to impose a Catholic culture from the top, though politics and law ought certainly to help to shape a sound culture even as they are shaped by it. Nor is it necessary to sweep away everything above in order to start fresh from the ground up, though when major institutions collapse and lose their grip, opportunities for rapid improvement may arise. Instead, Catholic culture can and must be forged simultaneously at every level as each person and group exercises opportunities to extend it in particular spheres. All of us are accountable for this process. Catholic culture begins with an interior conversion, a conversion profound enough to make us realize (at long last!) that it is not acceptable to leave any part of life untouched by grace. This realization impacts how we raise our families, how we treat others, how we do our jobs, how we engage in the arts, how we take our entertainment, how we form or influence various organizations, how we serve, how we buy, how we sell, how we vote, how we rule.

I admit that it is exciting to see examples of authentic Catholic culture springing up, more or less whole and entire, in specific institutions or communities that are self-contained enough to be easily identified. As I said in my earlier column ([Health Care, Catholic Care, and Catholic Culture](#)), some schools, medical facilities and other initiatives have given us this striking vision. It is both inspiring and consoling when we can see this whole. But the inability to create something self-evidently new and complete does not absolve us from the obligation to shape culture, in our own spheres of influence, as an extension of our deeply converted selves. Once again, Catholic culture is the

“incarnation of Catholic ideas in the concrete circumstances of the social order.” This is a profoundly sacramental process, a process by which natural things are perfected and elevated through participation in the life of the Incarnate Christ, Who is the origin, pattern and goal of all existence. To envision culture sacramentally is to see Christ as the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of every life, of every action, of every institution—truly, to reclaim an old expression, of every blessed thing.

View this item on CatholicCulture.org:

<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/articles.cfm?id=291>

How Culture is Done

June 29, 2009

One of the most important questions with which CatholicCulture.org is supposed to grapple is the question of how to form a Catholic culture. If the answer involves setting forth a specific program, a sure-fire series of steps that will take our current overall culture and make it Catholic, then the “right” answer simply isn’t possible. But if we understand that culture is operative at every conceivable level and in every conceivable circumstance, then we begin to see a fundamental truth about human culture in general, and Catholic culture in particular.

Wherever human persons repeatedly think and act in a consistent manner, a particular culture is created in their sphere of influence. Within the realm of action I include appropriate speech. Let us suppose, for example, that a particular set of parents has a deep belief in the goodness of God and the dignity of all persons as sons and daughters of God. The first thing we notice is that no culture will be created in the family circle as long as this belief is confined within the mind. But insofar as the parents—who necessarily form their children—join together to act repeatedly and predictably in a manner consistent with their beliefs, an identifiable and almost tangible atmosphere is created, an atmosphere in which all family members can find rest, and an atmosphere which tends to nourish and shape the speech and actions of each family member.

This “identifiable and almost tangible atmosphere”—this ambience of life—is what we’re talking about when we use the word “culture”. It can and is expressed in ways too numerous to count. In the example presented here, it is a constructive ambience which communicates things like support and dignity, security and love. By contrast, in a family formed by parents preoccupied with careers, productivity and financial power, an entirely different atmosphere will be created which communicates things like materialism, insecurity and stress.

Though we are not always consistent, ultimately most of our actions stem from the deep inner beliefs and judgments which we hold to be most important. If we are self-aware, we’ll eventually notice and change what is inconsistent in our behavior. In any case, a certain kind of culture is formed wherever people speak and act consistently. We usually think of culture in terms of the larger society of which we are a part, though the family is most often the first cultural unit. But culture is not restricted to families on

the one hand and dominant social trends on the other. Rather, culture is formed within the sphere of influence of each group of persons who are brought together by any conceivable set of circumstances.

Thus the combination of thought and action can create a specific atmosphere or ambience—a particular culture—in a recreational group, a team, a classroom, an office, a store, a church—in any human association. Of course, those in charge of each association or group have the greatest influence in creating the corresponding culture. What parents do for their families, teachers can often do in their classrooms, and coaches for their teams. But building a positive culture among group members who are not the leaders is also possible if a small nucleus of people can be formed who wish to think and act according to the same principles. Gradually, as all of our smaller associations take on certain cultural characteristics, the larger culture which they form will be transformed. It is also true that as certain large components of culture are transformed and redirected (major media, for example), the culture of small associations and families will often change.

The key point is that culture is always formed within a specific sphere of influence based on repeatable actions which are consistent with specific ideas, beliefs or values. This is why culture can be formed deliberately as well as more or less accidentally. In fact, to preserve the values in any existing culture within any sphere, or to extend those values to other spheres, a good deal of self-awareness, analysis and planning is often essential. The one constant is that culture is always born of consistent action properly connected to leading ideas. Therefore, insofar as we act based on the prevailing ideas already operative within a certain sphere, we do nothing to change or improve the culture. But insofar as we act consistently on a different set of ideas, then in each sphere of our own influence—or in each sphere where we can create influence through the building of an effective nucleus—the culture will begin to change.

Because we are not perfectly consistent creatures, there is generally plenty of room to make a small cultural experiment. Much as we are always trying to examine ourselves spiritually to make our moral behavior more consistent with our Faith, we should try the same thing in regard to the formation of culture. Among our family and friends, it can be very useful to make a deliberate effort to tailor our speech, actions, plans and programs more closely to our real values and goals—and then watch what happens! What we will find is that all of us have the capacity to engender culture. While we're at it, we'll also get feedback on when we're succeeding in doing this gracefully and when we're just being a pain! Hopefully, a small taste of how this works will lead us to make a larger difference in our world.

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<http://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/otc.cfm?id=430>

Religious Privatization and the Need for Community

June 14, 2005

One of the greatest challenges to the life of Faith in the modern world is the privatization of religion. This privatization consists chiefly in the elimination of religion's naturally communitarian character. It makes each of us a voice crying in the wilderness, thereby removing cultural support for the Christian life. For this reason, one of our most important goals must be the restoration of community.

Communal Signs

In a truly Catholic community, the Faith is reflected not just in the Church but throughout the social order. Some of this comes through the hierarchy of the Church, as when the local pastor leads a Eucharistic procession through the streets, or when a bishop publicly calls a politician to account. Some of it comes from lay leaders, as when an employer makes a holiday of a Holy Day or when a public event begins with a few moments of prayer.

Other manifestations of Faith occur when groups of workers punctuate their day with prayer or families and friends celebrate special feasts. Corporate acts of charity also bear powerful witness, as when a group undertakes both to assist someone in need and to incorporate them into the group at the same time. All of these, and many more, are communal signs of a vibrant faith, signs which at once transform the larger social order and support individual growth in spirituality and virtue.

Loss of Identity

Over the past several generations, nearly everything has conspired to demolish the sense of community and identity among Catholics. Small communities that may have once occupied a few city blocks organized around a church have long since been eaten away by upward mobility and an unflagging desire to enjoy more of the "American dream". Along the same lines, the rapid secularization of Western culture in the prosperity that followed World War II has profoundly altered mainstream and media-generated values.

Within the Church, the crisis of Faith among intellectuals, including priests and

religious, has led to a generation of horrendous preaching, sometimes heretical, often merely vapid. A weak and obviously bewildered episcopate has irresolutely faced the crisis by abandoning not only discipline but distinctive Catholic practices such as fasting, abstinence, and Holy Days, while confused clergy have discouraged popular devotions and permitted endless tinkering with that focal point of Catholic unity, the Sacred Liturgy.

These examples are a but a brief portion of a very long list. The point is that by now few people have a clear sense of their own personal and social identity as Catholics. It follows that they have almost no idea of how they can begin to reconstruct their identity, including the sense of community which does so much to form it.

The Desperate Need for Community

For those with little sense of the Faith, community is very nearly a *sine qua non* of conversion. But even for those both aware and strong enough to maintain a Catholic identity, the privatization of religion has been very damaging. While it is true that individual clergy, religious and laity have sometimes learned to live the universal call to holiness more or less on their own, their wounds are legion. They are frequently regarded as odd and are repeatedly betrayed. They face constant temptations to suspicion and self-righteousness. They are extremely susceptible to an imbalance in both their appreciation and practice of the Faith, arising from excessive attachment to one or two undirected and untempered ideas. Indeed, too often they lack the context of the Catholic whole.

The question is how to form nascent communities which will enrich the committed and extend their commitment to others. I am not thinking here primarily of prayer groups or formation programs of various kinds which bring people together only for the purpose of nourishing their faith without any natural association in other areas of life. Such groups are important but they are not in any significant sense natural communities, and they generally do not provide a foundation for corporate action, though they will undoubtedly equip individuals to help build natural communities elsewhere.

Where to Start

For such natural communities, four possibilities come to mind:

1. **The Parish:** The parish is first and foremost a supernatural community falling beyond this discussion. But through its spiritual activities, the parish also forms a community with the potential to be a Christian center for natural concerns and

aspirations. Certainly the parish remains the only place where the most isolated of Catholics can bond with others who share their Faith. Rather than looking for ever-greater opportunities to play special liturgical roles, however, it is necessary for lay people to be lay people, striving to address not only catechesis and evangelization but cultural, social, economic and political life, reaching out to others, and making an impact beyond Church property.

