

Being Church Today

In keeping with our custom, I propose to point this Lenten recollection towards the theme of priesthood, in a year dedicated to priests and during which we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the death of the Curé d'Ars, St. John Mary Vianney.

The Year for Priests, declared the Holy Father, seeks to contribute in promoting commitment to the inner renewal of all priests in order to make their Gospel-based testimony more incisive and vigorous in today's world.

This appeal corresponds to a crisis in the priesthood about which we should not blind ourselves. The Pope mentions the lack of priestly vocations, especially among the earliest Christian countries. This shortage is not without reference to a certain number of deplorable happenings that are reasons for scandal and rejection on the part of the world: the infidelity of certain priests, the scandal of the sexual abuse of minors by priests, the violation of the Vow of Chastity by priests, the defection of priests in relation to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, not forgetting a persistent and even re-emerging clericalism that compromises cooperation between the priest and his community.

Remedies recommended are numerous: the abolition of the obligation of priestly celibacy, the possibility of married priests returning to ministry, the ordination of recommended laypeople, women's ordination. These recommendations have been until now systematically opposed by the Catholic Hierarchy.

A return to the sources

Instead of entering into these debates, I invite you to return to the sources and expand our horizons, to contemplate the vision of Jesus on his mission and on the community he gathered around himself to continue this mission. What was Jesus' dream for his Church? Furthermore, to what conversion is the Church and each individual Christian called today, especially during Lent?

Rereading the Gospel, we are sometimes surprised

- Firstly, by the fact that Jesus himself was not a priest of Israel or even a rabbi. He did not belong to the priestly caste strictly separated from the rest of the People of God.
- Neither was Jesus a minister of worship strictly separated from the secular world. He abolished the separation between the sacred and the profane. He did not desecrate religion, but he founded it on the sacred character of humanity, as it appears in his words on the Sabbath and on the sacred offerings. At a stroke, he gave a new meaning to the **Temple** and the worship by means of the **sacrifices** offered there.
- Finally, Jesus he did not seek to exercise political or religious power, as demonstrated in the washing of the feet and his words on the greatness of 'the least among you.' However, he manifested absolute authority and unlimited saving power.

Priesthood, the sacred and power are notions which the theology of the Church integrated into its discourse on the Christian mystery, but which need to be continually evangelised, i.e., purified and surpassed, within the new meaning given to them by Jesus.

The kind of community required

Based on these clarifications, we may ask 'What kind of community does Jesus gather around himself for his mission?'

Firstly, let us define our terms. Can we say that Jesus 'founded' the Church as we know it throughout its history? The reply would be negative if we understand 'foundation' in the sense of a legal act of establishing an institution or an organisation. On the other hand, should we agree with the sarcasm of Alfred Loisy when he said, 'Jesus preached the Kingdom, but it is the Church that came' (instead). Certainly not! If Jesus did not found the Church, he is nonetheless indisputably at its inception. His whole life and work are at the service of the coming of the Kingdom of God and of the gathering and conversion of the People of God until the end of time. In this sense, the Church is the ultimate aim of Jesus' life and death.

The community that Jesus gathered around himself is marked by three essential features: it is his initiative and work, it is entirely centred on him and it is sacramental.

1. The Divine Initiative. The Church is not the congregation of those who adhere to his doctrine or his memory. The Church is neither the initiative nor the work of the disciples. Jesus' death marks the ground zero of the Church, when his disciples abandoned him and fled. It is the Risen One who once more gathers them, showing himself to them and giving them his Spirit. The Church comes into being through the presence of Christ Risen and the Spirit.

2. Christ himself is the Centre of this Community. The uniting principle of the community is the person of Christ alone. 'Remain in me. Be one as the Father and I are one.'

The Church, therefore, is not just an ideological or religious movement, or an esoteric religious sect for initiates. It is a new social reality, fully present in the world, without being of the world. Classical theology stated that it is a complete society, having within itself all the means to achieve its aim. The images used by the Second Vatican Council to define the Church are 'People of God', 'Body of Christ', and 'Temple of the Holy Spirit'.

