



APOSTOLATE
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RETURNING
KING

Reflections on Renewal
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Part One: Clericalism

The priesthood holds a place of the utmost power and authority within Catholic communities. In a priest with a mature and well-adjusted mind, this authority presents a protective gift to the Church. In an immature, underdeveloped, or narcissistic mind, however, a priest can pose the greatest problems for people by abusing the power that comes with authority, even to the level of criminal behavior.

A priest is intended to be a servant to the people. The diocesan priesthood, in particular, is ordered to the holiness of the laity (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 43) and is intended to prompt a life lived among the people, sharing their sufferings. The priest is not above the people, nor is he immune to the maladies and temptations that assail the people. The diocesan priest is from a place, a region. He is no greater than those he serves, rather, he serves in a different capacity. The priest should not come down from a height of superiority, but up from a self-imposed hollow in the earth, meaning, he is intended to be more aware of his lowliness, rather than less aware of his fallen nature. The authority given to a priest at ordination is bestowed by God to protect God's children who seek him, to hold open the way, not impose an authoritarian religion on those who already find life difficult. When this happens, Jesus is misrepresented and people drift away.

Clericalism occurs when a man ordained to the sacred ministry insists on being treated as someone superior to lay people. *“Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them’”* (Matthew 20:25).

Legitimate concerns about clergy abuse of power and clericalism sit uncomfortably in the minds of the laity. Everyone can see it now, but nobody is sure how to preserve the structure while impacting the problem. But impact it we must. It is easy to put it to the back of one's mind because most priests serve with such love. Perhaps this reality, clericalism, along with diminishing vocation numbers, presents an opportunity to re-examine how we, lay people, think about the priesthood and how we relate to both the sacred ministry and the institutional Church as lay people.

The priest as celebrity in the community and arbitrator of all things Catholic? Perhaps that old way must end if we are to preserve a structure that has come close to exhausting its pardons with many of the people of God. Arrogance simply prompts additional walkaways. Few care to argue with those who seemingly will not hear and cannot self-reflect. The priesthood as it is currently exercised appears to be totally dominant, holding all power, possessing all authority. Power is a word used deliberately before authority in this case. Here it is used in the sense that ordained clergy make most of the temporal and doctrinal decisions at local, national, and international levels for the Church. Also, even ancillary ministries run by lay people are largely administered with oversight, supervision, and authority of clergy. This is fine except where clericalism is present and then the Spirit can be suffocated entirely.

Only God can judge where a spiritual illness begins and only God can fully diagnose who has contracted it. We are all called, though, to reject clericalism, which is another word for bullying. Clericalism destroys so much for so many, and while it is easy to verbally reject it, clericalism remains largely under-challenged. There exists visible disdain from some priests toward lay people and their contributions. This disdain can communicate as a sneer, aggression, unkindness, mockery, or pushing the envelope from the pulpit or confessional. Mixing politics, rather than providing social and moral teachings while preaching, for example, is not what people should expect but it is so commonplace in some regions that nobody remarks. They walk away. In this regard, our Church fails to be a safe place; rather, it becomes yet another extension of the divisions within a culture.

Lay people give thanks for a priest who fulfills his role as servant to God's hopes for them without trying to be master of God's children.

It would be an easy thing to lay all clericalism at the feet of the priesthood, most of whom we have long admired and loved, and it would be an easy thing to see clericalism simply everywhere. But easy thinking fails to represent the truth and is part of our problem as Catholics. Any authority a priest possesses, which he misuses, has been granted by the magisterium with the goal of serving the lay people. This 'power' takes root in the minds of the lay people, but it is also rejected by their minds when it lacks the mercy of the Holy Spirit. When a priest is misusing power, instead of speaking from the merciful authority of the Gospel, he has abandoned his rightful spiritual and moral authority and his words and counsel become de-animated.

Some would say priests can be placed in double binds by the application of teachings which served well for a different people in a different time altogether. This is true. But most priests who follow the Spirit of the Redeemer simply offer the message for the person in front of them, as Jesus did, with hope that while the priest himself is not the Savior, he, the priest, can plant seeds of hope which will be germinated by God.

Clericalism is bad for priests, bad for lay people, and a deadly contagion within our structure. It has brought us to peril. We can ignore it or treat it. To ignore it is to abandon God's mission. To treat it assertively will be painful. But Jesus suffered and so must we, if we are to recover from the reality of abuses and how they were concealed, for example. The job of the leadership, clearly, would have been to tend to the victims as the priority, right after removing the priest from ministry. Instead, in many cases, those victims of what often amounted to atrocities, became targeted enemies of our leadership, rather than treated in truth as Christian martyrs. The leader's instinct to protect the structure from scandal resulted in a compounded wound to all of us, insult to injury. It was like treating dehydration by spraying water on cement while people died of thirst watching. There is no doubt that all right-thinking men in leadership suffered. The sorrow of many was real and our collective confusion great. Many, lay and clergy alike, were baffled. But the impact of our leadership's decisions to protect the structure of our Church before its people has remained.

It would be easy to say this is all in the past, but it is not. While great gains have been made by our leadership in matters like safeguarding children, we remain burdened with the issue of clericalism. One priest called clericalism "*a disease of the heart, a contagion of the mind,*

and a cancer of the soul.” This priest also noted that “a man can eclipse his priesthood by his human weaknesses.”

What is the effect on lay Catholics where this occurs?

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate” (Matthew 23:38).

Even the most casual reader of the New Testament can see that Jesus Christ despised hypocrisy in the religious leadership and wanted people to be liberated from harsh religion that sought to oppress, control, and distort. Jesus was a gatherer. Jesus did not like hypocrisy in lay people and he despised it in religious leaders. Jesus advocated forgiveness, compassion, and the power of the love of his Father to heal.

We remain committed to the development of a model worthy of his goals.