2. **The School:** It is not uncommon for natural communities to grow up around outstanding Catholic schools, precisely because these schools draw significant numbers of well-formed, serious Catholics to live in the same region, sometimes even in the same neighborhood. So much of American life revolves around the school, and so many people are willing to relocate and change various aspects of family and social life to suit the demands of a valued school, that school families can bond together not only academically but socially and economically as well, sometimes with astonishing results.
3. **The Workplace:** Catholic businessmen can create true natural communities organized around the work they provide, simply by hiring a preponderance of Catholics and providing adequate compensation, a moral environment, opportunities for daily prayer, Catholic holidays, and encouragement of family networking and common projects. Employers are not priests, however. They should support, encourage and give good example, not dictate spirituality.
4. **The Home:** No discussion of community is complete without mentioning the unique role the home can and must play in the formation of new and larger communities. Developing a communal Catholic life within the household is obviously the first step. But each household of one or more Catholics can also practice the virtue of hospitality to great advantage. Welcoming like-minded friends into the home provides opportunities for wholesome recreation, uplifting discussion and even shared devotions, all of which build a sense of community (and of identity) which transcends the home itself. In addition to friends, welcoming neighbors and associates into this environment is often the first step in extending the community to those not already aware of its benefits.

Christian Community Life

It is no idle proverb that in unity there is strength. The project of bearing public witness to the Faith and so beginning to transform the social order, which is so singularly

difficult on one's own, becomes immediately and dramatically easier in groups. Not only is there immense mutual support within such a community, which allows everyone to relax and use energy more effectively, but the diverse gifts and talents make every project easier. More to the point here, these initial communities quickly become natural embodiments of the Faith. They create the first opportunities for public manifestations of Catholicism to become the norm.

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Toward the New Evangelization, with Courage

October 24, 2011

Recently Pope Benedict has highlighted the importance of a new evangelization, something which figured importantly also in the thought of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II. On October 16th, the Pope closed a conference on evangelization by announcing a new [Year of Faith](#) to begin next October, an observance he hopes will spark this evangelization. And today he [named the officers for next year's Synod of Bishops](#), which will be devoted to evangelization.

Pope Benedict regards the “new” evangelization as directed toward those in regions which once had a robust faith but have since slipped into secularism, namely the West. He regards this as a natural complement to the continuing mission of the Church to those who have never heard the Gospel. The Pope well knows that there are many in the West who have never had the Gospel effectively preached to them, and many more who need to hear it afresh.

It is, after all, a huge assumption to think that all of our neighbors really know the Gospel, and it is certainly unjust to blame them for rejecting what has never been announced to them in any meaningful way. I am not referring to a lack of systematic religious instruction, which we call catechesis, or to an inability to defend the Faith, which we call apologetics. No, evangelization is first and foremost the announcing of the Good News, the sharing of the fundamental story of our salvation—the coming of Christ, His message of life and hope, and His conquest of sin and death.

If you have never thought about it, trust me on this: Many of your neighbors, even if they have heard of Christ and Christianity, have not really heard the Gospel preached coherently—including many who have ears to hear.

At the same time, even when they know nothing, people in the West are culturally shaped to assume they “know all about” Christianity and find it terribly wanting. For this reason, evangelization in the West is quite different from evangelization among those who have really never heard of Christ at all. Perhaps the point is best stated as follows: There is usually significantly less ingrained prejudice to overcome in a culture which is encountering Christ for the first time than in our culture, which has as part of its current

identity a historical animus against the Faith. It is important to remember, then, that Christianity does not really dialogue with culture (though by analogy something of the sort does happen). Rather, persons who are Christians dialogue with persons who are not Christians.

This personal dynamic is critical, and it can be approached in two ways. One way—the way I follow much of the time—is to disseminate Christian information and ideas in general so that others might encounter the message. A surprising number of people discover something about Christianity on CatholicCulture.org, and many use it to quench their thirst for the Faith once they realize that they do indeed thirst. Still others use our website to help them return to a deeper and more consistent practice of their faith, after having fallen away. Though CatholicCulture.org is primarily oriented toward those who already accept the Gospel, some of our work is an example of this sort of more generalized evangelization. The writer (or the audio voice or the video figure) is definitely addressing someone, but it is not a particular someone with a face, a name, and a unique relationship to the one bearing the message.

The other way is to talk about Christ to our friends and co-workers, one on one or in small groups, or to speak or preach to specific audiences in person. This more intensely personal dynamic takes more courage in the moment than does writing an essay, though I've known many closet Christians who would fear even to have their names on an essay. But because all evangelization is the announcement of a personal message, and in bearing that message we must always risk in some sense being “discovered” for what we are, our courage must grow under the power of the Holy Spirit if we are to participate in the Pope's plans. This courage—courage in the evangelizing moment—is absolutely central to the spread of the Gospel.

This is so even and sometimes especially in our outwardly placid Western culture because, as I hinted above, the dominant persons and groups in our society have imbued our culture with an atmosphere of rebellion against the Faith that once shaped it. Thus anyone who broaches the subject of Christ without being absolutely sure of the person or persons he is talking with must perforce fear to be met with some hostility, to be marked in some ways as an outsider, to be carefully watched by those—frequently superiors at work or school—who are seeking an opportunity to trip him up. The servant is not greater than his master (Jn 15:20).

Of course I do not mean to ignore the many other ways in which we can evangelize—by our permanent marriages, happy families, and well-raised children; by our peace and joy even in adversity; by our willingness to pray; by showing genuine concern for others; by gently redirecting thoughts and actions or quietly disappearing

when group situations become occasions of sin; these and many more. But there is a certain courage involved in speaking of Christ when we do not know if the name of Christ will be well-received, or in taking a stand in witness to what we have learned from Him.

I suppose there are some who relish the fight, who enjoy going on the attack. They may not lack courage, but they may lack good sense. Evangelization is not synonymous with being obstreperous. We must learn also to sense when a word will be opportune, and to seek opportunities to bring light rather than heat. The Gospel of Christ is truly a gospel of love.

But it is love, in the end, which makes us vulnerable, and so renewed courage really will be at the heart of the new evangelization. Without the personal courage of each one of us, the new evangelization cannot reach its potential. Insofar as any one of us is cowardly, the new evangelization will stutter and stall. “Be of good cheer,” says Jesus Christ. “I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). And what was it the angel said to the shepherds at the beginning? “Be not afraid! For behold, I bring you good news” (Lk 2:10). Of all that can be said about the new evangelization, I believe this is the most important point.

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The Three Most Important Characteristics of an Evangelizer

November 27, 2012

Evangelizer or evangelist? Depending on your frame of reference, the term “evangelist” conjures up the writers of the gospels, slick Protestant TV personalities, or the kind of modern corporate marketing fervor pioneered by Apple. And the term “evangelizer” sounds just plain ignorant and clunky. It reminds me of the similar problem with “baptizer” and “Baptist” which, as you can see, my spell-checker insists on capitalizing. But perhaps a rose by any other name smells the same, as the Bardist says: To evangelize, we need to know what we’re doing, have supreme confidence in the face of resistance, and never fail to press an advantage.

Or do we?

Actually, I’m rather afraid that this is what most people think, and why many people don’t evangelize. Even worse, it is all too easy to get this impression from reading people like myself, who have the supreme luxury of spinning well-thought thoughts in the privacy of an office connected only by cyberspace to the nearest critic. Like the proverbial sports official, we here at CatholicCulture.org may be wrong, but we are never in doubt.

But this absence of uncertainty is not the normal human condition, nor even the normal Christian condition.

I do not mean that we should fail to learn our faith well; this is a fundamental duty we have to God. Nor do I mean we should be reluctant to share the faith; this is a fundamental duty to our neighbor. But what I do mean is that we cannot expect to know the answer to every question or to be absolutely certain we are taking the best possible approach to bring a particular person to Jesus Christ and His Church. That is why the single most important characteristic of a successful evangelizer is not intelligence, or training, or courage, or even self-confidence, but holiness.

Unfortunately, while the advice to seek holiness does orient us properly, it doesn’t provide much practical guidance. So let us identify three characteristics we can acquire on the way to holiness, specific characteristics which will always make our efforts at evangelization more fruitful:

1. **Humility:** Humility is, of course, the very ground of holiness. It is the virtue by which we recognize who God is and who we are, that we are not God, and that in point of fact we depend entirely on God not only for our existence but for every good work. There are two sides to this virtue. The first is a radical reliance upon God, which I will treat as a separate characteristic below. The second is the recognition and acceptance of our own inescapable inadequacy in sharing the Christian life with others, which is what I wish to focus on here.

If we are embarrassed by our inadequacies we will be reluctant to expose them or to admit them when others cheerfully expose them for us. This is the result of pride and self-love. An effective evangelizer will always be frank about his own deficiencies in both virtue and knowledge. Questions will come up to which the evangelizer has no ready answer. Rather than bluster, he should welcome the opportunity to explore the answers together with any sincere non-believer who is genuinely seeking to know more. Similarly, questions will arise which touch on moral struggle. An evangelizer should freely admit that he too participates in this struggle, that the struggle is in no way shameful, and that one of the blessings of the Christian life is to provide *mutual* assistance toward the goal of greater union with God.

It takes humility to open ourselves to others in these ways, but humility is the mark of personal authenticity. It cannot be faked, and it is always attractive. Far better to be willing to engage another in the Christ life on terms of equal need than either to hide our light or be correctly perceived as a self-righteous know-it-all.

