
Diary of a City Priest

by George William Rutler

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Some newspapers report with increasing frequency what they call "division" between the Pope and Catholics in the United States. The reader might even come to suspect by their tone that the writers wanted this to be true. It is hard for people outside the Catholic Church to understand how Christ works through her. Reporters covering Church stories often have this difficulty; this problem is particularly so when the reporters are disaffected and lapsed Catholics themselves. And so the newspapers do not always give the facts.

One fact is that the bishops in the United States realize better than any other Americans that they must be both in communion with and in faithful obedience to the Pope for their local governance to carry authentic weight; the Second Vatican Council taught this in the document *Lumen Gentium*. The bishops enjoy the high privilege of collaboration with the Pope, and he calls on them to help spread the Gospel of which he has the chief charge on earth. In recent months the Pope has addressed various groups of American bishops in a systematic way on the meaning of bishops, priests, religious, and all laity. In each instance he has quoted what they have said themselves in official documents.

Another fact is that there is no such thing as an "American Catholic Church" even when the newspapers give the impression that there is. There is the Roman Catholic Church in the United States. Any tinting of universal Catholic truth with local presumptions is not the "expression of a vibrant indigenous church" but a domesticated disinclination to observe the truth of the Holy Spirit which transcends all particular cultures. Individual cultures promote that truth through their endowed gifts by brightening, and not coloring, it. In 1899, Pope Leo XIII condemned the disposition of some American churchmen to emphasize national ideals above spiritual realities. This heresy, called "Americanism," tried to replace the primacy of virtues such as humility and obedience with social optimism and an exaggerated dependence on independence. The governing principle became the democracy of the enlightened instead of the hierarchy of the apostles, and confused the way the state works with the way God designed his Church to work. And this same heresy confuses many today. Some of them mean well, but of course that does not mean they are right. Others more cynically would encourage heresy as a means of weakening the Roman Catholic Church, which increasingly seems to be the remaining force for good in the modern world.

Another fact is that the Pope whom God has given us in this most dramatic period of human history is Polish, and it is only proper that he should be influenced by his own culture. But Americans, and others, betray a mordant provincialism and thick chauvinism when they assert that he teaches what he does because of a "Polish mindset." The same voices used to complain of the papacy's "Italian mindset." It is interesting that John Paul II is a Polish Pope; it is vital that he is the Pope. He speaks with a

conviction born of a national experience and personal suffering which few in more comfortable circumstances dare imagine. People should not speak to him glibly of their pain. He is gracious not to tell us about his. He has a happier subject: the Gospel of Christ which will inevitably save the honest and be a scandal or foolishness to anyone else. If he tells Americans things they prefer not to hear, it is only because he is the Holy Father, obliged to tell his holy children things that are true. His radiance as he does it, so unlike the grimness of his frequent critics, beams from our Lord's promise that all who are reviled for speaking the truth in Christ's name will have a great reward. Ultimately, the Pope's voice is from a place farther east than Poland; it resounds with the waves of Galilee. And what good can come out of Cracow? The same good that came out of Nazareth. His more confused bystanders realize that in their deepest consciences.

As Christ called over the ranks of the scribes and Pharisees to the crowds on shore and hillside, so his vicar calls to the vast numbers of the faithful who far outnumber the pale shades of dissent; and it was to them that he turned when he first spoke from Peter's throne in 1978: "I count on the support of your prayers and your good will in carrying out my mission of service to the Church and mankind." Help his great work, and join yours to it, by making these special intentions when you pray the rosary: (First Mystery) That the Pope's words be received with faith; (Second Mystery) That the Pope's zeal move us to take up our own crosses; (Third Mystery) That the Pope's dedication attract religious vocations; (Fourth Mystery) That the Pope's example inspire us to lead lives of purity; (Fifth Mystery) That our Pope's faithfulness draw us with him to the heavenly company of Mary.

Old Scratch

Two sources of the neurotic personality are the fear that everything is evil and the conceit that nothing is evil. The first type expects imminent doom in the world, or at least personal failure. Unlike the cheerier type, who believe that every cloud has a silver lining, these believe that every silver lining has a cloud. But then there is the other sort who goes beyond conventional optimism, for they believe there is no evil at all and that sin is a figment of the maladjusted mind. They say, "If it feels good, do it," and "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you believe in yourself." They are not deterred by the fact that this attitude is basically superstitious, since it flies in the face of the facts and has succeeded only in producing the world's degenerates and tyrants.

The evil one, also called Satan, the devil, "Scratch" by St. John Vianney and "Screwtape" by C. S. Lewis, thrives on these neuroses. His power is negative, having been pilfered from Heaven when he fell through wounded pride. The enemy of life gets his unfriendly vitality from both total pessimism and total optimism because his only control over people is won by distracting them from God. Now God is infinitely powerful and has already conquered Satan through the Cross and Resurrection. But "Scratch" can still scrape individual souls, just as a losing army can still trap individual soldiers on the winning side. For all his banal lack of imagination, Satan knows that he can inch society away from heavenly strength by three assaults.

