

## **Moving forward or going back?**

### **Which is the correct approach for the Church today?**

There is sage advice given which states, that when you find that you are digging a hole that is getting too deep, stop digging. Maybe I should heed this advice even before I begin; but apparently, I am going to disregard it. By looking at the state of the Church in the present age, I could in fact be digging a hole that I may not be able to climb out of, but if I fail to even try to understand the issue, how can I ever hope to find a solution? As with any problem, the issue is multi-faceted, and the solution is complicated. There is no magic pill or one solution to our situation and any attempt to seek such a solution is a fool's errand. What I am certain about is that the answer to any question is not found at the extreme end of any position. So, in looking at those extreme ends, I hope to arrive in the middle where our action may in fact be found and lead us to a solution.

Some today would have us believe that the solutions to life's problems are found in one of only two camps. Some would propose that we must move forward from where we are if we are to progress/evolve. This is based on the understanding that the future has far greater potential than the past which with very few exceptions is nothing but a legacy of destruction and failure predominately as a result of the influence of Western civilization and a redactionary view of history. The second is rooted in the belief that we have progressed too far and the only real solution to the problems we face is to return to what could be termed, "a simpler time", which equally depends on a redactionary approach to historical truth. Both positions are filled with inherent problems, yet the race to the extremes of either position seems to be the preferred position of some people. Since both are extreme positions, they are fortunately inhabited by a few, and the vast majority are in the silent and reclusive middle. Like a car speeding along the road approaching a red light, three options exist. Two options would have you either speed up and hope you make it through, or you slam on your breaks. In either of these two positions, you run the risk of an accident. Thankfully, most drivers simply take their foot off the accelerator and brake in a calm way that causes no danger to anyone. This I believe to be the appropriate approach in most things. The situation we find ourselves in leads us to hurl ourselves head long into the unknown without much consideration of the impact we may be causing beyond the present moment and with such vehemently emotional language as to silence the dissenting or contrarian position.

While problems have always existed, the resorting to violence, be it in action or in speech, is being manifested in a way that increases by the day. As the yelling gets louder, the ability to have conversations decreases. The entrenchment of ideas, the lack of decency and courtesy, the vulgarity of language used only to intimidate another person, and the threat of physical violence is at epidemic levels. At either end of positions, the lack of perspective distorts reality to the point that delusion sets in as the norm, and I do mean delusional.

The inability to think beyond the moment, the failure to see consequences and implications of actions on myself and the impact of my actions on others around me are in fact hindrances to understanding reality and thus delusional. Some people are so convinced that they are right, the possibility that they are wrong is not conceivable. Instead of expressing what we think or believe, we are dominated by the prevalence of "feeling" as the ultimate qualification for truth. What would you call that if not delusional? Further, in our attempt to be "right" we seek to go even deeper into our chosen

views in an attempt to portray ourselves as convinced of our “rightness”. This results in a spiral of absurdity.

Even when it comes to Christianity, though there should be a prevailing common ground called the Bible, we have allowed the escalation of personal perspective to override sound scholarship and foundational teaching. We too have allowed the culture of “my desire”, “my wants”, to create a diluted theology of the teachings of Jesus and the Scriptures and a denial of early Christian history.

I recently heard a variety of sermons based on how we should only focus on the first six words of John 3:16. The basis of the teaching is that God loves us. For this position, nothing more needs to be said. For thinkers in this camp, the fact that God loves us requires nothing more from us, since the love of God accepts us just the way we are. How could anyone not be drawn to such a concept? Who is not drawn to a theology that is only directed towards me after all?

The truth that because God loves us, God sent the Son into the world so that the world would be saved by him is not relevant to a theology based only on the first six words. The objection to the rest of the verse is that such a concept is offensive to non-believers and requires that even we, as followers of Christ should be forced to believe that Jesus, who himself teaches us that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life, would want us to profess a need for salvation through him. God loves us just the way we are, don't you know! If that were true, then Jesus died for nothing! There was no need for salvation from sin. All that Jesus did could have been avoided because God loves me. By focusing on those six words, there is also no real need for me to love God. Trying to apply that perspective to the rest of the New Testament is impossible. Instead of Christ being at the center of the Gospel, I would have to be the center since God loves me. Why do I have to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the ill or imprisoned, forgive my neighbor, turn the other cheek, or need to be born of water and the Spirit? The only good news is that God loves me and not that Jesus is the Son of God and who died for the salvation of the world.