February 15, 2024

Part Two: Celebrity Priesthood

Ordination of a man does not a new god make, for all he becomes a Christ-bearer. He becomes the cup, not the coffee. There is one God. When a man is ordained, it seems that he is given something like a slice of the divine from which to work. Wrapping his humanity around that gift in a protective way will take him a lifetime, even as the Savior gets on with the ministry on day one. This is all fine. The humanity of the man is no barrier to Christ and the perfection of Christ comes into the world through the sacramental graces, not through the holiness or lack of holiness in the man. Yes, it is true that the man’s successful engagement with his personal work should create a way to connect with people so that he becomes a bridge and not an obstacle to those in his spiritual care (PDV 43).

When a priest emerges from the seminary equipped with arrogance and inflation instead of humility, he is on track to contribute to the weakening of our structure.

Lay people who assign sanctity to every priest, regardless of his behavior, compound this issue. Offering blind deference instead of a friendly welcome with lively support can affect a vulnerable ego and cause a reaction that can become like an allergic desire in the priest for that which is sickening. A vulnerable ego can develop an insatiable craving for attention, notice, admiration, and authority. We see this in all ages and it is clearly not limited to psychologically vulnerable clergy, but it is most ugly in any person who has a position of power.

Excessive deference can actually be a recipe for disaster for any person trying to follow the way of Christ, particularly if they are young.

When a priest is assigned to a parish, for example, as a pastor or parish priest, he is placed in the parish of the people who are there. It is not his parish. It remains the parish of the lay

people of the Church. It is their parish. It is his assignment. His role is to serve there temporarily. Among the lay people, there exists knowledge of a certain phenomenon. This occurs when a new pastor displays a heady mix of authority which prompts power moves instead of the needed period of watchful apprenticeship to the local assembly. This is a sad state of affairs because the works and ministries of years can be simply cancelled by a newly assigned parish priest, leaving the people disillusioned and yes, tempted to walk away, because, as so often is said, 'He ruined everything.'

Now, there can also be cliques in the parish that exclude 'outsiders' from joining into the service and community of parish life. Trouble can come from many directions. A new priest can find himself in the uncomfortable position of having to break up a gang who control, dominate, and exclude others or possibly even distort our faith. It takes time to identify those serving well and those who have established their own little kingdoms. A priest going up against these groups requires support and must have courage. In many countries in the West, this model where each parish is a little kingdom, is disintegrating because of the lack of priestly vocations. Perhaps we might aim to create something better than we created in the past.

Together, we take a deep breath and recognize that we are as likely to find holiness in lay people as clergy. Our expectations of the men ordained to serve should be realistic. If a priest appears to be arrogant and dismissive, we should probably assume he has work to do and not ignore bad behavior because the man is ordained. We should possess the same charity for priests as we do for lay people, but no more absolute and blind deference. We must desist, as stated, from turning priests into celebrities. The priest is a servant to all, a beloved servant, yes, a highly valued servant, yes, but our expectation must be that he is a team player, meaning, he evidences humility in his willingness to provide the sacraments. We raise him up with respect he has earned, not simply been assigned through his ordination. What he has been given is what comes through his ordination, yes, the ability to bring us the perfect sacramental graces, but communication also comes through the behavior of the man. It must be noted that we could say the same about others we tend to revere, such as doctors.

We must treat men ordained to the sacred ministry with love and care, but we must also be realistic and mature, no longer childish. The celebrity treatment of men ordained to the priesthood can allow monstrous behavior to go unchecked and create all types of power imbalances, not only against lay people but against our bishops, our popes, and sadly, as we have seen, against our most vulnerable, be they women, children, or young men.

To summarize, priests who suffer from psychological weakness or social under-development can be prone to inflation from blind deference, and can come to believe they are superior even to their superiors. Bishops demonstrate leadership that goes ignored because a troubled priest believes he is above all and that he no longer must heed his own rightful authority. If this man becomes bishop? The problem is compounded. Most bishops, earnest in their desire to serve, have moved away from making demands on priests and instead may discuss assignments and diocesan needs with priests. But priests experiencing difficulty in the humility area do not extend that same collaborative spirit to the lay people, nor do they respect the leadership of their bishops.

It is not just lay people who suffer clericalism.

February 16, 2024

Part Three: Rigid Thinking

One dangerous misconception among Catholics is that every Catholic should think exactly the same way. This is a dangerous misconception because it is impossible to achieve and actually a concerning symptom in any religion. Only in cults is total collective thinking mandatory or desirable. When people think this way, rigidly, there can only be friends and enemies, good people and bad people, because there can only be two groups, those who agree with us and those who do not.

This is why we have a battle within our Catholic Church, with threats of schism, as well as a cruel war against our Holy Father.

Rigid application of teachings will always create small boxes into which everyone is forced to fit. Nobody actually fits into these boxes; we can make a case for and against every single person. Rigidity prompts an internalized mental structure where people try to be religious but forget to transform in Christ. The symptoms of this include false selves and personas laden with religious externals but little spiritual substance. When something causes a rigid person to become uncomfortable, they may simply label it 'evil' without distinction. Meaning, if a concept challenges the small construct of religion in one's mind, then it is bad because holding my rigid construct helps me to feel that I am 'good,' and 'safe,' which is an identity that would appear to be perilously located on the surface of one's psyche and not well integrated at all.

In December 2023, the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* was issued by the Holy See's Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF). In this declaration, based on the pastoral vision of Pope Francis, we read that we risk becoming "*judges who only deny, and exclude*" (*Fiducia Supplicans*, n.13).