2. **Hospitality:** Another outgrowth of humility, when combined with the charity to which humility opens the way, is a willingness to invite others into our “space”. As we begin to see whatever gifts we possess as gifts for others, our all too human desire to be left alone diminishes. Hospitality in the formal sense of welcoming others into our homes and treating them as family has always been considered a Christian virtue. It is also a vital means of establishing contact with those non-believers whom we are most called to influence: relatives, friends and associates who are open to our invitations despite not sharing our faith.

But the hospitality I am referring to here goes a little deeper than the formal commitments of social gatherings or holiday get-togethers, as valuable as these are. What must lie at the core of our relationships with others is a radical

openness to *allowing them in*. Each person is a brother or sister wholly deserving of our attention—not an interruption or a distraction, and still less a nuisance. Obviously we must make prudent judgments concerning time and energy, especially in light of our primary responsibilities to immediate family and to the work for which we are compensated. But even in terms of evangelization, potential effectiveness will be dramatically increased insofar as others sense that we think them important, that they are more than welcome to share our joy.

This constant projection of authentic personal hospitality, this heartfelt ability to *provide a welcome*, is another essential component of evangelization.

3. **Trust in God:** As I suggested under the heading of humility, a Christian would be very foolish to achieve only the worldly half of humility, which is a sense of inadequacy so profound as to send us running for cover, never to attempt any good for the remainder of our worthless lives. To the contrary, the Christian realization of humility is a realization not that we are worthless but that we depend on God because God loves us. Our weakness is the key to our greatness, because God wants us to fulfill the aspirations of our nature through union with Himself.

Since this is the case, we must depend on God in everything, constantly asking him to make up for what we lack, to use us as His instruments for whatever good He wishes to accomplish through us. Prayer, then, will be as constant a part of our program of evangelization as it is of our program of spiritual growth. If it has been given to us to be “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor 5:20) to certain souls, then we must ask God for the grace to “shine like lights in the world” (Phil 2:15) so that these souls may be “saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2).

Faith remains a gift, and we remain but instruments of that gift. The giver is God alone. In all efforts at evangelization, we must be confident not in ourselves as instruments, but in God as giver. Our job is to trust that He will use us if we allow ourselves to be used. We do not insist on obvious success, for it is not the instrument which appraises success but the One who uses the instrument. And surely we must know that one may sow while another reaps (Jn 4:37)! But there is only one Lord of the harvest (Mt 9:38), and He alone is wholly good (Mk 10:18).

Speaking of ourselves in the wearisome course of human life, hesitation and uncertainty

are normal. Indeed, if we did not experience our own inadequacy, we would have no hope at all. But we are right to have confidence in the One who is good, the only One who was ever wholly right to say, “Don’t worry! Be happy!”—the One who could and did say, “Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33).

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The New Evangelization: Down with Optimism, Up with Hope

October 10, 2012

The current Synod on the New Evangelization is not optimistic about the state of the world. This, I am prepared to argue, represents a seismic shift in episcopal perceptions over the past fifty years. In the second half of the twentieth century, the Catholic hierarchy in the West seemed possessed by what can only be called a foolish optimism, almost to the point of believing that human culture would evolve all on its own to a better and more spiritual state. Let's look back a bit before going forward.

For a wide variety of cultural reasons, the world seemed full of promise in the 1960s when the Second Vatican Council was meeting in Rome. The Church reflected this sense of promise in the Council's determination to recognize any good that existed in the human family generally and especially among non-Catholic Christians, with the hope of stabilizing and building upon that good in the full light of Christ. The key Conciliar document on this point is the [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World](#) (*Gaudium et spes*).

At the same time, it would be wrong to accuse the Council of an unbridled optimism, as many have done. No, the chief Conciliar difference was an emphasis on connecting with the good rather than condemning the bad, a policy which had borne little or no fruit in the preceding centuries. Rereading *Gaudium et spes* nearly fifty years later reminds us that the Council fathers saw very clearly the tensions, corruptions and failings in human persons and human institutions which desperately needed to be purified by Christ. This, in fact, is a constant theme in the document. Consider, for example, this passage:

Sacred Scripture teaches the human family what the experience of the ages confirms: that while human progress is a great advantage to man, it brings with it a strong temptation.... For a monumental struggle against the powers of darkness pervades the whole history of man. The battle was joined from the very origins of the world and will continue until the last day, as the Lord has attested. Caught in this conflict, man is obliged to wrestle constantly if he is to cling to what is good, nor can he achieve his own integrity without great efforts and the help of God's grace. That is why Christ's Church, trusting in the design of the Creator,

acknowledges that human progress can serve man's true happiness, yet she cannot help echoing the Apostle's warning: "Be not conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2). . . . Hence if anyone wants to know how this unhappy situation can be overcome, Christians will tell him that all human activity, constantly imperiled by man's pride and deranged self-love, must be purified and perfected by the power of Christ's cross and resurrection. (#37)

Nonetheless, a sort of debilitating optimism about human progress did infect the Church in the second half of the 20th century. It was not so much the result of the Conciliar texts as of the dominance of Modernism in the Catholic intellectual establishment, including the episcopate, evidenced in the late 1960s. This came primarily through the Catholic academy, where Modernism was kept largely hidden until the long-term Western cultural shift toward secularism was finally publicly admitted and praised among the cultural elites (who had generally felt the need to appear pious in the preceding generation). As soon as the world was ready to acclaim and lionize those who could "explain away" or "water down" the demands of Faith in the face of prevailing secular trends, the stage was set for intellectual influence to proceed primarily in the wrong direction throughout the Western Church.

Resistance to that trend required a Christian seriousness which simply was not possessed either by Modernists or by episcopal leaders who had come to take their dominance for granted. This is the situation that was inherited by Pope John Paul II, who engaged in a long struggle to restore the episcopate and reestablish a proper understanding of the Second Vatican Council. With small but clearly discernible results beginning after 1985, an authentic renewal of the episcopate has developed slowly since that time. There can be no question that this renewal was paradoxically accelerated after the abuse scandal broke in 2001.

Therefore, as the Synod on the New Evangelization begins, I find it welcome—but happily no longer surprising—that the problem of secularism both inside and outside the Church is being identified loudly, clearly and repeatedly (see [Leading prelates speak about mounting worldwide secularization](#)). Take for example the remarks of Cardinal Péter Erdő, president of the Council of European Episcopal Conferences:

Europe must be evangelized. It needs it. De-Christianization is accompanied by repeated juridical, as well as physical, attacks against the visible presence of the manifestations of faith. . . . The vast majority of cases of violence and of discrimination because of religious belief are acted out against Christians,

especially Catholics, in Europe.

These remarks signal the death of Western Catholic optimism about the world.

Or consider the words of Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the dean of the College of Cardinals, who reflected as follows on his recent rereading of the Book of Revelation:

[I was] able to reflect on the reality of evil in the world, as on the mystery of man's freedom, who although he sees the light, sometimes prefers to remain in darkness. Similarly I wished to meditate on the pages of the Apocalypse that describe to us the devastating presence of Satan in human history. But it is always comforting to read in the same Book of Revelation how in the end it is the victorious power of Christ which shines over all human misery.

In fact, it is not now but only at the end of human history, Cardinal Sodano reminded the Synod, that we will have a new heaven and a new earth. Until then, "we are not the first to work in the vineyard of the Lord nor will we be the last." Cardinal Sodano here expresses the triumph of supernatural hope over human optimism.

Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, who is the Synod's relator-general, referred even more forcefully to a "tsunami of secular influence" in the Church (see [In major synod address, Cardinal Wuerl rues secularism and poor catechesis, analyzes new evangelization](#)). He made this point in his *relatio ante disceptationem* (report before the discussion), which will shape the Synod's deliberations:

This current situation is rooted in the upheavals of the 1970s and 80s, decades in which there was manifest poor catechesis or miscatechesis at so many levels of education. We faced the hermeneutic of discontinuity that permeated so much of the milieu of centers of higher education and was also reflected in aberrational liturgical practice. Entire generations have become disassociated from the support systems that facilitated the transmission of faith. It is as if a tsunami of secular influence has swept across the cultural landscape, taking with it such societal markers as marriage, family, the concept of the common good and objective right and wrong.

Cardinal Wuerl went on to say that "secularization has fashioned two generations of Catholics who do not know the Church's foundational prayers..., do not sense a value in Mass attendance..., fail to receive the sacrament of Penance, and have often lost a sense of mystery or the transcendent as having any real and verifiable meaning." All of this has

left them “ill-prepared to deal with a culture that...is characterized by secularism, materialism and individualism.”

Wuerl also noted that today’s evangelizers must be characterized by four qualities, “boldness or courage, connectedness to the Church, a sense of urgency, and joy.” And “when we speak of courage,” he said:

we must also recognize the need for institutional witness in those particular churches that enjoy the presence of institutional expressions of the Church—colleges, universities, hospitals, health care ministries, social services and other types of outreach to the poor. There must be a recognition that these institutional expressions of the life of the Church should also bear testimony to God’s Word.

It used to be that only lay persons and marginalized priests were willing to speak with such realism. For large numbers of bishops to speak this way is a sea change.

It is easier, of course, to say such things in Rome than at home, and still easier to say them than to act accordingly. But as our news coverage has demonstrated over the past several years, more and more bishops are now saying these things at home as well as effecting the long, slow changes to make them stick. Yes, clearly, there is a long way to go. In particular, success demands a thorough reform of Catholic universities which has hardly yet begun. But if there were no heavy lifting to do, there would be no need for the keen sense of crisis we see and hear at the Synod.