There are those who would have us believe that the Bible should be contorted by the views of the modern world. Whatever is not in conformity with the desires of any person, then it should simply be ignored or changed to fit the person's wishes. We want to make sure that people feel accepted, that they feel included and that they do not feel judged. Again, the idea that actions are judged does not equate to the condemnation of the person, is a concept that the modern mind seems incapable of grasping. More than one commentator has said, “we should drag the Bible into the modern world, kicking and screaming if necessary”. Why would we do that if we believe that the Bible is the Word of God. Do we really believe that we are smarter than God?

On the other hand, we have those who would have us believe that the church needs to be put on a path to the past. Some take such positions as to hold that the road to “normalcy” is found in fundamental beliefs in the Bible, or to discount science and modern thought completely, to become almost reclusive in nostalgia to harken to a time that may have never really existed. There are those who are convinced that traditions and liturgical practices of a not-so-distant past will bring us back to where God wants us to be in the Church.

As beautiful as those liturgical rites are, and as tender as some of those memories of the past are, let us not forget that abuse took place in those days as well, both liturgically as well as individually. In every age and in every liturgical rite of time, saints and sinners existed. Our search for holiness and mystery

are not found in rites but in the sacramental presence of the Lord Jesus in the Eucharist. It is the mystery of transubstantiation, that surpasses any rite or language or musical style or any other external reality. If we can't find wonder in the miracle that is the Eucharist, we are far from the kingdom.

I too have a desire for the Church to return to the past, but I would prefer to go back a bit farther than most. I don't want to go back to the Council of Trent, I want to go back to the first century Church. I am convinced that the Acts of the Apostles serves us as a blueprint for the Christian way of life and to the renewal of the Church as a whole.

In the Acts of the Apostles 2:42, we read that "they devoted themselves to the teaching of the Apostles and the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers". These four aspects of the Christian life are essential if we are to embody the essential mission which Christ left us at his Ascension. The Lord clearly commanded us in Matthew 28:19-20, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the world".

The message of Christ is about love, but the kind of love that does not leave us in our sin or our lost ways or personal confusion, but to clarity and freedom from sin. God clearly loves the sinner but does not leave them there. Point to me one passage in the Gospels, where Jesus forgives someone and then proceeds to tell them that it is OK to go back to what they were doing. In no place is this the case. Jesus always tells them to go and sin no more.

Our failure to study the teachings of the Apostles and the Scriptures leads to a spiritual deficiency that impacts our ability to boldly proclaim the Good News. The simple reality is that most of us have no idea what we are talking about when confronted by someone who is searching for the Lord. The goal of the Church is not to get people to go to Mass, it is about getting people to heaven. Remember the command at the Ascension. Jesus told us to teach, but how can we teach if we have not been taught? Recall Acts 8:26-39 and the encounter of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

The early Church understood this and since there was no New Testament at the time, they turned to those who knew Jesus best, the Apostles. Who do you think would understand what Jesus meant, the ones who were with him or someone who came 1,000 years or more later? The Catholic Church has a rich written history from the earliest of times that tells us exactly what those early leaders taught and believed and how they prayed and lived. We don't have to make it up, we have their words.

Further, the early Church devoted themselves to the communal life. A communal life means that we can't be selfish, only focused on our own wants and desires. Our primary concern is on the other not on myself. This may be the most counter-cultural of the four foundational aspects of the Christian life for the modern-day Christian. I joke about the look people give when they come to Mass and see someone sitting in the pew they most often occupy or how unchristian the church parking lot can be after Mass. Yet, at the same time, those examples highlight how far we are from embracing the communal life. The Acts of the Apostles reminds us that "they held all things in common". It is not really "your" pew, you do know that don't you?