In an era of over-communication, where fundamental psychological principles are readily available, surely we can grasp the reality that everyone is a sinner and understand the reasons why people might make mistakes. When one eliminates the surface actions of sin, rather than drive them underground where they cannot be viewed by others, one is expected to work on the more subtle forms of holiness, such as detachment, mercy for self and others, and ultimately, broadening one's viewpoint to include all of humanity, as Jesus did. One is expected to allow the love of God within to expand in one's heart so that one can embrace all people, arguably becoming more alert to the global contribution of the Church, and less obsessive about 'othering' whole groups of people, and making assumptions about them and their sins.

One is definitely not expected to become a sin policeman, easily scandalized by the mistakes or quandaries of others. This is a symptom of immature faith, regardless of where we see it. When one is called to preach the Gospel and can only talk about evil, always projected out at someone else, there is a problem. Small-mindedness creates double binds for people. They cannot win. How can one locate divine mercy when one is continually tripping over the details of limited, human mercy which changes from person to person? People can get stuck with a negative religious mindset that incites fear, not trust, scruples, and not freedom to be loved through every struggle. Indeed, if "*chastity requires an apprenticeship of self-mastery*"

(CCC 2339), then why do we have exclusion based on an assumption of sexual impurity at all? Are we not all involved in the apprenticeship? Or is it just for those whose sexuality we understand? Either way, we are not God, we are merely human beings who seek to follow him on our private personal journeys in the tradition of our Catholic faith. We seek to bring everyone with us to the love of God, not only the people with straightforward life experiences.

The harm that flawed applications of our teachings has levied against some human beings, even excluding criminal actions of clergy, consists often in communicating to God's children that their sins leave them unloved, indeed, in a state of spiritual peril. This peril comes from the assumption that one of us can tell another that his soul is in a state of mortal sin. Some crimes are so heinous, as in people trafficking or the actual sale of people, themselves, or their organs, and some offenders so unrepentant, that we must wonder, but wonder we must. We cannot know. This particular oversimplification, that people can be accidentally in mortal sin or that certain actions, all by themselves constitute mortal sin, has caused people to leave the Church in large numbers. What else can they do? The idea that any man, priesthood notwithstanding, can be ultimate judge of others, is in violent opposition to our core Gospel teaching which states that Jesus Christ is the only, ultimate Judge, and that horizontal judgment, person to person, is inappropriate and should be avoided.

“For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son” (John 5:22).

And further,

“But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God” (Romans 14:10).

Is it possible that the woeful lack of maternal instinct has allowed the exclusion of people from Holy Communion based on what human beings decide constitutes a mortal sin?

Our teachings are not a criminal code, as much as we might erroneously present them as such. It is not that simple. For a sin to elevate to the level of a mortal sin, it must be objectively grave matter. The person must be confident that an action is indeed a mortal sin and understand it as such. The person must be acting in full knowledge with deliberate consent (CCC 1857). This would impact actions that occur when someone is inebriated, confused, uncertain, or operating from strong emotions or wounds that he or she has not learned to manage with maturity. Some might say we look in the wrong direction altogether for those in a state of mortal sin. Those whose sinful actions elevate to the extreme level of mortal sin may not be the people we tend to think they are. For context, the spirit of a person committing a mortal sin would possess malice and scorn, ridicule, mockery, and a cold indifference about the consequences on anyone else involved. Often, people like this hide in the open, considering those around them fools for not seeing their duplicity.

Where might we see something like that? A sneering, calculating, cold spirit?

Back to Holy Communion, most mothers would feed all of their children, regardless of their mistakes and conditions. Most mothers would assume that the way to bring a family member along in recovery and repentance, should they need to recover or repent, is by pulling them

closer, not putting them out and ‘othering’ them. Jesus Christ, himself, fed Judas until the final betrayal and kept him close, no doubt for Judas’ sake, in the hope that proximity would prompt loyalty, but also to show us to maintain hope for people in all circumstances.

“The Church, moreover, must shy away from resting its pastoral praxis (application) on the fixed nature of certain doctrinal or disciplinary schemes, especially when they lead to a ‘narcissistic and authoritarian elitism, whereby instead of evangelizing, one analyzes and classifies others, and instead of opening the door to grace, one exhausts his or her energies in inspecting and verifying” (Fiducia Supplicans, n.25).

This habit of scanning for flaws rather than rejoicing in proximity, has turned the understanding of people’s quandaries into something like criminal felonies, as stated. We scan our clergy, we scan our friends, we even scan our family members, forgetting that the scans we do on ourselves should include a search for the charity, patience, and hope of Jesus Christ for not just others, but for ourselves, too. The idea of an over-emphasis on Catholic rules and regulations is deadening to the spirit.

The goal, after all, is to think more and more like Jesus Christ, not to inflict a preposterous notion of him onto those who already suffer.

February 19, 2024

Part Four: The Hospital

Imagine a hospital. The doctor with life-saving medicine is inside. Surrounding the hospital is a large group of people, guardians, who determine who can or should see the doctor. The people have a set of rules but some follow them and some do not, therefore there is inconsistency. The decision on whether or not someone can see the doctor is arbitrary, dependent on which person you encounter. Those who get past these guardians to see the doctor think the system works, just as those who successfully run across a highway without getting hit by a car deem it to be safe. Those who encounter the wrong guardian, believe that the system does not work and they drift away convinced that it does not work because they have been deemed too sick to see the doctor or they have been actively harmed. Perhaps conditions have been placed on their permission to see the doctor, but who could run around the hospital five times when one is sick, for example? Who could be *too* sick to see a doctor or receive his care, even if it was just to become more comfortable with a seemingly intractable illness?

Sin is the illness, the doctor is Jesus in the Eucharist, and the ring of arbitrary judges around the hospital represent the varying application of our teachings.