What is clear now is that twentieth century secular Catholic optimism is gone. The idea that all we need is a few magic programs is dead. The bishops now seem to know that the Catholic future lies in hard personal work, work that there can be no reason to do without hope in Christ. As Cardinal Wuerl expressed it: “The New Evangelization is not a *program*. It is a mode of thinking, seeing and acting. It is a lens through which we see the opportunities to proclaim the Gospel anew. It is also a recognition that the Holy Spirit continues actively to work in the Church.”

To this I would add only one thing: The New Evangelization is also a sacrifice. It is a good thing that the tired worldly optimism is gone, for evangelization is not possible without redemptive suffering. And redemptive suffering is not possible without hope in Christ.

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Ten Keys to Effective Evangelization

December 12, 2012

One of our supporters wrote recently to ask what was supposed to be “new” about the New Evangelization. He had found that many people seemed to be waiting for Rome to issue instructions on a new *kind* of evangelization, different from the past, which would somehow solve the *problem* of evangelization. But this is a misunderstanding. The New Evangelization is called “new” because it is directed at people in once-Christian cultures. Individuals within those cultures may need to hear about Christ almost as if for the first time, but taken as a whole, we can see that these once-Christian peoples and once-Christian cultures need to be evangelized “anew”.

It is perhaps unfortunate that many Catholics have come to expect that their duties will always be encapsulated in “a program”. But in general, this habit developed because of the weakness of the Church and the Faith in the West over the past few generations, a weakness by which “programs” somehow came to replace spiritual growth and commitment. I note with gratitude that our bishops are beginning to realize this. For example, when the USCCB announced its [campaign of prayer and fasting for marriage and religious liberty](#) earlier this month, Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco said: “It’s not meant to be another program but rather part of a movement for life, marriage, and religious liberty, which engages the New Evangelization and can be incorporated into the Year of Faith.”

Yet vestiges remain. Just this week Baltimore’s Archbishop Lori emphasized at a conference in Rome [the need for collaboration among the bishops](#) in North, Central and South America to make evangelization effective. There is nothing objectionable in Archbishop Lori’s call for collaboration, especially insofar as he recommended that we all turn to Our Lady of Guadalupe. But in fact collaboration at the episcopal level has very little to do with evangelization—and will not make it effective—unless each bishop labors to renew the faith in his own diocese. It is here that a new evangelization must begin, as each seeks to transform nominal Catholics into holy Catholics. For one of the most important aspects of authentic holiness is a sense of *mission*.

These considerations prompt a modest exercise. I wish to offer ten points which will lead to authentic spiritual renewal, a keen sense of mission, and effective evangelization. In enumerating these points, I will move from goals, through disciplines of renewal, to

tools of evangelization. I make no claim that the list is exhaustive. After all, even the number ten is something of a gimmick. But I believe all of these points must be incorporated into what we might call an effective Christian life, a life that evangelizes—a life that draws others to Christ.

Goals

What sort of person do we desire to become if we are to be effective evangelizers? It goes without saying that this effectiveness will necessarily depend on the grace of God, and so we must open ourselves to grace as widely and deeply as possible. Our Lord's life must flow through us to others. For this purpose, concepts like faith, hope, charity and holiness come to mind, but they are perhaps too vague to be useful, so I will first focus on four "ways of being" which define what we want to become.

1. Personal Relationship with Christ: This will surprise nobody, but it still needs to be stressed. It is very easy to become what we might call a Catholic by rote, that is, somebody who follows a kind of minimal set of rules, living the Christian life in an essentially *prescriptive* way. Such a person frequently asks, "What do I need to do to at least make it to purgatory?" Or "What does the Church require of me to be a 'good Catholic'?" It is often observed that this attitude was far too widespread among the laity in the first half of the twentieth century, and that an important part of the purpose of the Second Vatican Council was to shake the Church out of this sort of complacency. In any case, our Christian life must be defined and motivated first and foremost by a personal love of Jesus Christ.

2. Personal Relationship with the Church: Any significant theological reflection will reveal that this point is simply another side of the first point. The Church is the Body of Christ, united by Christ's assimilation of us to Himself in the Eucharist, and inseparably joined to Christ the Head. All that Our Lord offers to draw men and women into union with God is made available through the Church. This is a consequence of His saving passion, death and resurrection, the fruits of which are specifically actuated by her sacraments and, in a different way, by her Magisterium, which safeguards Revelation so that we "may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). This fundamental ecclesial reality is often obscured by the sins and weaknesses of the Church's members, but we must never permit it to be obscured in our own spiritual perception. In other words, the second point is like unto the first: Our Christian life must be defined and motivated by a deep personal love of the Church.

3. A Different Way of Living Morally: This too may go without saying, and yet it is easily overlooked by Catholics who do not lead what we call an "examined" life. Our

moral behavior must become the behavior of a Christian, that is, of a saint. How we live in our daily life—in our personal and sexual relations, in our speech, in our social attitudes, in our use of time, in our priorities—must be marked by Christian, that is, saintly values. Obviously, if we are serious about the first two relationships, Christlike ethics will follow. And if this difference in moral living really becomes a “way of being” for us, it will be noticed. We need frequent self-examination in light of the Commandments and the teachings of the Church, extending their implications into every dark corner of our old habits and self-love, in order to develop the robust moral habits of a Christian.

4. Different Attitudes, Responses and Emotions: There is more to the difference I am describing here than avoidance of serious sin. As we mature in the Christian life, we find (or ought to find) that we do not react to news, entertainment, surprises, victories, defeats, stresses and strains as our neighbors do. Our ears do not perk up at the prospect of gossip; we do not thirst for the same popular entertainments; our fashions are not dictated by celebrities. If we are struggling with some difficulty, we are not sad or short-tempered. Should we be humiliated in some way, we are not downcast. Contradicted, we take no offense. Victorious, we deflect credit and never gloat. Boasting is to us a shameful reminder of the weaknesses of the “old man”. We do not seek to avoid responsibility. In the calm, inner-directed stability of our “being”, we become more pleasing to God and immensely more attractive to others.

Disciplines of Renewal

The four points above certainly qualify as a tall order. How do we habituate ourselves to these “ways of being”? I am not interested here in what the Church, or the bishop, or the priest “ought to do” to make this happen. Each person’s spiritual perfection will bear fruit in the realm of his own life and responsibilities. But how does each and every Christian grow in these ways? In response to this question, the answer will not be so surprising, and it certainly will not be new. It is the perennial three-fold path:

5. Prayer: Put simply, the Christian life cannot be lived without prayer, and plenty of it. I include in this category the all-important regular reception of the Sacraments of the Church, which have a special power to fill us with the life of Christ—but a power than we can effectively utilize only if we have the right dispositions. And the right dispositions grow through prayer. It is through prayer that we learn to know God, to know ourselves, to recognize the difference, to discern God’s will generally and particularly, and to increase in the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. Among other forms of prayer, Eucharistic adoration should play an important role, for obvious

reasons. In any case, to put the matter very simply, Christians pray; if they do not, they are not really Christians. Eventually, they learn to pray always, practicing the presence of God, but most often they must set aside specific time for prayer, in accordance with their vocational duties. Even Our Lord went off frequently to pray. See also the advice given in Lk 21:36, 1 Thes 5:17 and Eph 6:18.

6. Spiritual Reading: Here we have the most accessible form of spiritual instruction and direction, the practice of slowly reading and meditating on Scripture and the works of the great saints and doctors approved by the Church. Our interpretations of these things, through our deep love of the Church, will always be subject to correction by Church teaching, a sound spiritual director, or at least a perusal of the *Catechism*. Nonetheless, spiritual reading should be both an important foundation of our prayer life and a vital means of spiritual, intellectual and moral formation. We should never be far from a good spiritual book, with which we can focus our minds, combat distractions, and open ourselves in a safe and constructive way to the movement of the Holy Spirit in prayer. For nearly all souls, spiritual reading immensely accelerates spiritual growth. God works in us in many other ways, of course, but for a literate person, it takes an extraordinary action of God, really an extra miracle of grace, to compensate for an unwillingness to take advantage of solid, prayerful spiritual reading. On this see also 2 Tim 3:16.

7. Charitable Works: Works of charity are at once a spiritual discipline and a fruit of our love of God and neighbor. Here I treat them primarily in the former sense—as a means to the end defined in our first four points. Charity always involves personal sacrifice; there is, after all, nearly always something that we would rather be doing. We must cultivate the discipline of charity as a part of our habituation to the Christian life. For this reason, I include within “charity” those penitential exercises which we ought to perform out of love for God, to curb our passions, strengthen our wills, and “make up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ” (Col 1:24). And although our left hand ought not to know what our right hand is doing (Mt 6:3), Our Lord did call attention to charity as an important aspect of evangelization: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).

Particular Tools for Evangelization

Perhaps all of the foregoing is too obvious. But perhaps that is part of the point. There is no magic bullet for evangelization, no particular program to guarantee results, no decree to be passed down from on high to generate mass conversions. If we are waiting for something like this, we will wait in vain. I will not deny that at different times and

places, new forms of effective witness have been developed and implemented which have born great fruit in particular situations. Hopefully we can find equally fruitful ways of reaching out to people and getting their attention in our own time. That is a discussion for another day. But a more pressing question is simply this: What important tools of the Christian life ought each one of us to sharpen so as to improve our results in spreading the Gospel?