3. The Sacramental Character. Just as Jesus is the visible sign of the presence of God in the world, so the Church as a whole is the real sign of Christ and the salvation he brings to the entire world. This is why the Church is founded on the Eucharist, the sacrament par excellence of the presence of Christ in the Church. Nevertheless, neither the People of God nor the Church exist for themselves. They are at the service of the initial and final plan of God: the salvation of the whole world. The Bible does not begin with Abraham and Moses, but with Adam, i.e., with humanity, and it concludes with the apocalyptic vision of a 'new heaven and a new earth.' (Rev. 21:1). Vatican II states that the Church is the 'sacrament of salvation for the world'.

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In asking ourselves how we can be Church today in line with the intentions of Christ, we need to take into account the two major events that determine the period in which we live: the Second Vatican Council and the great mutation of civilisation that we traverse.

Quite justifiably, Karl Rahner said that Vatican II was a 'Church Council on the Church'. Confronted with the classic model of an institutional and hierarchical Church, the Council proposed a model of communion, without abolishing the first. This means that those who today claim to be from one model or another do so equally in the name of the Council. This ambivalence could be seen as a harmful compromise, but it can also be interpreted as recognition of the fact that the unity of the Church (and this since the time of Peter and Paul) is not in uniformity, but a unity in tension between different tendencies in the bond of love and faith. I will return to the consequences of this in relation to our judgements and personal attitudes when confronted with contemporary issues in the Church.

Then, there is the immense and rapid transformation of the world which is nothing less than an out-and-out mutation of civilisation and global civilisation. A deeply secular world has taken the place of a world founded on a general belief in God. A pluralistic society has replaced a monolithic one; the collective mentality has been replaced by a thoroughly individuated mindset, allergic to any form of institution.

For the Church, this cultural mutation has brought with it the bewildering collapse of what Emmanuel Mounier called Christendom. Even in the 1930s, he prophesied its irretrievable demise in his articles on 'Christendom deceased'. He meant the type of Church which, from Constantine, had prevailed for 16 centuries in what has precisely been called the 'Christian West', and in continents colonised by it. This Church identified with the culture and civilisation which entitled it to omnipresence, a considerable secular sway and a prestige in keeping with it.

All this is still so near and yet so far. Faced with the numerical reduction of Christians, the loss of the Church's influence, and even an increasing marginalisation, we are staring crisis in the face. Crisis means a time of trial, but also of choices. The present reality can also be for us a sign of the times inviting us to conversion and to refusal of the temptation to domination, power and prestige. Thus we come to the subject of priests.

Priests for the Church and the Church for its priests

In a recent article on the scandal of paedophile priests, Timothy Radcliffe suggests that the deep root of the priesthood crisis is to be found in a Church which has been too arrogant and powerful. The Church has to become more humble and fraternal, in the image of its Lord.

In conclusion, let us say that it is true that the Church will be in the image of its priests (as shown in the case of the Curé d'Ars, a great source of inspiration, without as such becoming a model for priests today). It is also true that the Church will have the priests it deserves. With this, the Year of the Priesthood does not just become a pious prayer intention, but also a task and a call to conversion in our manner of being Church, beginning with our private lives and that of our communities.

Here then you have a fine Lenten programme which also prepares us for the Resurrection of the Church of Christ Risen.

Preparing for Easter with the Resurrection of the Church in Prospect

In this second part of our recollection, let us find out how to live Lent practically and pertinently in the light of the mystery of the Church and of the priesthood.

After our morning reflection, I propose three attitudes to cultivate, three temptations to fight against and some concrete questions for a personal and community examination of conscience.

Three attitudes to cultivate

1. Faith and humility

Accept humbly that the Church is both divine and human. The Church is divine and holy in its origin and vocation, but it is unmistakably human because it has been entrusted to a fallible and sinful humanity. Its history is punctuated by the exalted summits of mysticism, culture and charity, but also by abuses of feudal power, the horror of the Crusades, the Inquisition and wars of religion. Yves Congar said that the Church is like a tree: we see the rough and dusty bark, but within the tree flows the sap of the Spirit. Indeed, God works through feeble humanity's members. We must never forget this dual polarity, above all in a contemporary context that tends to denigrate the history of the Church in a unilateral and tendentious way. Let us not drink of this heady poison.

2. Personal Commitment

When we speak of the Church, we often think of the institution or its hierarchy. We are then wittingly or unwittingly facing the Church or outside it, whereas the Church is an essential and profound dimension of my life. As a believer in Jesus, I am of the Church and I am the Church, because Jesus wanted the Church and I can only cling to him if I adhere to the Church in faith-inspired fidelity

3. Neither pessimism nor optimism, but hope

Making pessimistic or optimistic forecasts about the future of the Church is futile, because these sentiments rely on calculations and human expectations, whereas the future of the Church rests on the fidelity of Christ. Besides, these sentiments are very ambiguous, since the same developments that make some optimists make others pessimists. I am thinking of the success, more or less apparent or partial, of a restoration of 'Christendom' that comforts some and depresses others.