What is the experience of the people approaching the hospital to see the doctor? They are apprehensive in their illness, or their sinful condition. Why? Because while they believe, hopefully, that the doctor wants to heal them, and that the doctor will understand their illness, they understand that depending on the person they encounter, they may or may not be allowed to see the doctor. This creates a state of fear and a need to pretend one is not ‘too’ sick. There is also trauma because the people have experienced family members who were turned away, and others who were badly assaulted and abused by those surrounding the hospital. There are a large number of people who believe that the hospital is a dangerously

unsafe place and they stay away. They do not understand why anyone would go to that hospital.

What is the experience of the guardians surrounding the hospital? Well they each have different minds, have been taught differently, and their beliefs vary widely amongst themselves. The point on which they should agree is that the doctor wants to see everyone. Some represent that reality well. Others? They do not believe it so they can hardly be expected to represent it. They believe that they must protect the doctor from the very people who require his care. They believe that the doctor will feel disrespected by the conditions of his patients. Instead of allowing the people to see the doctor, who understands every illness, be it chronic or fleeting, they tell the people to go and get well by themselves, and then maybe the doctor can see them.

This makes no sense, either to the people or to the doctor, or to any reasonable person.

What is the experience of the doctor who sits patiently in the hospital craving the life-saving activity for which he came?

“On hearing this, Jesus said to them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners’” (Mark 2:17).

The doctor must feel under-utilized and misunderstood, with his character distorted. There is so much more the doctor could do, so many ways in which he could be helpful and effective in healing people. Now, the doctor, the true authority in the project, refuses to be limited to the work in the hospital, which was established for **his** care of the people, not anyone else’s. The doctor regularly goes out to the people in the field, since they have been blocked from coming to him based on their illnesses, which are his domain. The doctor can be the most helpful, the most healing, when he is in his hospital with all of its light-filled teachings, with rich understandings about healthy living. But what can he do? What choice does he have? If the people are unable to get past the guardians, he simply overrides them and goes out to find the sick people himself.

The guardians were initially formed to bring the people to the doctor and the hospital was built to be a home for the miraculous doctor. The guardians change over time, much like the illnesses of the people also change. It can take centuries to understand why some illnesses occur, and how they are cured. We, humanity, have proven that we can be very wrong about illnesses and what cures them. The reality, also, includes the illnesses which occur amongst the guardians, but many guardians believe they can simply conceal their own illnesses. Why wouldn’t they? The hospital is not a very favorable place in which to admit you have an illness and amongst many inside and around it, a pretence of health exists, particularly amongst the sickest people, some of whom are in leadership positions.

Yes, an illness that can be contracted by those in authority, arrogance, is the most dangerous illness of all and does the most injury to the safety of the hospital, the people in it, and the ones who try to approach it, but get injured. People fear these leaders, especially those within its own structure. The goal of a poor leader is domination. Bullying and using weaker people for selfish purposes feeds their experience of invincibility. Their gaze is horizontal. They do not look to the divine physician for instruction and enlightenment. Their power base is in and around the hospital and they establish their kingdoms there. They do not meet the gaze of the healer. They do not want to be well, themselves, and cannot acknowledge their illness

because they would have to relinquish power to do so. To them, the people's belief in the healer is a convenient means of acquiring distinction without true sacrifice or achievement. Rather than bringing the people to the healer, the guardians who exploit power build stages for themselves in and around the hospital so that even the most righteous workers must bow down to them in order to continue to do their jobs, which most understand is about increasing the healer's access to his people.

There can even be an illusion among many that the hospital is only about the guardians. Most of what is discussed is about these guardians and the sanctity of so many of these men is overshadowed by the evil actions of some. When the healer begins to take action, shining a light on cruelty, illuminating hypocrisy and power abuses, reversing policies that should never have been, the hospital is thrown into a state of upheaval. For those who watch and pray, this upheaval is a sign of good progress. The healer is asserting his authority and with it a healthy dose of his own power, which, while always restrained, can, on occasion knock over a few tables.

The people, waiting to access the doctor, watch ever so carefully. Will the hospital become safe again? Because if it is only safe for some illnesses, the people have to abandon family members who contract other illnesses. Many of them simply abandon the hospital, too, in solidarity because they know the healer will come to them anywhere. They know the healer is not afraid of their illness. The healer can heal anything when he is trusted to do so and he does heal everything.

Do the people visited by the healer outside of the hospital have less of his healing? No doubt the doctor gives an equal measure of healing to everyone who approaches him or will let him near, in the hospital or outside of it. Healing graces cannot be quantified because it is always complete at whatever level the patient can tolerate. Truly, the healing power of this doctor can only be complete at every encounter, because he is perfect.

The idea that the healing power of the divine physician is limited to the hospital is wrong. The divine physician will go anywhere, at any time, to be with people who desire his presence.

The healer asks only one question.

"Do you want to be healed?" (John 5:6).

February 20, 2024

Part Five: A Sacred Space

Where one person asserts control and domination over another, resentment can occur. When a person imposes rigid religious beliefs, as opposed to the truth about the love of Christ, even in the most private matters of one's life, people can become very vulnerable, indeed. As resentment builds, so can the instinct to push out the intrusion and become free. When the practical applications of a faith fail to recognize the contemporary realities of the lives of its followers, it fails to serve them. The correct disposition of a true faith structure is that of always wondering, always adapting its presentation to its people. A true faith structure does not compromise the truth; however, it expands its understanding of that truth and plumbs all possibilities to help the people it serves.

God is free to come and go where he pleases. God is bigger than any application of teachings or practices which, when developed by human beings, can only be incomplete in their understanding of mercy. If we cannot accept that only God is perfect, and only God can perfectly dispense mercy and judgment in all of its layers and elements, we truly are not best placed to teach about God.