8. Knowledge of Scripture: The two great sources of Revelation are Scripture and Tradition, but while Tradition benefits people spiritually insofar as it is lived and handed on, as it seeps into our bones over time, Scripture has a direct and immediate spiritual power as the Word of God. This is not primarily a matter of proof-texting. That is something one might do in apologetics with Protestants, who already accept the authority of Scripture but misunderstand the fullness of Divine Revelation on various points. Here I am referring to something like what happened to the eunuch for whom Philip interpreted the words of Isaiah (Acts 8:26-39). There is salvific power in Scripture. We do well to work it into our discussions, helping to explain the Word of God made flesh by the Word of God in Scripture.

9. Traditions and Customs: In our secularized societies, we have lost much of the warp and woof of the Christian life in our daily personal, familial and community habits, customs and celebrations. I am referring here to traditions with a small “t”, both the kinds of little practices and customs which populate the [liturgical year section](#) on CatholicCulture.org and the larger habits of family prayer, meals in common, hospitality, rules of Christian courtship, and all such methods of more easily incorporating a guiding spirituality into work, recreation and life as a whole. Those who are admitted to our circle will observe such things. Practical questions will frequently arise, and we must provide answers. For example:

“With our children, we did not allow ‘dating’; we promoted and allowed only wholesome group activities with opposite sexes until such-and-such an age.” Or “Here is a grace you can say before meals, and one you can say after, ensuring that all come before the opening grace, engage in family conversation, and leave the table only after the closing.” Or “We have a Eucharistic procession in our parish on Corpus Christi—it promises to be a beautiful day, why not join us?”

Just so: Our faith should be reflected in a thousand concrete ways, both small and large. By excluding its beneficent influence from any segment of life, either out of laziness or fear, we lose immense opportunities for both ourselves and others.

10. The Skill of Detachment: Let me close with something that might seem a bit unusual. I believe all effective evangelists need to recognize (and live in accordance with) sharp distinctions between, on the one hand, all that is definitely revealed by God as essential to Christ and, on the other hand, all of our favorite opinions on such things as politics, culture, entertainment, private devotions, personal dress, and a hundred other things which prevent our interacting with others as the potential kindred spirits that they really are. St. Paul put this eloquently: “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). If we want to preach the Gospel, we cannot insist that our prescriptions on everything from foreign policy to sacred music must also be received and accepted as oracles of God. How often we get in our own way, putting others off because we intrude so much of ourselves into every discussion! The goal in evangelization is for us to speak in a way that enables others to hear, not us, but Christ. For this to happen, detachment from our own prejudices, preferences and opinions is essential.

Not Done Yet

A word to the disappointed: I know you did not find a new formula here, a new discovery of how to “make evangelization work”. As I said earlier, if this is what you are looking for, you are looking for something that does not exist; you are relying on programs in an area in which we must rely on Christ’s desire to use our poor efforts as a conduit of grace. Nonetheless, two caveats are in order.

First, it would be wrong to conclude that nothing more is necessary. The unique challenge of what the Church is calling the *new* evangelization is that it must take place in a culture in which Christianity is partially known yet widely rejected as an affront to civilized behavior. Our culture frowns on the introduction of Jesus Christ in any but the most private circumstances. We have been raised in and formed by this highly secular culture, and we have imbibed its prescriptions. Speaking of Christ, of Faith, of Church is really not quite the thing. It simply isn’t done! Not by a gentleman, anyway. Self-evidently, evangelization cannot occur unless we can overcome this inculturated reluctance in ourselves. Only if that is overcome can we explore possible specific paths or tactics of evangelization which might bear fruit (as we began to do in [Evangelization Ideas](#)). Obviously there is more work to be done regarding practical methods, but only the spiritual growth outlined above can lead us to break the barrier of respectability which our culture has established between man and God.

Second, if evangelization ultimately depends on the kind of growth and commitment outlined above, it would still be wrong to argue that we should not involve ourselves in

Christian witness until we are perfect. We will never be perfect; nor does Our Lord require perfection before we dare to preach. For His part, He loved all of us while we were still in our sins, and even with all of our sins, by His sacrifice Our Lord has made us as worthy to speak His name as others are to hear it. This essay is about how to become more effective at evangelization, not about how to begin. We must remember that we are not trying to promote ourselves. Rather, we are trying to promote Jesus Christ—partly for the reason that He is more than willing to make up for all of our deficiencies.

This brings me back again to the last of the ten points, *detachment*. Self-detachment is part of knowing the difference between who we are and who God is. After all, it is not we ourselves who are the way, the truth and the life. In a previous essay on [the three most important characteristics of an evangelizer](#), I stressed humility, hospitality, and trust in God. This is the way to begin. Let people criticize our own weaknesses, as long as they criticize them in the light of Christ. Let them shoot the messenger, as long as they get the message.

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The New Evangelization: What Does It Look Like?

November 14, 2013

As I mentioned in my latest *Insights* message ([Evangelization Forever!](#)), we should end this Year of Faith not with some sort of boxed memorial, but by making what we have learned the basis of a new era of Catholic evangelization. That is the challenge before us, and I think we really have made some progress toward that goal. At least I hope I have. Let me try to explain.

If I have heard it once, I have heard it a thousand times: People are frustrated by an inability on the part of the Church to put its finger on exactly what form this New Evangelization ought to take. My own explanation may ramble a bit. I am trying, just as you are, to put it all together. Moreover, what I have learned has come as much from Providence as from formal exercises in defining and encouraging evangelization during the course of the year.

The Francis Effect

Perhaps the greatest Providential sequence during this current Year of Faith was the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI and the election of Pope Francis. Some would like to argue about how “great” this is; I am not one of them. I defend my position by pointing out that, whatever we may think about this or that, everything that happens is in fact Providential. Ideally we ought to be considering this reality more or less continuously. But when something really startling happens in the official life of the Church, we need to engage ourselves in Providential hyperdrive. In His Providence, God has caused something to happen. In His Providence, then, we are to reflect on it and learn from it.

I am not going to dwell (again) on how to interpret Pope Francis, but by now there can be no question that this pope wants to lead Catholics away from a restrictively institutional and functional perception of the Church. In other words, he wants the Church to position herself more to offer a continuous invitation to life in Christ than to defend her prerogatives, and more to embody mercy than to argue policy. I suspect every pope during my lifetime has been slowly moving the Church toward this goal, and would have assented to this characterization as stated. But it seems to be the charism of Pope

Francis not so much to write measured explanations as to distill and crystallize them into action.

In any case, surely God has sent us signals in the retirement of Benedict and the election of Francis, signals to which we are supposed to respond as people of Faith. These signals are not the sole basis for the following reflections, for it would be supremely foolish to base anything *entirely* on our reading of the signs of the times, which readings are as fallible as they are necessary. But I venture to hope that others will see the “Francis effect” in my reflections, and will regard them as improved by that effect.

The Culture Wars as an Obstacle to Evangelization

One realization I have been groping toward for several years, which has crystallized for me this year, is that the so-called culture wars are a serious obstacle to evangelization. The mode of engagement is simply all wrong. While the name “culture wars” captures much that is valuable about an important aspect of the struggle in which we find ourselves, it excludes too much more. We have fallen into a “culture wars” view of our responsibilities primarily because Christian culture has collapsed so rapidly around our heads over the past fifty years or so. This has led to the illusion that we are at some sort of balance point in history in which it is just as likely, or almost as likely, that we will win the culture back, primarily through politics, as that we will lose it irrevocably.

Nothing, I think, is farther from the truth, and by now we ought to be able to recognize this huge and unassailable fact. What we had in 1950 (and had as late as 1950 only because of the trauma of two heart-stopping world wars) was a culture whose public habits were formalistically Christian despite the fact that a vibrant Christian faith had long since ceased to inform them. Christianity has been weakening in the West for hundreds of years, progressively having less and less real influence over the hearts and minds of men, with Christian sentiment retaining a place in our public life only in a continuously less coherent and demanding way. Our public habits in 1950 were already largely a hollow shell; the underlying culture had long since ceased to support them.

It cannot be surprising in retrospect that they were so easily swept away as soon as aggressive secularists realized the law was supremely vulnerable. Nor can we any longer cling to the illusion that this rapid degeneration of law and politics between 1950 and the present has been a very close thing. Rather, it has been an inexorable shift toward making law and politics reflective of a firmly-established secular and post-Christian culture.

This does not mean that there is no longer anything good, anything redeemable, in Western culture. But it does mean that there is something very wrong with the dominant

perception of contemporary Western Christians as being involved in a culture war or a series of culture wars that can be won politically, as if there is a Christian culture out there that can be retaken if we just get the right number of votes, rather than just a thoroughly and depressingly secular culture which must be re-evangelized from the ground up.

Born of an essentially mistaken political calculation, the “culture wars” metaphor is almost totally inimical to evangelization. This perception of our situation and of our duty reflexively causes us to fill our agenda with *arguments against*, with *efforts to defeat*, with the *perception of persons as either enemies or allies*, and with all the exaggerations, half-truths, and myopia that are inescapably a part of both politics and battle. In fact, popular as they have sometimes been, I would argue that war images in general have rarely served the Church well. The Church in this world is not called “militant” because she is military or at war (except with the world, the flesh and the Devil in a spiritual sense)—and certainly not at war with any particular human faction—but because she must still struggle in the service of the Good.

Now hopefully I have taken enough positions in the culture wars over the years for readers to understand that it is not my purpose to run from a fight, where a fight can accomplish something, or to denigrate political activity, where political activity can accomplish something. The assessment of possibilities will vary, as do our individual talents and callings. Nor do I have any interest in pretending to divest Catholicism of its moral content, which should be so deeply internalized in each of us as to eliminate any possible uncertainty, defensiveness, or shrillness of tone.