First he attacks the Blessed Sacrament. The consecrated Host is the most vivid presence of God we have on earth. Old Scratch cannot stand it. For as malign voices shrieked whenever Jesus got close

during his earthly ministry, so it is not uncommon to find disturbed and even criminal personalities drawn by a dread fascination when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed. Satan tried to annihilate Christ, and his obsession with the Eucharist is a case of a culprit returning to the scene of his crime. For this reason, the Christian must do all he can to remind himself of the utter holiness in this Holy Sacrifice. We should never speak of the "wafer" or the "bread" or the "wine" after they have been consecrated because they are no longer bread and wine. From that moment they are the Sacred Body and Precious Blood of Christ. So too, we vest this sacrifice with outward signs of dignity: prayerful preparation before Mass and thanksgiving afterward, genuflection before the Real Presence in the tabernacle, and reverential reception at communion. Catholics resist the temptation of Old Scratch to make the Mass a limp fellowship meal or memorial. It is the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, and that only because Christ is the Lamb offered in it as a living sacrifice. From us it deserves a worthy sacrifice of prayer, alms, and the best music and appointments we can provide.

Secondly, old Scratch attacks the priesthood. Priests mediate between God and the human race. They connect us with the sublime, and that connection is precisely what the great deceiver does not want. So he will tell us that the Church is wrong to have priests. Or that if everyone cannot be a priest then no one should be one. Or that Christ was culturally limited in the way he structured Church order. Or that since priests are as sinful as everyone else, they cannot mediate. Sometimes he even seems to persuade religion editors in popular magazines to take his dictation. But our Lord says: "Every high priest taken from among men is ordained to act for men in relation to God to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward since he himself also is beset with weakness" (Hebrews 5:1-2). The priest knows this better than anybody else, and Scratch hopes that nobody will know it. So he plots to turn the priest into a manager, or cheerleader, or psychiatrist, or politician, without his clerical clothes which are a sign of contradiction, no longer called "Father." For Satan cannot stand fathers. He rebelled against his own and does not want to be reminded.

Thirdly, old Scratch attacks the holy names of Jesus and Mary. They are more powerful than "Scratch," and he knows it. Mary helps, and Jesus saves. Invoke their names with faith, and all will be well. But Satan does not want us to know that we have recourse to holiness. He wants us to be in awe of no one, and only in fear of himself. The prince of darkness wants to keep us away from the castle through whose windows the King and Queen pour light. He starts the detour by teaching us to speak lightly of holy things and even to make Jesus' name a curse word when we hit our thumb with a hammer, and Mary's name a kind of cocktail. These are silly little things, indeed, but old Scratch knows that scratches can frustrate worse than cuts.

"Be of good cheer," says Christ, "I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Cheer is vinegar to prideful old Scratch, and ridicule to him is poison. This wisdom is more stunning than false optimism and falser pessimism. Because it is wise it counsels like the general of the stronger army on the night before victory: "Be sober and vigilant..." (1 Pet 5:8-9).

Acting Our Age

A child should not be blamed for being childish; that kind of blame would be like blaming a grandfather's clock for being antique. We are simply talking about acting our age. But there is a difference between acting our age, which confers dignity, and acting the way our age expects us to act, which imposes conformity. Peter Pan refused to act his age and grow up: that was infantilism. The boy-who-called-the-Emperor-naked refused to be persuaded how to act by the world: that was heroism.

Now while we can pretty well describe how a person should act according to the birthday coming up, it is harder to anticipate how a person should act according to the century coming up. For instance, a man entering the twenty-fifth year of his life can be expected to have certain physical and intellectual characteristics, because many millions of men have reached that age already. But we can barely imagine what a man entering the twenty-fifth century will look and think like, because no one has reached the twenty-fifth century yet.

It is in knowing what to expect that makes history is helpful, and why it is said that the past is prologue. Each age is unique, but we can perceive an age as unique only because it inherits certain facts which permit comparisons. It is uncertain whether the average human five centuries from now will have myopia or X-ray vision; but, inasmuch as no previous century has bred Cyclopes, we may be reasonably certain that our descendants will have two eyes. What the Church will be like five hundred years hence is also unpredictable except that, if there are five hundred more years allotted to the human race, she will be One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic. We know this because these are "marks" or constants, without which we would be dealing with something other than the Church, much as a biped is not a triped.

We should also expect that the Church in the twenty-fifth century will face a grave challenge and will also be given a Pope able to handle it. More than one historian has remarked how this happens roughly every five hundred years. At the end of the first five-hundred-year cycle Pope St. Leo I resolved a theological challenge to the doctrine of Christ's divinity. Concluding the second period, Pope St. Gregory VII resisted an ecclesiastical challenge to his authority from within. In the sixteenth century Pope St. Pius V defeated the political challenge of nonbelievers from without who would have destroyed Christian civilization altogether. Now, at the end of the fourth cycle, Pope John Paul II is facing a challenge which combines all three

