

2/17/06

A friend wrote recently: Where is the leadership in our church? The leadership continues to honor those archdiocesan leaders, both lay and religious, who looked the other way and allowed the abuse and the pedophilia to spread.

Why was he upset? It seems that the St. Thomas More Society of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia recently presented the St. Thomas More Award to C. Clark Hodgson, Jr. This is the same Catholic jurist who was quoted in the news as saying, "...church officials were not obligated by state law to report sex-abuse cases to civil authorities unless the actual child victim notified the church personally. If the child's parent filed the complaint with the archdiocese, however, church officials did not have to notify the police..."

My correspondent continues, "By their very nature and evil, sexual abuse crimes involve control and manipulation on the part of the perpetrator and shame and disgust on the part of the victim. And the Church hierarchy was expecting these young, vulnerable, and violated elementary and high school children to come forward THEMSELVES to report the crimes directly???"

The Saint Thomas More Award is given annually to "a member of the legal profession whose accomplishments in some way represent the principles and ideals of St. Thomas More. A practitioner of his Catholic religion, he combined an intense concern for the problems of his day with a personal moral commitment. **And he placed obedience to his conscience over blind obedience to governmental authority.**"

[If you would like an edited copy of the letter my friend wrote to the counsel for the Archdiocese expressing his outrage and disappointment, let me know.]

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2/13/06

Idolatry. What an archaic concept. Who believes in idols today?

The first commandment of the Decalogue commands, "You shall have no strange gods before me."

Anybody out there burning incense to idols? Anyone sacrificing animals to molten calves? Does this commandment have any relevance at all to us today?

Unfortunately, some religious people have turned their religion into an idol. Rather than perceiving their religious affiliation as an instrument of mutual support, they see it as an absolute indication of their salvation. Even if that involves the exclusion of everyone else.

Jesus himself refused to be made into an idol. Could that be the reason for the “Messianic secret”?

He clearly stated that he came to bring us closer to “the One who sent him.”

When a church claims absolute authority to speak for God, then it is not only being presumptuous, but it is also coming dangerously close to making itself into a molten calf.

We can not buy our way into heaven by our obedience to an institution. Jesus, and all great religious thinkers have told us that salvation is a gift.

How long will it take for those who guard the gate to understand this.

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**2/10/06**

On the first Sunday in July, 1989, I went to St. Kevin’s Church in Flushing to fill in for a couple of masses. I kept “filling in” for the next 15 years. And I loved every minute of it.

Back then, Sr. Sheila Browne choreographed the liturgy in the parish, and when Holy Week came she asked me to take the part of the Narrator in the Passion. She explained, “The priest is meant to be the story-teller – the conveyer of myth. So it’s right that he should tell the story and let others take the roles of Jesus and the Speaker.”

Her observation, that the priest is meant to narrate – to tell the stories and to convey the myth – became the foundation of my evolving theology of priesthood and Sacraments (and also the topic of my Doctoral Project – but more on that some other time).

I began to extend this insight from the liturgy of the Word into the liturgy of the Eucharist. I was struck that one of the components of the Eucharistic Prayer is called the “Institution Narrative.” It is called a narrative!

A narrative tells a story. It conveys a myth.

This is exactly how Jesus taught. He told stories that conveyed myths – profound truths that could not be communicated in any other way than poetic imagery and stories. He did this because the message he came to deliver was unfathomable. It was the very mystery of God, and of the Love that was the underpinning of Creation. How else do you convey this Myth except in the form of story?

When the celebrant of the Eucharist recites the Institution Narrative, he is entering into the language and Myth of the Christ. He is not (I suggest) changing

bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Christ. He is, rather, announcing that Food and Drink are sacred. He (unfortunately, only a He) is performing in a stylized and ritualistic way what every cook and provider performs at meal time. He or she (the cook, now) is saying, "Look what I have provided for you out of love. Take and eat. Take and drink. This food is who I am. It is the sacrament of my love for you."

But it goes further.

Jesus was also saying, "If I am in bread and wine, if I can be born in a cave, if I can be in you with all your sins and weaknesses, then I can be anywhere." If the words of Jesus, "Those who hear you hear me, and those who hear me hear also the One who sent me," mean anything, they mean this. God lives in us and speaks through us.