No, my point is a larger one: As a meta-category—as a way of organizing our thoughts about the Christian place in the world—the notion of “culture wars” is seldom helpful. We’ve fallen into it largely through a misperception of history; it seriously obscures the processes by which cultures are formed and strengthened; the ideological baggage it carries with it tends to reduce our sense of reality to politics (which is the great error of secularism); and the habits it inculcates almost inescapably impede evangelization.

Culture Is a Living Thing

If all this is true of the “culture wars” metaphor, it ought to lead us to a deeper consideration of the relationship between evangelization and culture. Consider, for a moment, the caricature of a newly converted Fundamentalist who feels compelled to ask everyone he meets whether they have a personal relationship with Jesus, or insists on calling people to give up their sins and accept the Word of God every time he has an

opportunity to address a group. There is a certain laudable courage here, which most of us should seek to build up in ourselves, but there is also a near-total insensitivity to personal situations, particular needs, and the exigencies of background, place and time. There is little or no engagement with the *person*, who is treated more as an object than as the dynamic subject he or she really is.

That's a form of evangelization, I suppose, and at times it may hit its mark. But what we might call "real" evangelization, or evangelization in a deeper and more authentic sense, is always both personal and cultural. It is informed by the process of getting to know the other persons, and it must be shaped to the kinds of receptivity that have been enhanced or stunted in them by the various levels of culture that have formed and conditioned them—personal, familial, social, intellectual, political, and even artistic.

Our lives in the context of family and friends make this a little easier to see, for only the stunted among us operate in "culture wars" mode all of the time. For most of us, our own Christian spiritual growth has had a deep impact on our family life, gradually creating an atmosphere of comparative tranquility and love despite our own brokenness and any particular stresses and strains. Now at one time or another we have also encountered among acquaintances, friends, family members, or friends of family members someone who is very confused but still welcome in our midst.

It is easiest for me to relate to this in terms of someone one of my children might have brought home from college to share a holiday, but we all have our own experiences. I have known Catholic fathers in such situations who would immediately start "preaching at" the hapless visitor, but that is relatively rare. More often, the attitude is one of welcome and warmth, with a deep respect for the feelings of the guest. There may be exploratory discussions of sensitive topics as occasion suggests, and there is a clear readiness to go deeper if the desire arises. The atmosphere is, in short, *invitational*.

But note that it is not invitational only at the intellectual level. At its best it is invitational at the *cultural* level. The person in question has now experienced the warmth, the peace, the joy, and indeed the fundamentally spiritual moorings of your family life. He or she has been made to feel welcome in what is really a very special setting. For in this little culture—given the dysfunctional character of so many families today—the guest may have experienced an attractive family dynamism quite different from anything he or she has been able to share in the past. The family wishes to extend that opportunity, and the newcomer may well want to experience it again, or at least to talk with your son or daughter about "how lucky they are".

This is just an illustrative example. But luck has little to do with the formation of sound family culture, or of a vibrant community of Catholic friends, or of a social setting

characterized by deep respect and an implicit desire for virtue. These settings, when not at all forced, possess their own strength and serenity. They create bonds, they foster love, they enkindle an interest in the Good, and they help others to recognize their thirst for God. In such contexts, the very best sort of evangelization can proceed, even when the larger culture is inhospitable to it. It is just here that it becomes most obvious not only that culture is a living thing—a vibrant expression and extension of the human person—but that both culture and evangelization itself must consist of something more than mere words; they must manifest and even embody life in Christ in all decisions, relationships, talents, opportunities, callings and achievements.

Service and Evangelization

Catholic culture, then, is primarily built from the Catholic person out, sustained and fostered by the sacramental culture of the Church, and through the Church by the Person of Christ Himself. But when we come to ask ourselves what we should regard as the hallmark of this culture, the single most important ingredient which the Catholic person is bound to express and which, at the same time, is most attractive to others, we realize that the answer is love. And this answer brings us to the chief habitual and cultural manifestation of love in any society, and that is *service*. In any society from the family on up, sacrificial service in response to particular needs is the embodiment or enculturation of Christian love.

In the past, some readers have expressed alarm at a point I have made several times before, that if Catholics want to transform culture they must be prepared to pay twice. In the context of the modern State, in which Big Brother is expected to provide almost everything through programs based on taxes, truly personal engagement with those in any kind of need is rapidly becoming a thing of the past. To take a slight liberty with the Gospel, State programs will always lack the “one thing needful” (Lk 10:42)—both the focus on the Person of Christ which Saint Luke expresses, and the intense personal focus of another Christ on the one in need. This is the exchange that occurs when Christ meets Christ in two human persons who can be fulfilled only in Him.

To overcome this dreadful lack, if Catholics truly wish to serve others, they must set up other mechanisms which afford a much more personal contact with the ones who are to receive this service. Just as service takes time, talent and resources in the many things we do for others in the course of our daily lives—from honoring a spouse to helping a co-worker in a time of crisis—so too do more regular programs of service and support come at a cost. I mean at a double cost, because we have already paid our taxes. Most serious Catholics know this only too well when it comes to educating their children. My

advice is that we get used to it in every significant area of life.

Such service is a sustained act of Christian love (in fact, a habit of Christian love), which accepts people as they are, assisting and working with them in the solutions to their own problems. This provides a remarkable opportunity for the exchange of values and of faith. Clearly no Christian should take advantage of the dependency of another person for purposes of evangelization, for this would be mere proselytizing. In fact, the Christian ought to regard service to others as an opportunity for mutual enrichment. Those who serve are also gifted by those they serve. But in such service a culture is extended which invites collaboration, internalization and inquiry.

This is so true that it is almost an axiom that the shortest route to evangelization is through service. Of all possibilities, service creates the most frequent and fruitful opportunities to open others to God. In fact, the very reason that a truly Christian service is both so important and so attractive is that it engages the whole person, including and often especially the spiritual yearnings and wounds which lie at the very core of the person, which are generally neglected everywhere else. This renewal of the habit of personal service—one might also call it the life-giving exchange of love—will, I think, be the first key to unlocking the New Evangelization.

But it will be no key at all, unless it happens. It needs to happen both in our daily encounters and in the associations and organizations through which we build our extended Catholic culture. Here again, it is not so much about pointing the finger at the corruption of State programs or even of official Catholic service organizations (the Culture Wars, again!) as it is about developing the habits of effective service in oneself and one's associations, that these habits of love may spread throughout the Church and the world.

A Merciful Conclusion

In presenting what I have written here, I am well aware that we need to hear the insights of others on this question, especially practical insights on how to extend this newly kindled spirit of evangelization in a more than purely personal form. There is also another important area which I at first wished to include in my own portrait, and that is the role of what we often call High Culture, or the Arts. Paradoxically, we do not do much with the arts at CatholicCulture.org, perhaps mostly because I am not as well-equipped to deal with them as I would like, and perhaps also because we have ourselves been unduly influenced by the idea of warfare, in which works of the imagination seem like luxuries, both unwarranted and inessential.

But surely not only the true and the good but also the beautiful should play a role.

The artist, no matter what his medium, seeks to penetrate more deeply or more acutely into reality through craft in the service of imagination. Nonetheless, instead of attempting to tack on here something that is in some way central to both human and Divine culture, I think it best to save my initial exploration of this question for a shorter essay to follow.

What I have been trying to do here, then, is to answer the first and most basic objection of many willing Catholics who encounter this concept of the New Evangelization: The objection that nobody can explain what it is supposed to look like. What I have suggested is that it is not supposed to look like a war or an argument. Rather, it is supposed to look like an invitation which is both personal and deeply cultural at the same time—reflected in everything one does and makes, from the family on up. The New Evangelization will reflect the serenity of Christian hope, avoiding whatever is self-conscious, defensive, pugnacious or shrill. It will proceed not so much through logic and proofs (though these should be offered gently and without rancor when requested or needed), but through the deeper reasons that love alone possesses.

By this I propose, among many other things, that the evangelizer will manifest an unshakable calm, a genuine interest in the experience of the other, a devotion to heartfelt service, and once again that uniquely Catholic quality of interaction which does not condemn but always offers an invitation to “something more”, even to the point of martyrdom—the “something more” for which all men and women so deeply yearn. Here again we see a “crystallization” from Pope Francis and his emphasis on mercy. It is a mercy to offer this “something more” to others, just as it has always been an incomparable mercy that it was offered to us.

The new evangelization about which I am writing is called “new” because we must introduce it again into a territory once Christian, into a culture now possessing all the drawbacks of thinking itself “post-Christian”. But it is “evangelization” for the same reasons it always was. I mean that it is a sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is always and above all an initiation into the mercy of God.

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Toward Effective Christian Witness: Making Room for the Gospel

January 09, 2014

The concerns most often expressed about my writings on the New Evangelization fall into two categories. I've emphasized the importance of apostolates of service, both for their own sake and to attract and open others to the Gospel. Given this emphasis, it would be rather disturbing if some Catholics did not wonder whether (a) Failure to continue what we call the "culture wars" would weaken our defenses against various forms of political restriction and coercion; and/or (b) Failure to witness consistently to today's most contested Catholic moral values would be a betrayal of Christ.