Our sense of entitlement, our possessive nature acts contrary to communal life. Think about how we approach our parishes. We are more likely to see ourselves as members of a parish, than we are

members of the Catholic Church, and we certainly have a hard time of seeing ourselves as members of a diocese or the local Church. Our competitive and possessive nature leads us into competition with another Catholic parish, rather than collaborators in the mission of saving souls for Christ. We are reluctant to support each other's activities; we only go to Mass at another parish if "we have no other option" because we are "trying to get Mass in" to our schedule and we have adapted an attitude of self-preservation so that "they" don't close my church down. All this works in counter to the Gospel being Good News for all to hear. We are so far from the early Church and being devoted to the communal life.

Thirdly, the people were devoted to prayer. They did not simply pray for what they wanted, but they prayed for each other, the community, the leaders of the Church and for grace to live a faithful life, no matter what comes to them. When was the last time you prayed for your parish? Or your bishop? We must realize that nothing is accomplished without prayer. If we are not praying, not simply reciting prayers, but spending time in the presence of God, what do you expect to happen?

We speak about prayer, remembering people in our prayers, but do we? There is a discipline to a proper prayer life. It takes time, dedication, and perseverance to enter the presence of the sacred when we pray. It is founded on the belief that God is someone and not something. The first two words of the prayer taught to us by the Lord are worthy of much reflection. What does it mean when we say "our", the first word of the prayer? If we are struggling with the common life, is it because we do not fully grasp our unity in a common Father? And then we have the term of relationship, "Father". What a profound word to have us use. God is no longer described by adjective but by relation. If God is Father, then I am child. How does that relationship move my approach to prayer?

The early church clearly understood that relationship. Their prayer lives sustained the community in every situation. So much so, that songs of praise were on their lips as they were led to death. Stephen prays of those who are persecuting him and even in Peter 2:20, St. Peter reminds us to be patient when we suffer for doing what is good. That is only possible when prayer is a part of who we are and not simply of what we say.

Finally, the early believers devoted themselves to the Eucharist, the breaking of the bread. The all too prevalent attitude against real presence in the Eucharist, is contrary to the words of Christ himself and to the teachings of the Apostles and other first century Christians. For these believers, there was no doubt what Jesus said or meant, nor is there doubt in their firmly held conviction to the truth.

So important was the Eucharist that they celebrated it daily (Acts 2:46). They understood its importance to their spiritual and communal life as believers. Some Christians refer to the breaking of the bread as a "covenant meal, which recalls our promises to be faithful to the Lord". Even a cursory reading of the Last Supper discourse, the institution narrative, clearly does not have any indication of it being a ritual that speaks of our commitment to Christ Jesus. The early believers clearly understood that by celebrating the Eucharist, they placed themselves in the upper room again and that the Lord was made manifest through the power of the Holy Spirit, real presence.

Taking the Eucharist for granted and diminishing it in meaning has fractured the church. We have relegated the Eucharist to "going to" a ritual rather than being present at a miracle. How else does what Jesus tells us the Eucharist is, become real? No sign, no symbol, but truly the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of the Lord Jesus. In his presence and through his presence we become what we receive and are transformed into the community of believers that is devoted to prayer, learning and the communal life.

That is why I contend that the future of the Church must be found in its foundational practices. Like the early church, we too face external and internal pressure and persecution. Similarly, the present and the past are united in danger of falling into false teachings and personal preferences. I believe that we have far more in common today with the church of the first century than we do with the church of the Council of Trent and if we are not careful, we may not have a future.

For the Church to be relevant to believers, to be a haven for searchers of truth, to engage a world that is hostile to it and to be a harbor of calm amid chaos, the community of believers must be devoted to the four essential tenets that drew hundreds to be added to their number each day. It was not found in programming or entertainment or succumbing to the trends of the day. It was found in prayer, learning from the Apostles to the common life and to the Eucharist. Our foundational past is our future. Everything else will continue to lead us deeper into the haze of our present irrelevance and despair. May the Lord enlighten our minds and hearts to the truth and find in him our way to the Father.