**Trimming the Sails:**

**The Church’s Response to Today’s Crisis**

***The Crisis Today***

The Catholic Church today, from the Vatican to the church-goer in the last pew, has a sense that something important has been lost. But why shouldn’t it? Every week another article appears documenting the loss of members–not just the young adults who have other interests, but many of the long-time Catholics who have reached middle-age and beyond. We are repeatedly reminded that ex-Catholics constitute the third largest “denomination” of Christians in the US today.

What’s gone wrong? No one can seriously attribute this drop only, or even chiefly, to the sex abuse scandal, although some try. Other reasons are often given by those who have dropped out: the church’s denial of leadership roles to women, its fixation on traditional sexual ethics, the haughty demeanor of some of the clergy, and the perceived deafness of the hierarchy to the voice of the faithful on matters big and small. Underlying all this is, we can infer, is the complaint that the hierarchical church has reverted to its old heavy-handed ways of making doctrinal and moral pronouncements. It no longer appears interested in engaging its members in the respectful conversation that began in the years following the Second Vatican Council.

But look at it from the point of view of church leaders. Their response to the embattled position in which the church finds itself today is to cut away the rigging to ride out the storm. Sails might allow a ship to run fast before the wind in fair weather–as during the promising days of the early 1960s when the church began to venture boldly out of its sheltered harbor–but the very canvas that offers speed under the right conditions is a threat during a hurricane.

The efforts of the church to trim its sail seems to have taken two forms. First is the attempt to tighten up dogma, not to mention moral teaching, and thus remove ambiguity from the post-Vatican church. In this way the church might be able to provide the certainties needed to restore confidence in its members. Second, the effort, by way of the not-so-new English translation together with the gradual acceptance of the Latin mass as normative, to return to echoes of the liturgy that inspired such awe in a pre-Vatican era.

“Bring back that old-time religion” seems to be the refrain, with the hope that it will entice more into the fold–or at least keep there those who have entered as babes in their mothers’ arms. The judgment that the “old feel” of Catholicism is its strongest appeal seems to be supported by the traditionalist bent of many of its most committed young adherents today. No wonder the Church, in the minds of many, has taken a tack to the right in recent years.

***Tightening Church Teaching***

Dogma, in the form of a creed, can be a simple statement of what Catholics believe and a reminder of what unifies us as a church. We all subscribe to the belief in a creative and sustaining force that we may call God, his mysterious entry into our world in the person of Jesus the Christ, the continuation of his saving presence through the Spirit, and his assurance that we, like Jesus, will live on in some form after death. Surely, none of this should be minimized. But the best theologians have always understood the risks taken in building too elaborate an edifice on this creedal foundation. There is the danger of assuming that we know more than we really do about the God who beckons us from deep inside ourselves as well as from the vastness and complexity of the universe. It is not by doctrine that we are saved, as all but the Gnostics in our midst have always acknowledged, but by a surrender to the mystery of God.

Catholics today, as in any age, crave certainty in an uncertain world. The desire to plug the gaps in our understanding of God is all too human. But, as we try to map our faith in conceptual terms, we must never forget that doctrine derives from our collective encounter with the divine over the centuries. One of the great glories of the Catholic Church has been its time-honored insistence on the importance of tradition: God reveals himself not just in the sacred texts written two millennia ago, but in the layers of meaning that Christians have found in these texts over the ages. But why shouldn’t this be so? One of the basic tenets of our faith is that our God is continually revealing himself in the experience of his people, who can count on the assistance of the Holy Spirit to interpret it. That same Spirit was envisioned as the very gust of wind that would fill the sails of a ship. Unless, that is, the sails had been struck to avert a storm.

By exaggerating its claims to understand the divine and so pander to this human desire for certainty, the church might well bring about the opposite effect of what it intends. Many of the young and the not-so-young today have defined themselves as searchers. Their plea is that their experience be taken seriously, as together the entire community, leaders and people, seek the face of God in today’s world. They have come to react instinctively against any institution, especially a church, that claims to possess more of the truth than it really does. This is why the church, in its attempts to reduce doctrinal and moral ambiguity, may be in danger of losing members rather than consolidating membership.

Unfurling the sails to catch the experience of these searchers is surely a brave move in a storm. Or should we regard it as foolhardy? While it might lay bare the uncertainties in the doctrinal and moral teaching of the church, it would also encourage those “seekers” to find in this same church fellow travelers in search of the God who shows himself in our shared history.

***Awakening Awe***

But doctrine isn’t everything, especially in the Catholic Church. Surely its not what we Catholics first learned to cherish about the church in which we were raised. What was it about the church, then, that burrowed into us so deeply from our early encounters with Catholicism? For me it was the introduction from an early age to many small rituals: blessing myself with holy water on entering the church, genuflection before the tabernacle with the faint glow of the sanctuary lamp alerting us to the presence of the Lord, the sound of bells rung at the consecration, and the smell of incense on special occasions. Others remember with a certain reverence the chanting of litanies, the sung “Eternam Requiem” at masses for the dead, or the clink-clank of the censor during Benediction. Still others recall the uneasy feeling at entering the confessional box at an early age, or the rumble of the priest’s voice on the other side of the grill. Most often it is was the sights and smells, and especially the sounds, of church rituals.