Again, it would be extraordinarily disappointing if these very legitimate concerns were not raised, and raised strongly. I am very glad that some readers have raised them. They merit significant attention.

An Adequate Defense is a Strategic Defense

Concern about the political vulnerability of the Catholic community is clearly legitimate. But the key to dealing properly with this concern is to recognize that it is strategic, not moral, in nature. Certainly we are morally obliged to bear witness against immoral policies, whether these are policies that permit abortion or policies that permit persecution of Catholics. But this witness need be specifically political only to the degree that political involvement has strategic value. Thus, for example, nobody insists that all good Catholics fight politically to outlaw contraception, for we have no conceivable effective strategy for doing so. In the same way, the degree to which Catholics should feel obliged to engage *politically* in the fights against abortion, or gay marriage, or euthanasia, or the restriction of religious liberty is directly proportional to the possibility of strategic success.

This is very similar to the way we must treat the "how many babies must die" argument against Pope Francis' emphasis on the full Gospel (see [Abortion, the Death of the Soul, and Christian Strategy](#)). The argument that we cannot take the time now to be more fully evangelical because it will cost the lives of unborn children is weak and confused on a number of grounds, but the first of these grounds is strategic. For the

argument makes any sense at all only if, in fact, by striking hard and fast now in some more directly political way, we can actually achieve a significant and lasting reduction in the number of babies who will be killed. This is a strategic argument, not a moral one. And a moment's reflection suggests that it is a severely problematic strategic argument, if not a very bad one altogether.

In exactly the same way—even apart from the obvious spiritual superiority and long-term advantages of attempting to open more people to the whole Gospel rather than simply to defeat them politically—the argument that, as a matter of corporate defense, Catholics cannot afford to take their eye off the political ball for a single second is strategic, not moral. Its validity depends on there being something significant that Catholics can do politically to secure themselves against increasingly restrictive pressures from the secular world through its secular governments.

Political Disproportion

Because these are strategic questions, of course, they are also prudential ones. Therefore, there is room for disagreement; I do not mean to suggest otherwise. More important, it is always necessary to recognize that each of us is called to slightly different specific forms of witness. God gives us different gifts, different opportunities, different roles to play, and different works to accomplish. It is an unrealistic fear to suggest that recovering an emphasis on the whole Gospel in its deeply personal dimensions will amount to throwing a gigantic switch, a switch which will suddenly cause everyone to ignore politics in favor of daily heartfelt chats with their neighbors. The good for souls and the positive long-term social effects of an emphasis on the whole Gospel of Christ do not eliminate politics; they simply place it in a different light, and invest it with a different priority.

It so happens—no surprise!—that I think our political prospects are fairly bleak. I have made this abundantly clear, and this opinion certainly affects my emphasis in these matters. But surely some political initiatives hold promise and need our attention, and surely some of us are called to significant political involvement. It is our culture's *preoccupation* with political solutions that I have criticized (see, as just one minor example, [Advocating for a Minimum Wage: Is There a Better Way?](#)). There can be no possible objection to supporting the strategic use of politics where there is something significant to be gained. Still, as I argued in [The Credibility Wars: Where We Go from Here](#) and [On Our Dangerous Need for Enemies](#) and [The New Evangelization: What Does It Look Like?](#), the “culture wars” paradigm, including its preoccupation with politics, is by its nature somewhat inimical to the Gospel. And even in the ways in which it is not inimical, it tends to be an all-absorbing paradigm, conditioning all of our thoughts and

attitudes.

One result is that what we might call Catholic guilt inevitably takes its toll. Here are three propositions which illustrate my concern, propositions which I hope every reader can recognize as true:

- We Catholics, led by our bishops, too often respond to each new problem by proposing a political solution, that is, another point for political advocacy. Often the laity emphasize things that the bishops do not, but the tendency is remarkably similar for both.
- In certain areas of concern, there is a cottage industry of think tanks, political action committees, and non-profit organizations churning out agendas, marketing ideas, and explaining why their particular approach is the key to political success—while effecting relatively little change.
- Recognizing all these efforts as morally good—and consistent with our contemporary preoccupation with politics—good Catholics are to some degree “guilted” into putting a disproportionate share of their time, energy and financial resources into the task of keeping these various bouncing balls in the air.

My contention is that all of this is frequently distracting and self-limiting. So what we are really talking about here (and clearly what Pope Francis has talked about) is ratcheting down our political freneticism, of taking a step back to *make room for the Gospel*.

Non-Political Witness

It is time now to consider the second question, of whether the failure to witness consistently to today’s most contested Catholic moral values would be a betrayal of Christ. It goes without saying that a failure of Christian witness would be such a betrayal, just another temptation that asks, “What will you give me to deliver Him to you” (see [Speaking of Temptation...](#)). But the problem with this question is the unwarranted assumption—deeply rooted in the political bias which is so utterly characteristic of modern life—that if witness is not political it hardly qualifies as witness at all. This is a chilling prejudice which can all but destroy the ability of the Gospel to take root and grow.

To illustrate with an example, I think we can all agree that slavery is immoral. Yet in the ancient Roman Empire, Christians were not noted for their political battle against

slavery. Instead, as Christianity took root, Christians grew spiritually to the point of freeing their slaves. As the social order became predominately Christian from the ground up, law and politics gradually reflected this value. The same was true for the exaggerated rights and powers of the heads of families over the disposition of their wives and children, even to the point of murdering them if they were sufficiently inconvenient or insubordinate (the notorious *Pater Familias* customs in ancient Rome). I am not aware of Christians fomenting major clashes in the Senate, constant polls, or fierce electoral battles over these issues. But they did witness against these and other grave evils at every moment of their lives by how they dealt with their family relationships, their domestic staff, and their businesses.

Indeed, the first and most important form of Christian witness is that of parents to their children, and by “witness” here I do not mean mere instruction. For parents to effectively pass on their values to their children, their personal and family life must actually be lived a certain way, even when the tangible disadvantages of that way are obvious to everybody. Parents who talk the talk but do not walk the walk raise kids who reject the parental rhetoric as unconvincing and socially worthless. And if we take this principle that Christianity must be an actual way of life and extend it to relationships with relatives and friends, with business associates and even with strangers, what we find is that people notice. It was said of the first Christians that they could be known by the love they bore for one another, and more than one historian has commented that a great reason for the growth of Christianity in the early centuries was that Christian communities took better care of their own people than did the Roman State.

The point is that opportunities for authentic Christian witness are both numerous and diverse within every aspect of a culture. Catholics must adopt an entire way of life that is different from their more secular neighbors. This will express itself in all the ways they interact. Therefore, it will not take long for Catholic families and Catholic parishes to become known as vibrant communities where people are loved rather than used; where babies are welcomed rather than aborted; where the old are cherished rather than euthanized; where the poor are succored rather than ignored; where chastity is practiced, sexuality is *not* objectified, and authentic self-possession is prized. We need to reflect on what might be accomplished if we put our energies and resources into fostering such patterns of life among Catholics in every parish, rather than instinctively seeking an easier but less deeply responsible solution, by attempting to pass a better law.

Catholic witness may be political at times, but it is not necessarily political. And it is a caricature of the Christian life to act as if it is exclusively or even primarily political. Once again, we need to make greater space for the Gospel in our lives.

The Inescapability of Witness in Community

In this last consideration, we come up against a notable characteristic of the Catholic life—that we are called to be in but not of the world. A fully Catholic life cannot be lived by a collection of individuals who conceal their real selves from their neighbors. Just as the human person is a social being, so too is the person perfected by grace drawn inescapably to community. I grant that this will be a community with both the living and the dead, with the heavenly hosts, and with that gloriously dynamic family which is God Himself. Nonetheless, even the earthly structure of the Church is communal, with many individual grains being constantly formed into the one body of Christ. Catholics are also fruitful in creating community not only through their immediate families but also through their recognition, love and service to their brothers and sisters in the Church.

Moreover, the Catholic community constantly interacts with the more secular communities and individuals which surround it. Except perhaps in extreme cases of hermitage, where the community at work is almost exclusively spiritual, it is essentially impossible for Catholics to exist in the world without a constant individual and communal intermingling with non-believing neighbors and associates. It is also nearly impossible for those who are more spiritually advanced not to interact with other Catholics who have come less far along the Way. Under these natural and supernatural circumstances, which are a constituent part of what it means to be the Church, it is no more possible to escape the need for Christian witness than it is to stop breathing. It is never a question of whether witness is possible or desirable; the only questions concern the forms it will take.

It is perfectly right that Christian witness should take different forms, among different people, in different circumstances, and in different times and places. And it is perfectly right to put our time and energies and resources into many possible initiatives to strengthen the Catholic identity of our families, our parishes, and even our Church as a whole. Not every form of witness will be open to every Christian in every situation. Not all women will give direct, biological witness to the value of motherhood; not all men will be called upon to demonstrate the generous employment practices of the owner of the vineyard. And those with limited or non-existent political opportunities are very infrequently called to bear witness to the joys and benefits of making laws that genuinely protect and enhance the common good.

It is absolutely paramount to understand that the length and breadth of Christian witness eclipses even politics as the true leaven of the community, of the social order and of the culture. To be effective it must be both something more and something other

than a preoccupation with politics and law. It must be a witness to the whole Gospel. A nation can no more be made Christian by mere law than a family can be made Christian by mere rules. I say it again, and I say it without any hidden agenda, without any desire to denigrate the forms of witness prized by others, without any pressure to abandon political initiatives which are actually likely to bear strategic fruit. But still I say it: We must fill the vast human space beyond rules and beyond politics. We must make room for the Gospel.