At each crisis each Pope asked monks and nuns to help him especially by prayer and obedience, much as Moses asked the help of Aaron and Hur to lift up his arms in the battle against Amalek (Exodus 17). In the United States, religious have had a magnificent record this way; and that record is why the Pope conducted an investigation of them under the auspices of his bishops, much as a general inspects his crack troops. This could be a time of heroic sanctity for them; this time also could also expose weaknesses which must be repaired. A number of women religious in particular have lost that sense of interior consecration which is a spiritual contradiction to worldly dictation, and consequently these women do not even wear the religious habit which is an outward sign of this contradiction. Their not wearing a religious habit contradicts the Pope and not the world, and leads to their own decline. As God raises up special Popes in the cycles of crisis, so he raises up special nuns. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, for instance, opened 254 convents; and eight of these were in the United States in just three years. She wrote a letter to the bishops of the United States in which she said:

Though most unworthy to write to you—still I feel I need to turn to you, to beg you to help our Religious Sisters in the United States of America to turn to our Holy Father with childlike confidence and love. I would be grateful if you would help us to love, obey, and remain faithful to the Church and the Vicar of Christ and so come back to our full consecration by living the true life of the Spouse of Jesus Crucified... There has been much disturbance in the Religious life of Sisters, all due to misguided advice and zeal. Something of that oneness with Jesus and oneness with His Church has been lost. There is more love for freedom in action and the way of life. Just as in many lay women, so also in our Religious, the ambition to be equal to men in all things even in the priesthood has taken away that peace and joy of being one with Jesus and His Church Give us holy priests to teach us how to be and grow in holiness and if Religious women are holy—naturally the mothers of the families and others will also grow in holiness through their teaching and example. Please pray for me and the poor....

God has given us John Paul II in this critical time of world history, and is filling his Church with saints. He intends that each of us join them along with the religious. It is basically a matter of adults acting their age by refusing to be told by their age how to act, learning to be childlike and not childish. Encourage the religious sisters you know in their sacred vocation by showing them Mother Teresa's letter. It may still be read five hundred years from now.

Rod and Staff

It is fitting to recall what a bishop is. First of all, the only real reason we have bishops is that our Lord wants us to have them. There are many things we would do differently in life, if we were in God's position; and there have been many people who tried to rearrange the world the way they think God might have done it, if he had enjoyed the benefits of a modern education. But the Church is as he planned it. Bishops are successors to the apostles, and Christ built his Church "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the cornerstone (Eph. 2:20)."

Saint Fulgentius, who was a sixth-century bishop in North Africa and suffered much at the hands of the Arian heretics who denied Christ's divinity, wrote:

We bishops, then, are the servants of the householder, the stewards of the Master, and we have received the portion of food to dispense to you. If we should wonder what that portion of food is, the blessed apostle Paul tells us when he says: 'To each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned to him.' Hence what Christ calls the portion of food, Paul calls the measure of faith. We may therefore take this spiritual food to mean the venerable mystery of the Christian faith. And we give you this portion of food in the Lord's name as often as we, enlightened by the gift of grace, teach you in accordance with the rule of the true faith. In turn, you daily receive the portion of food at the hands of the Lord's stewards when you hear the word of truth from the servants of God.

Saint Paul set out some bluntly practical considerations in his letter to Saint Titus. A bishop, he said, must be blameless and not self-willed or arrogant. He is not to be a drunkard, or violent, or greedy. But more positively, he should be hospitable and a lover of goodness, steady, just, holy, and self-

controlled. These were concerns then as now for the same reason: "There are many irresponsible teachers... men who are empty talkers and deceivers. These must be silenced. They are upsetting whole families by teaching things they have no right to teach—and all for sordid gain (Titus 1:10-11)."

The appointment of Archbishop John J. O'Connor came nearly as surprisingly to New York as the election of Pope John Paul II came to the whole world. The fact that the Holy Father chose him, after only a few months as Bishop of Scranton, indicates the strong conviction that this man was most needed at this time in the life of the New York archdiocese. A similar thing happened when Cardinal Lustiger was called from Orléans to Paris. Our Holy Father does not mind breaking custom to preserve sacred tradition. As Vicar of Christ, he intends to surround himself with men after his own heart, radiant with love, and strong in that truth which is the substance of true love. A bishop, after all, is a shepherd, and the shepherd carries both "rod and staff," the staff to gently guide the flock and the rod to rebuke it when it begins to wander into dangerous paths.

It is not enough for a bishop to be just a wise administrator, although administration is part of his ruling function according to the model of Christ the King. Nor is it sufficient for him to be a dedicated priest, although priesthood is indispensable since he is to perform his sacrificing function according to the model of Christ the High Priest. More now than ever, the bishop must also be a theologian, in his prophetic function according to the model of Christ the Divine Teacher.

Exciting times lie ahead for a bishop who shows gifts for all three offices. Of course he will need our prayers and help; for whenever Christ's Gospel is proclaimed strongly, the foes of Christ's peace will be eager to criticize. At such times, every worthy bishop asks his people what Christ asked the Twelve: "Will you also go away?" (John 6:67) Peter replied with uncommon sense: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." Thus began the great economy described by the fathers of the Second Vatican Council: "From then onward there is a duty laid on the Church of spreading the faith and salvation that come from Christ. This duty is in virtue of the express command inherited from the apostles by the college of bishops, assisted by the priests in communion with Peter's successor, the chief shepherd of the Church."

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