Such memories may seem trivial, but they are buried deep in our inner being well beyond the reach of our cognition. They represent the signs of the sacred, rooted in our past but forceful even today. We human beings live by symbols, and our church throughout the ages has always made abundant use of signs to appeal to the deepest yearnings and fears in our hearts. Sounds and smells and bells, as well as tiny points of light in a dark church, all may evoke the sense of some great and mysterious force in life that can not be plotted on our cognitive map. It might be tempting to facilely dismiss all this as fond memories of an outdated piety, but collectively such symbols offered many of us a sense of the sacred, an invitation to explore the mystery of the divine.

Isn’t this a feeble foundation on which to build a sense of the divine? Not according to Karen Armstrong. In *The Case for God*, her splendid historical overview of religious experience dating back to the paleolithic caves of Lascaux, she identifies two elements as constants: myth and ritual. We could translate that as stories and practices.

Appealing as they do to the human imagination, these stories are designed to engender a sense of awe and wonder. No one assumed that the creation stories of ancient religions or our own were literally true. Instead, their purpose was to capture that sense of spectacular mystery that engulfs human beings and the world in which they live. Six days of creation, talking serpents and wondrous gardens were the stuff of legend. But legend, with a truth substance at the core, has a rightful place in nurturing the religious imagination.

Then there were the rituals, which abounded in symbols of all kinds. Armstrong selects ancient initiation rituals in particular to show how they could generate in turn terror, hope and desperate surrender to a power beyond description. Not all religions, of course, have young men and women crawl through long winding caves in total darkness. Our own Christian tradition utilizes an initiation ritual that begins with water poured on the head of an infant clothed in white, the lighting of a candle that is passed on to the parents, and oil rubbed on the head. But it continues over the years to include that clink-clank of the swinging censor and the puffs of strange-smelling smoke that it emits, the glimmer of the sanctuary lamp and all it symbolizes, and so many other things.

These stories and symbols, with their imaginative hold on us, are what Catholics never lose, even when they have come to question or reject outright the dogma. They may make the mistake of taking those stories literally–a common problem for an age that tends to equate truth with facticity. Still, they retain the stories along with the magical moments in the course of their long initiation ritual in the church. This is what authors have called the Catholic imagination, and it explains why Madonna, Lady Gaga and Berlusconi can leave the Catholic Church, but will forever remain residual Catholics because of the images and experiences that stubbornly cling to them.

***Formulas for the Future***

If the strategy of the church is to recapture the past by tightening dogma and redirecting believers to a liturgical celebration that antedates Vatican II, this may prove to be counter-productive.

While certain core beliefs will always remain at the heart of a Catholics’s faith, most of us today also believe that the church’s understanding of our faith grows over the course of its history. Church councils, amplification on the creed at certain times, and sharper definitions of how believers are expected to act in the light of their faith all testify to this. Any summons to recall the core of our faith must be balanced by an admission that the Lord still speaks to us today and that we can never cease working out the concrete demands of this faith in our lives. Deeper self-understanding brings sharper awareness of what the law of love requires of us in our world.

The signal being sent by the church for the past few decades, at least as it is understood by many Catholics today, is the insistence on traditional doctrine with its summons to reclaim the past. While this might offer a sense of certainty that could be enticing, it can discourage those who believe that the church still has a lot to learn. To admit that even the church feels its way along, lurching at times this way and that in its search for the Lord, is to meet half-way those who have left the church or are considering doing so. It is to invite them to become once again real participants in their church rather than just recipients of formulas worked out by the hierarchy.

Likewise, the church must continually seek to awaken the sense of the sacred in its people. But how do we go about building on the Catholic imagination, traditionally so rich in symbols? Do we restore the Latin mass–if not through the language itself, at least through the new English translation with its periodic sentences and quaint expressions, in the hope of recapturing the aura of mystery that the mass held for many of us in our early years? Do we attempt to recreate the pre-Vatican II church, as some would like, in the hope that this will offer sufficient fuel for the Catholic imagination? Our symbols must be awe-inspiring, but also consistent with the notion of the divine that we hope to awaken. “*Dies Irae*” will never again embody the spirit of the divine as it might have for past believers who were captivated by the fear of a punitive god seated in judgment of wrongdoers.

We need not depend on all the old symbols to have that same enduring effect on the people of this age that they may have had upon us. Symbols are necessary, to be sure, but they grow out of our understanding of the divine, an understanding that can change from one age to another. The Catholic Church has always possessed a large inventory of symbols on which to draw in its rituals, liturgical or otherwise. There is no reason to suppose that its symbolic storeroom will suddenly become bare today.

The liturgical reforms following Vatican II may have led to the loss of some of the old symbols, but they have also reclaimed others that had previously fallen into disuse. The Paschal candle, the light and darkness of the Easter Vigil service, the shared cup at the Eucharist, oil in anointing–all these are reclaimed treasures. Compare the wealth of the present-day Easter Vigil service with the tedious ceremony that was once celebrated on Saturday morning in an empty church to get a sense of just how far we have come.

The Catholic Church has a rich history of being able to mine different cultures and ages for what it needs to speak to the hearts of people. Somehow the church has been able to feed both the Latino and the Slavic imagination, not to mention the Chinese and the Malaysian. It has done so because of its firm conviction that God speaks to his people through their lives and history. To give its faithful the impression it is surrendering this conviction in the face of the present faith crisis will only deepen the doubts of its members and extend the crisis.

Even in a darkening sky, we might be better off unfurling the sails and trusting in the Spirit to fill our sails and keep us safely on course.

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