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CLOSING THOUGHTS

Converting the Average Catholic

October 28, 2008

In his outstanding book [Render unto Caesar](#), Archbishop Charles Chaput describes the utterly miserable state of Catholic life in the United States: “By our actions, many of us witness a kind of practical atheism: paying lip service to God, but living as if he didn’t exist. Many of us don’t really believe we need a savior. In fact, we don’t see anything we need to be *saved from*.”

This is certainly true; it is even more true because our culture has carefully taught Catholics to appear as mainstream as possible if they want to get ahead; and, in any case, such problems are typical of the affluent, who so often substitute material acquisition for spiritual growth. But lest you think this is a new problem, consider the telling quotation Archbishop Chaput has found from Fr. John Hugo, a retreat master writing in 1947:

...even in the case of those who are wholly faithful to the external obligations of religion, there is often little evidence, aside from their devotions, that they are living Christian lives. Large areas of their lives are wholly unilluminated by their faith. Their ideas, their attitudes, their views on current affairs, their pleasure and recreations, their tastes in reading and entertainment, their love of luxury, comfort and bodily ease, their devotion to success, their desire of money, their social snobbishness, racial consciousness, nationalistic narrowness and prejudice, their bourgeois complacency and contempt of the poor: In all these things they are indistinguishable from the huge sickly mass of paganism which surrounds them.

Few people would deny, I think, that the average self-described American Catholic continues to be largely indistinguishable from his non-Catholic and even pagan neighbors. Statistics on both the public and private behavior of Catholics as a group—voting patterns, divorce, abortion, contraception—amply bear this out. Worse still, to some degree, this problem has always existed. Apparently it does not take much superficial comfort to dissuade the human person from thinking hard about moral and spiritual realities. Whenever we’re too comfortable or can otherwise distract ourselves, it becomes easy to imagine that everything is just fine. Even sin doesn’t seem particularly problematic. Why stir up trouble?

So the average American Catholic is far too content with his mediocre life. And

that's also true of the average European Catholic, the average Asian Catholic, the average Latin American Catholic, the average African Catholic, and every other average Catholic. This problem is endemic to human nature, and there is not a single thing we can do about it. For it is utterly impossible to reach the "average Catholic" anywhere or at any time. The average Catholic is well on his way to Hell in a hand basket. It is beyond difficult to formulate a strategy to head him off at the pass. It is impossible.

On the other hand, there is no sense despairing over our inability to convert a fiction. For the average Catholic does not exist. We may cheerfully abandon the average Catholic to his equally non-existent average fate and instead take a hard look at the spiritual impact of our words, actions, habits and lives on the few real and unique Catholics (and others) whom God has placed us in a position to influence. I don't say that this will make us more comfortable. Personally, I much prefer excusing myself (with unassailable logic) for my inability to do anything whatsoever about the "average Catholic". But a proper focus on real persons makes one huge difference: Even if we feel worse, there is something we can do about it.

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Because I Love God

August 24, 2012

I found myself thinking about temptation the other night, and I concluded that, among all the motivations in the world, ultimately I would choose not to do certain things simply because I love God. Then it came into my mind how this would sound to someone who does not believe in God, or at least does not feel any sort of close relationship with God. Such a person would be very likely to say: “Oh, come on, be honest. You won’t do something because you love God? Isn’t that a deception? Isn’t it more likely that you won’t do it because you are afraid to do it, or you would be ashamed to be caught doing it, or you’ve been influenced by some external standard of behavior which you can’t shake off?”

Where does this idea of love of God come from? What makes it (in some cases) a legitimate explanation for our behavior?

In the early stages of moral and spiritual development, especially as children, we obey certain rules because we have been told that these rules are given to us by God, and we have not only a healthy aversion to the consequences of transgression but a desire—presumably both innate and strongly conditioned—to please our parents and the God they represent. As we grow older and more mature, we internalize the values which underlie these rules and restrictions. Our relationship with these values may be conflicted to some degree, or at the very least we will not always adhere to them. But we increasingly adhere to those which, as we find over time, have real value to ourselves. In other words, we gradually experience the goodness of these values, and we prefer to participate more fully in this goodness.

All of this could be dismissed as mere cultural and psychological conditioning, and often, to some extent, it is. But when we begin thinking (hopefully with a certain sense of wonder) that we have actually grown to the point of making certain decisions because we love God, it means we also believe that we have transcended the normal conditioning process, a process which (after all) is sometimes helpful and sometimes not.

But how can I answer my imaginary critic? How can I illustrate this process of acting out of love in a way that enables my critic to grant at least that my self-description may be accurate? Perhaps the best way is by the analogy of romantic temptation pitted against marital love. (I would also argue that all temptations in some sense appear “romantic”.

That is a discussion for another day, but if it is true, it makes the analogy even stronger.)

I take it as a fact of both nature and experience that our capacity for romance is not completely filled by marriage, if for no other reason that our capacity for temptation is not eliminated by marriage. We can always be attracted by various kinds of beauty or “chemistry” which trigger misplaced feelings of tenderness or even passion. In the early stages of a marriage, if we are fortunate, we may experience a period in which such feelings trouble us very little, as our capacity for romance is actually nearly filled by the marvelous adventure of married life. But even in the best of marriages, as the hard work of loving in all things combines with the dullness of routine, the romance quotient often diminishes even while the love quotient (frequently unknown to ourselves) continues to grow. So romantic feelings may arise elsewhere, in reality or in imagination.

Now if one resists the temptations these feelings represent, one may resist them from motives ranging from fear of being “caught” (or even of not being caught) to an unwillingness to betray one’s spouse and/or one’s children. Clearly, this unwillingness to betray is itself a movement of love, though I have expressed it negatively. But as marital love grows deeper and more secure, especially in a couple that has fully shared their lives and the lives of their children over a period of twenty or thirty or forty years, couples begin to be more aware of a very positive choice which motivates their resistance to temptations, whether they arise from reality or their own minds. Let me put the matter in a more personal way.

I am sixty-four years old. This is old enough to be unattractive to young and beautiful women, a fact that I can verify by an honest look in the mirror, despite my immense wit and charm. But I do not perpetually stare at a mirror. Sometimes my attention is caught by the young and the beautiful, and sometimes I respond not through the eyes of an old man but through the eyes of eternal youth. I am simply me, as I have always been, not at all old and certainly not contemplating death at every moment—just me, immortal me, certain in a flash of instinct that I cannot cease to exist. As a result, feelings of wonder and tenderness (or even a stirring of passion) may instantly arise in response to this inrush of beauty, or even to the very thought of beauty and all that goes with it. This can also occur in dreams.

Now, having habituated myself to the obligations of matrimony, the duties of religion, and (I hope and pray) the trust and love that goes with both, this first response lasts but an instant, nipped in the very bud of thought by the recollection that I am exceedingly foolish, and more, that I am an old fool, and even more than this, that I am an old fool who—by some mysterious and utterly undeserved alignment of the whole universe—is very much in love. In this moment—this second moment which follows like

lightning on the heels of the first—I become aware that I have freely chosen this love, that it is more important to me than anything else on earth, that everything else on earth pales in its comparison, and that I simply refuse to indulge this temptation because I have already chosen the better part. In the way that a man loves a woman, I love my wife and her alone.

Let me pause for just a paragraph to mention just one interesting sidelight on the difference between romance and love, which mirrors the difference between sex and love as well, and which very likely applies to all temptation. A romantic temptation peaks in the anticipation, settles down somewhat in the fulfillment, and pales in the aftermath. By contrast, a solid, well-grounded and authentic love is a mere shadow of itself in the anticipation, grows mightily in the fulfillment, and has an almost annihilating intensity when it is involuntarily severed (as it may be by death or even abandonment).

In any case, over years of challenge and trial, my wife has shared my dreams, my fears, my goals, my triumphs and my pains. We have had children together, and poured our united life into them. She has been my inseparable partner in life, both natural and supernatural. At first I was drawn to her by attractions which seem almost beside the point now, and perhaps I strove to please her partly through my own fantasy of love and commitment. But now, in some limited sense, it is not I who live, but she who lives in me. I seem to love almost without effort, returning the love she herself has given me. Yet I know I have freely chosen this love, that I could forsake it, and that moment by moment I choose to reaffirm it against every challenge.

As with marital love, so too with God. Through years of challenge and trial, God has shared my life and permitted me to share His. Through prayer and sacrament I have both worked toward and received the incomparable gifts of this union, which have also poured forth into personal formation, work, marriage and family. At first I sought to please God because of what I was told, or because of some exalted image I had of myself—the evangelist, the apostle, the hero, the saint! But now, in ways that actually define what I have become, I have decreased and He has increased (Jn 3:30). It is now, not I who live, but Jesus Christ who lives in me (Gal 2:20)—the Lord and bearer not only of every human love but of the infinite Trinitarian cascade.

Please understand that I am not making a special claim to personal holiness. I am, in the first person, describing the universal experience of the Christian life. My Beloved has chosen me, and I have chosen to return His love. And if I also choose to resist some temptation or do some good thing, it is in the end most definitely because I know I have already chosen the better part (Lk 10:42). This—yes, only this!— is a love which even the incomprehensible love of marriage can only foreshadow, and it is the most powerful

motive we can possibly know. For in God alone are there three things which endure, and divine love dwarfs the rest (1 Cor 13:13).

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