For example, the plight of today's people cannot be exactly the same as the plight of yesterday's people. It is a bit easy to simply demonize everything that is different or appears to be less straightforward than in the past. Maladies change or begin to rise to the surface. We saw this in the exposure of criminal behavior toward people from the clergy. We saw this, too, with sexual assault and violence within families, another space intended to be safe. The religious system of beliefs, while charged with remaining stable and dogmatic with regard to core beliefs, must give way to the alterations in the sufferings of the people and our increased understandings about human behaviors. If everyone is mentally lost and unable to focus because of technology overuse and impure imagery and entertainment, how do we adapt to that condition? What must we create to protect people so that their relationship with God, himself, is preserved, whatever their reality? Most significantly and most alarmingly, why is this happening?

The Declaration *Dignitas Infinita* deals with these and many other issues that threaten the dignity of the person. This declaration draws upon “*the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasized that ‘all offences against life itself, such as murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, and willful suicide’ must be recognized as contrary to human dignity*”, but also “*all violations of the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, undue psychological pressures*” (*Dignitas Infinita*, n. 34).

Also discussed is “*human trafficking*”, which is taking on “*tragic dimensions*” and is described as “*vile activity, a disgrace to our societies that claim to be civilized*” (*Dignitas Infinita*, n. 41). The Declaration invites “*exploiters and clients*” to make “*a serious examination of conscience*” (*Dignitas Infinita*, n. 41). It also illuminates phenomena such as “*the marketing of human organs and tissues, the sexual exploitation of boys and girls, slave labour, including prostitution, the drug and weapons trade, terrorism, and international organized crime*” (*Dignitas Infinita*, n. 42).

We celebrate our Church for her ongoing guidance. Interesting that the language used is that of inviting exploiters and clients to make a serious examination of conscience. Even in these most vile activities, the Church does not assume mortal sin or project evil on to individuals, but rather, lists actions that are egregious and sends forth an invitation to repent.

We must tend to those caught up in the troubles of the day and make inroads to provide a better, more visible contrast to the culture that cares nothing for true victims. We must pull people closer, not put them out. Logically, if we are sincere in our desire to assist God's children, we should be focused on how to help maintain a link for everyone to connect to God, instead of rejecting his people.

‘In or out’ Catholicism, meaning, people are literally deemed as outside of communion with us based on circumstances they may not be able to control, cannot possibly be consistent with the ministry of Jesus Christ. People should not be forced to relate to God on our flawed, human terms. The reality that is uncomfortable for many of us is that most people don't. They

do their own thing, but they should not have to. In truth, an attitude of exclusion should be unheard of for Christians. People continue to practice our faith as they feel they can, which may not be in as full a compliance as we might believe them to be. Also, people in irregular circumstances might live in greater compliance to the spirit of our teachings than we know or care to know. Those individuals should receive our ongoing support and encouragement. Loving companionship is what draws people into a more complete sacramental experience. In truth? We badly need people from all life experiences for their perspective, their mercy, and the wisdom they may have gleaned from their life experiences.

We stipulate that appropriate behavior and understanding should be evidenced by those receiving the Eucharist. We stipulate that the Eucharist should never be disrespected or removed from where it is intended to be reserved. We also stipulate to the authority of a bishop in pastoral decisions for individuals who hold public, intractable anti-Catholic positions. But spirituality is not a performance sport, at least, not with God. We, spiritual beings, hopefully, move hermeneutically closer and closer to Christ over a lifetime. We know that our faith and its teachings provide the deepest, safest way to live our lives. We know our teachings are full of light and protection. But we only know this if we have made a journey within the teachings and can look back and see how the Lord held onto us through periods of confusion, pain, or challenge, even when we departed from a life lived within our teachings. Yes, we know this only if we are doing it.

On what basis then, would we inflate a teaching on mortal sin to the degree that people believe that missing Mass by itself, automatically constitutes a mortal sin? On what basis would we inflate a teaching on mortal sin to the degree that people fear their sexuality, which we insist requires an apprenticeship in self-mastery (CCC 2337, 2339), but also disallow and demonize the learning that must take place within an apprenticeship?

Many people have had the most upsetting experiences in Confession. Many will not use this sacrament because of human aggression or psychological disturbance by one priest or another. The fact that most priests are helpful and kind does nothing to convince the traumatized person that being toxically shamed or sexually intruded upon is something they should take a chance on repeating. It simply is not happening to them again. Women, in particular, can experience the most distressing intrusions but men, particularly young men, also report this experience. Layer upon that the reality that people have been taught that actions equal mortal sins, by themselves, regardless of quandaries, conditions, unruly passions or human double binds, and they simply assume that Christ in the Eucharist is so far out of their reach as to be repelled by them.

“Conscience is man’s secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God, who’s voice echoes in his depths” (CCC 1776).

Perhaps, from Heaven’s eyes, this has been a significant transgression made by us as a people of faith and a religion. The people whom we identify as mortal sinners have been, in some cases, mortally failed by us and gravely misunderstood. They have been distorted at the location of their most vulnerable self where they meet God, their sacred, eternal identity, their secret core, their very soul. Perhaps then, this is where we need to be the most humble, acknowledging openly that no human being can absolutely and definitively determine whether or not an action elevates to a mortal sin in another person. This eternal, sacred space of the soul, is surrounded by mystery, kept utterly private for every person and God to know each other in spiritual intimacy, where Christ, the healer, can gently identify and interrupt

troubling patterns. Christ can apply hope and mercy for the journey. The sacrament of reconciliation provides perfect grace to help people experience forgiveness for others, forgive themselves, and believe that they are forgiven by God.

But each person is known fully by God alone.

If we humbly assist people in coming to know God directly, and stop pretending we can speak so confidently for him with regard to the condition of people's eternal souls, even those whom we have never met, Catholics and others might start to think it is safe to return to us.

For that to happen, we might acknowledge that mistakes were made in application of teachings. We must accept the guilt attached to that reality or simply move along in our applications. We are doing our best, after all, to mediate that which remains a mystery to us all.