Three temptations to counter

1. The temptation of statistics

When speaking of Hell and Purgatory, one Treasurer General said, 'God's accounting and mine do not tally.' We have to be sceptical about figures in assessing the health of the Church. Someone asked, 'Formerly there were lots of Catholics, but how many were Christian?' We could also turn the question round: 'Today, there are many Christians, but how many are Catholics?' In any case, we know that with statistics, we can prove anything. For this reason, we can rejoice in the WYD (World Youth Day), but not because of the number of young people gathering, because at that level, the WYD could never rival the attendance at Rock Festivals or Gay Pride Parades.

2. The temptation of adversarial journalism

The general press simplifies the internal dynamic of the Church by reducing it to rivalry between Liberals and Conservatives. It is a very superficial presentation which leaves out two things: firstly, it is about two sincere ways of conceiving and promoting the future of the Church, then, that these real tensions do not destroy the unity if these stresses are lived in charity and faith. The unity for which Jesus prayed is not uniformity, but unity which immerses mutually respected differences in love. It is precisely the definition of the Holy Spirit at the core of the Trinity!

3. The temptation of the Church as refuge

Faced with surrounding indifference and even hostility, we could be tempted to withdraw into the community of the Church, as into a citadel. This is the perhaps the most subtle temptation threatening us, for it is contrary to our vocation of being the sacrament of salvation at the heart of the world, such as it is today.

Our place is at the core of the melee and we find the strength required to penetrate it, convinced that there where God seems to be absent in the extreme, he is in fact already there, having preceded us, waiting for us.

Some pertinent questions

- What comes to mind when I speak of the Church – is it the Pope, the Vatican, or me, my parish, my community?
- What major criticisms would I make of the Church? Would these not be the very criticisms I should be making of myself (i.e., seeking to possess the truth, the whole truth, the desire for domination and prestige, intolerance, etc?)
- In the Church, would I class myself among the liberals or the traditionalists, left or right? Where would Jesus class me ?
- Is my obedience to the hierarchy one of blind submission or a free and responsible loyalty based on the authority Jesus conferred on his Apostles and their successors?
- Quite justifiably, we expect a lot from the priest. However, what can the priest expect from us? Do I pray for priests and try to support them by my friendship and with any help they may require?

May I finish on a humorous note and a prayer?

I have two stories.

The first comes from Cardinal Ratzinger. It is the story of a Jew in the Middle Ages who, during a journey, visits the Papal Court and becomes a Catholic. On his return, a person acquainted with the Papal Court asks him,

- ‘Did you not realise what is going on there?’
- ‘Yes’, he replied, ‘I saw everything, all the scandals, everything!’
- ‘Nevertheless, you became a Catholic?’ said the other. ‘It doesn’t make sense!’
- ‘That is exactly why I became a Catholic’, the Jew responded. ‘because if the Church continues to subsist, it is definitely because someone else is keeping it in being!’ (Cardinal Ratzinger. *Voici quel est notre Dieu*. Paris. Plon-Mame. 2001, p. 43)

The second story relates that one day Napoleon said he would destroy the Church. On the spur of the moment, a Cardinal replied, ‘Impossible; even we, after 18 centuries, have not managed to do that.’

Finally, I reproduce here an extract from a prayer service bringing together priests and laypeople in a Church in Africa at the start of the Year of the Priesthood. After the prayer for forgiveness from the priests on account of their faults and failings, the laypeople also asked forgiveness. Let us join with them in prayer:

Lord, we laypeople also need to ask forgiveness for our behaviour towards our priests.

- *Often we do not support our priests enough. We criticise them, sometimes wrongfully.*
- *Lord, have mercy.*
- *We split them, pitching one against the other. We like the one and reject the other.*
- *Lord, have mercy*
- *Often, we are not involved enough in the Church. We leave our priests to do everything as if the work of God is not for us all.*
- *Christ, have mercy*
- *When we see our priests behaving badly , we do not have the courage to speak to them and advise them;*
- *Lord, have mercy.*