February 21, 2024

Part Six: Where Charity Remains

For perspective, an action can obviously be wrong without elevating to the level of sin, as stated. Even serious sin, such as those listed in Scripture and the Catechism, do not automatically elevate to the level of mortal. Even if the appearance of all three elements exist in relation to an action, we can only take knowledge of those precise elements and their completeness so far and no further, because, as stated, we are not God, we cannot read the soul of another, nor fully evaluate their freedom and consent. Few of us are experts in the 'whys' of human behavior.

Additionally, *"The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders"* (CCC 1860).

At another glance, we know that mortal sin kills all charity in the one committing it. That is our teaching. *"Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him. Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it"* (CCC 1855).

Perhaps we might consider whether a person has any charity remaining within. We could look for evidence of charity. If people continue to possess charity, even if only toward one person, arguably they are not in an ongoing state of mortal sin. Simplistic? It may be, yes, but should we not be simplistic toward mercy instead of judgment? Which mistake would we prefer to make? Needless and cruel condemnation or offering too much of God's, infinite and divine mercy? Is there such a thing? If true charity remains in a person, we should possibly allow our gaze to turn toward venial sin, which offends and wounds charity, but does not destroy it. Also, venial sin is forgiven through reception of Holy Communion and through an Act of Contrition.

Does the fact that this is hard for us actually expose our disposition toward human condemnation, as opposed to divine mercy?

The bigger question is different though. Is this constant attempt at the judgment of humanity the best use of a faith family? Was this the hope of Jesus Christ? That we would persistently examine how to most efficiently and completely condemn people and pretend that God can only come *through us* to save them? Are we reductionist of God, himself, when we do this? Would it be simpler to advise people to check their own dispositions and look for evidence of continued instinct for charity and virtue?

“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Corinthians 11:27).

February 22, 2024

Part Seven: Purgatorial Suffering

When we evaluate an action, we tend to do so with an eye on human or natural consequences. Sometimes, a small mistake can lead to the most dreadful human consequences which can permanently alter lives. Do the dreadful consequences direct back to the initial action, making it somehow more serious an action? No. When a mistake elevates to the level of a sin it cannot become a bigger or smaller sin based on unintended consequences. The action is the action. The intent is the intent. The level of freedom is the level of freedom and the disposition is the disposition. Just as a mistake can be made innocently and have terrible consequences, a vicious action with the most malicious intent can result in almost no consequences, except for the soul involved.

If we are attempting to assign guilt or innocence to a person based on an action, we should look behind the action, or before it, to the disposition, freedom, deliberateness, and intent. In a state of purgatorial suffering, we should accept that people grieve the negative nature of the spirit which they entertained just before they offered the negative action to themselves and to the world. They grieve that they allowed spite to drive them, for example, or envy, or pain of rejection to become convoluted and erupt into actions with malice. They grieve that they gave their consent. But both the intended and unintended consequences that come, arrive from the same actions. Therefore, we are correct as a faith community to help people in learning how to understand and manage their wounds, lesser instincts, and human emotions.

Do we behave in an alarmist way when we engage in semantic jousting and what amounts to speculation with regard to another's immortal soul? Should we begin to assume that most negative human actions are venial sins and as such can be forgiven by reception of Holy Communion, rather than assuming that so many actions are mortal sins? We encourage people to focus with fear and trembling on what may or may not be a mortal sin. For example, if someone is worried about an action and in fear that they may have offended God fatally, this disposition itself would seem to potentially indicate that they are not in a state of mortal sin. There we see fear of the Lord and possibly remorse or regret, all solid precursors to or indications of repentance.

What happens to Christ when he is received in the Eucharist by someone who is in a state of mortal sin? Sacrilege happens. Christ is used, perhaps, in a way that neither he, nor we would choose for him. But, we know that he remains vulnerable in the Eucharist as he remained vulnerable on the cross. The bird in flight is woundable. We could not remove him from the cross and see mankind redeemed. We cannot remove him from his ongoing vulnerability in the Eucharist and have mankind fed as our Savior, himself, intends. Therefore, we, with

Christ, accept his state of vulnerability as a state he holds in service to our comfort and consolation and need for direction. His divine benevolence is clearly apparent in his willingness to exist in an ongoing state that includes the potential for additional offense and suffering.

A mortal sin includes a global impact. It includes mockery and sneering at all that is good, innocent, and holy, even though this may be carefully concealed. It comes not from pain from a past wound alone, but from superiority and envy of the goodness that others have and the person feels they lack. When a person is at their last judgment, that person will make an ultimate choice for Jesus and the whole family of humanity or for permanent separation from us all. If a person is mad at God, for example, for something a human being did by falsely representing God, a person's love for any other person, a child, spouse, parent, may result in their choice to be saved by Christ.

Love for anyone, authentic love that prompts willingness to sacrifice for another person, all by itself, demonstrates some level of openness to God.

February 23, 2024

Part Eight: Immortal Blessings

When we are wounded during our lives, and we do not heal or cannot seem to heal, our ability to allow connection with others can be impeded. Sometimes, when people are wounded at a young age and do not have the loving and safe connection they require for healthy development, their capacity to give and receive love does not fully develop. A neglected and unloved child exhibits low pro-social brain development. However, they may have a child themselves, and in their love for that child they experience the need to open themselves to connection, even if it is reserved only for that child. The opening, imperfect though any relationship may be, is enough. If for this reason alone, unexpected children should always be welcomed. The potential for healing in the world is uniquely present in each new life.

The opposite of the global impact of mortal sin is the global impact from Christ's love, reserved very purposefully in the Eucharist. The global impact of love from Christ's presence in the Eucharist also makes itself known in the world. Every true action of love toward Christ creates the opposite effect of any mortal sin committed, that is, an immortal blessing. We have two opposing forces at work at all times. Mortal sin and immortal blessings. Which will win? Christ and the spirit of love will win. Immortal blessings will win. Unlike the effect of sin, the effects from immortal blessings do not die and their impact can never perish.

"For whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith" (1 John 5:4).

The bigger the receptivity in each of us, the more likely we are thinking globally. Mortal sin must be that which drives war and aggression. All actions of love for Christ in the Eucharist act as protection for the world against the evil designs of a spirit that can only destruct by opposing love and the gentleness love prompts. When we adore Christ in the Eucharist and bring him our love for others in the line of intentions and petitions, love on Earth grows. People become more insulated against temptation on the smallest and largest scales.

Can we begin to see the importance of our Catholic faith and the importance of those who perpetuate it? Can we begin to see why together we must help shape the priesthood into a more accurate representation of Christ? Can we begin to see why lay people must become more mature and actively pursue both holiness and leadership in the Church? Can we start to understand that our religion is not about just its own membership but about God's protection of the whole world?

The way in which we view our Catholic faith will determine where we locate ourselves in relation to it. If we simply observe it, or God forbid, become embroiled in the factions of any one time, we locate ourselves horizontally, studying not Christ, but the humanly imperfect people who try or do not try, to follow Christ. Better to put our focus on the Savior himself, as evidenced in Scripture and present in the Eucharist, and engage in the sacramental life in order to benefit from the graces available within. In this way, we will come to understand the true function and obligation of our religion and its practices. Yes, we want a strong structure. But we want a spiritually authentic strong structure, which is as it purports to be, a light to the nations. We do not maintain an authentically strong structure at the expense of the most innocent within it, nor by excluding from the Eucharist those whom we choose to condemn rather than understand, and those who need Christ's love most urgently.

“And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it” (Matthew 7:24-27).

Our human representation of our structure in the past was partially built on sand. It always will be because we are flawed human beings. It is good to remember that we are intended to be in the world but not of the world. We should not look like slick and canny politicians, any of us, but noble representatives of something bigger than our own human presence in time. We should speak as though we speak of a mystery, a sublime hope for every person in the world. A unique ray of mercy is available for every one of us and each ray looks different to every other ray of mercy. We do not understand God's perfect mercy for each person but we know it exists. That is the mystery we bring to the world and insist upon.

Can the laity regain uncritical and blind trust in the clergy? A better question is, should they? One can only hope that lay people will adopt a position of two strong pillars. One, never leave our faith. Two, open our eyes as mature followers of Christ and keep them wide open. Renewal has to happen from top down and bottom up. Many of us can testify to the sanctity and love in the clergy near us. Many of us can also testify to the lack of wellness or holiness in one or two of the clergy near us. This inconsistent representation is not the problem. The unthinkable power they sometimes possess is the problem. The inflated authority and ability to affect people's lives at the most personal and sacred levels is the problem. The absolute inconsistency in application of teachings is the problem.

To repeat, the people, clergy and lay alike, with their maladies and quandaries, is not the problem. Neither clergy, nor lay people, should retreat back to a passive and de-animated role within our Church structure.

To do so is to go backward, not forward.

February 24, 2024

Part Nine: Who are we?

“Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Isaiah 60:3).

When Jesus was in the world, he was the light of the world. After his death, the Church was called to be the light of the nations. What is perfect about the Catholic Church? The presence of Christ in the Eucharist is perfect. Jesus Christ and the salvific grace he obtained for us is perfect. Surrounded by imperfect humanity, Christ in the Eucharist continues to provide his presence as light in a dark world. Only by accepting the truth about the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, can we understand why our fidelity must remain unflinching. The gravest sins of any person, regardless of how deeply they offend, are as nothing compared to the light of the immortal blessings pulsing out from the Eucharist, soothing the world. Therefore, when we talk of mortal sins, rare as they may be within our membership, we must always turn our eyes quickly to the immortal blessings which pump a steady supply of light to God’s children in the world.

Many say we live in dark days. But we are no stranger to dark days if we follow the light. Dark days do not diminish the light, rather, the light is easier to see when it is dark. It radiates more fiercely against a backdrop of a dark world. Those who have forgotten the light or were told they were unworthy of the light will come back if someone offers light to them. Let us note that many who offer light to them are not fully compliant Catholics, themselves.

For example, one woman, scalded by the extent of the atrocities committed against children by clergy in her region, lost comfort in the practice of her faith. Like many, she became traumatized and uncomfortable. She retreated fully from public prayer, the Mass, and related to God privately, as many do. Despite this revulsion for the crimes committed, she walked to the church every day. She said her prayers for the day, paid for two candles, and brought one home. Many called upon her for prayers because she spoke freely about God and his blessings. She believed in the Lord’s presence, the presence of our Blessed Mother, Mary, and the access to the saints in her moments. When someone needed prayer, she lit a candle from the Church and placed it in her window for “all of Heaven to come to our aid.”

This woman’s faith gives her peace. There is no judgment or harshness in her and her face shows her heart with calm countenance to all. Wisdom with humility issues forth from her in simple sentences as she glances at her small candles burning for others. Does she have less light than other, hardier folk who more easily understand that power corrupts and that darkness hates light? Is the light of Christ that she offers to others dimmer? Or is it the same light, powerful, healing, reassuring?

Most people, more than likely, will not approach mortal sin, never mind commit mortal sin. Most people are doing their best, despite negative patterns that might come and go in their lives. Most people are trying to transcend the hurt they have encountered, to give back something better to the people around them.

Mortal sin? Or immortal blessings? Which are more common within our assemblies? Which do we choose to promote? We must speak without pause of the infinite power of the countless immortal blessings coming from the Eucharist through our fidelity to it and the fidelity of people like this woman. She knows God and she knows exactly where to find him.

We have achieved that through our fidelity to the Eucharist and our fidelity to the structure, the Catholic Church, which protects it.

We exist as an Easter people. The reality that mortal sin is a radical possibility does not make it likely for most sincere, earnest people. In fact, perhaps it is more remote a possibility, even while it remains a 'radical' possibility. The word radical means that while it is out there, it is pretty far out for most people who love. Possibly it is more unlikely than likely.

Again, we are a resurrection folk. We do not overly study those who put Jesus to death. We know the guilt of each of the people present was variable and dependent on their dispositions and malice, their knowledge and freedom at the time of the actions, even while their actions constituted the gravest of matter. We study Jesus Christ and learn to become more like him over time. We know that those who killed Christ were weak and flawed, like us. To repeat, the goal is not to make people become exactly like us, because we, too, can be weak and flawed. We try instead, to compel ourselves to think more and more like Christ. In doing so, we invariably help people develop a desire to think more like Christ, too. We allow Christ to impress his perfect thinking on us and we gradually surrender ourselves to his way. When we actually do this, our mere presence evangelizes, with no words spoken.

What distinguishes those who remain faithful to the practice of our Catholic faith? Who are we? We are those willing and able to suffer to protect the structure that protects the presence of Christ on Earth in the Eucharist.

What must it have been like to be in attendance to Christ during his life, hearing him, feeling his presence, watching him speak? Those of us who remain committed to our faith practice experience something like that through our immersion in the sacramental life, particularly the Mass. We uphold the structure for the woman who lights candles for us. We uphold the structure for all of those like her, who have a place to go, to return to, even if only in their minds, because we remain faithful. We should not look on our fidelity as something that means we are better, elitist even, but chosen, despite our own weaknesses and flaws, to participate as fully as possible. The Church was never intended to be a gentlemen's club on the part of the clergy, nor a social club on the part of the laity. Arguably, it is at its most ugly and least convincing where either or both of these two realities occur.

While we require the fellowship of gathering, we can never lose sight of why we are gathered or those for whom we gather. We are gathered to become stronger in our faith, both personally and collectively, and we are about Jesus Christ, not any one contemporary human figure in the Church, charismatic though they may be. We must become invisible conduits for the graces of God, clear highways for the light to be transferred through us into the world. Together, as a faith assembly, we look out at God's children for opportunity to make their lives more dignified. We look up to the Eucharist and to God, the Father, himself and ask for the blessings needed by the people we see. We hold our stance, praising God and thanking him, and drawing down immortal blessings for all of mankind, over and over. The immortal blessings come, again and again, every day, every moment. Regardless of the variable condition of a soul on a day, a person can draw down immortal blessings for the whole world.

If we sum up the call of our faith, it is about staying in place as the light to the nations, the beacon of hope, a conduit of immortal blessings that will serve us now and resonate eternally. Such is our very great privilege as practicing Catholics, regardless of how much or to what degree we practice our religion. Together in these days, we must remain fixed and committed

in our Catholic faith and we must keep our eyes wide open to protect our structure from those who would narcissistically distort it or hurt others within it, be they lay or clergy. This must be the most mature way to proceed and the only way to conduct ourselves in this period after we have been forced to accept widespread abuses of power and irrational condemnation of so many.

We celebrate and protect the sanctity of the committed and selfless clergy in our midst. We pray they will make way for active lay contributions and leadership in the days to come.

“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, ‘Anyone who believes in Him will never be put to shame.’ For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on Him, for ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (Romans 10:9 -13).

Part Ten: Conclusion

Our Catholic faith is sometimes referred to as an ‘in or out’ religion. This perception, untrue, can cause great distress and hurt to some, and perplexing superiority to others. The culprit to the ‘in or out’ mentality is partially the faulty and incomplete application of the teaching on mortal sin. People in leadership may fail to grasp the cruelty and distortion of the misapplication of this teaching on people, as well as the extent of the serious damage it has caused to the minds and self-esteem of many. Combined with the widespread exposure of the reality and extent of clergy abuse in the past and the ongoing presence of clericalism in the present, and we have lost more members than we have gained in the West.

Our attrition rate is appalling and we must stop ignoring it.

The truth is that we have no right to levy total judgements against people. When we do, we collapse the space for an individual to evaluate their own condition and grow increasingly more equipped to do so over time. When we pretend that we can fully judge others, we intrude upon their “*secret core, and sanctuary*” (CCC 1776). We also run the risk of spiritually infantilizing people and while that may serve to support an oppressive structure promoting fear, it does not work to support a healthy structure promoting hope.

To repeat, no action or set of actions can be arbitrarily designated a mortal sin or sins without the fullest examination of all accompanying realities. The full understanding of each circumstance remains completely available only to Christ, himself. To hold a vast amount of people in the belief that they exist in a fixed state of spiritual peril and that they harbor a fatal flaw which they cannot remove without our intervention, is reductionist of God and must be considered a possible evil in itself. After all, elements of sanctification exist outside the visible confines of the Church (CCC 819) and people can be forgiven by God without the sacrament of confession in some circumstances.

Jesus warned us that those who judged would risk judgement upon themselves (Matthew 7:1) and we know that while we can judge an action, we cannot judge a person (CCC 1861). Why then, do we persist in judging others with such puzzling confidence?

Our Catholic teachings are full of light and wisdom when presented properly. People are drawn to Jesus Christ, truly present in the Eucharist. People are drawn to honest, integrated priests and lay people. Immortal blessings, healing mankind, emanate steadily out from every tabernacle in the world. Our faithful priesthood insures the physical presence of God for us in the world. While we have our human problems as a Church, as we always have, none of these problems are fatal flaws. Indeed, it is our engagement with our imperfection as an institution, religion, and assembly that indicates our great integrity and ongoing, sincere desire for holiness.

The Church... will receive its perfection only in the glory of heaven, at the time of Christ's glorious return" (CCC 769).