The celebrant of Eucharist, the narrator who repeats the words two thousand years later, is not taking something that was profane and making it sacred. The celebrant is calling our attention to the pervasive presence of the Christ, in whom all things are already somehow holy.

Like John the Baptist said, "Look! There is the Lamb of God!" And there! And there!

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Hi Tony!

I've been reflecting on prayer... and I'm currently taking an enrichment course on it where we are learning about different types of prayer. Today it occurred to me that prayer seems so complex. I mean...I'm taking a class about it. So, for a simple-minded person this must be an almost impossible level to reach. It seems silly to TEACH people how to pray, in what ways, etc. How can talking to and listening to God be so involved? Does that mean that children, mentally disabled and people who are just not intellectually sound unable to reach certain levels of prayer?

Am I being too narrow-minded about this? I would appreciate your thoughts...

Have a good day!

Love, B.

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Dear B.,

I think prayer is as simple and as difficult as allowing oneself to be loved. It's as

hard as we make it.

Some people, sometimes the most simple, are born with a capacity to simply "be" in the presence of God. Others have to work at quieting themselves, and frequently have to work at it for years before they attain the necessary openness.

The most important thing about prayer is that it's two-sided. I speak to God; God speaks to me. And I have no control over God.

So conceivably a person could pray for years and may never experience God speaking to them.

For me, often, my prayer has been a prayer of waiting: simply making myself available, placing myself in God's presence, and waiting for Someone who may or may not show up.

But I believe that there is value in the waiting. The waiting itself can be prayer. Many holy people have written about prayer over the ages. If the course is leaving you with a sense of the complexity of prayer that's fine. But if the course is making it sound impossible or extremely difficult, then I wonder if the person teaching it is a theoretician or if he or she is really a pray-er themselves.

Sure, there are a lot of things you can learn about prayer, but basically it's very simple. God wants to engage you, and you have to be available.

Just rest in His/Her presence, and enjoy!

Let's keep talking about this. Clearly I have a few things to say about it.

Love,

A.

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To the Editor of the (Brooklyn) Tablet:

I am troubled by the "lavish praise" bestowed on President Bush by Supreme Knight Carl Anderson. His gratitude that Bush has "restor(ed) moral integrity to the office of the Presidency" implies that misleading comments (even before a grand jury) are of more consequence than the lies that cost hundreds of American lives and thousands of Iraqi lives in Iraq: lies about weapons of mass destruction; lies about an Iraq – al Qaeda connection; lies about an imminent threat to our country by Saddam Hussein.

And your editorial suggestion that the Democratic platform is somehow flawed because of its stance on pro-life issues ignores the fact that guns kill almost 30,000 Americans a year with the "blessing" of the Republican Party, that our misguided effort in Iraq is harmful to Iraqi mothers and children, and that \$417 billion in military appropriations rob those already born in our country of education, housing, sustenance and health care.

Don't the Knights and the American bishops realize that they are being exploited by a cynical political machine that will forget the Catholic voter after the election and turn its attention to the only segment of the population that matters to it – the conservative, corporate coalition?

It will be interesting to see if the Catholic press will be as ruthless in critiquing the Republican platform.

Sincerely,  
Anthony S. Ercolano

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To the Editor of the (Brooklyn) Tablet:

I take strong exception to your assertion that the Democratic Party is not hospitable to the right-to-life agenda.

For Republicans to claim the high ground in the right to life debate they would first have to renounce their support for laws and policies that compel women to choose between a life of poverty for their children and terminating a pregnancy. Often those who wish to legally restrict abortion provide the least assistance for families with children.

Republicans have bankrupted the Federal government with handouts to corporations and the wealthy so that we are now virtually incapable of caring for our poor and vulnerable, most of whom are mothers and dependent children. This is in direct violation of Catholic social teaching, which demands that all economic policies must be predicated on a “preferential option for the poor.” Many Democrats feel that by providing increased social services for mothers and infants we can ultimately make abortion a rarity.

I want to see a society in which a woman will never have to terminate a pregnancy because she is afraid that she will not be able to provide adequate food, shelter and health care for her children. This is a life issue.

Furthermore, it may be heretical to assert that the God “who sends the sun to shine on the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous” would value the life of the innocent over the life of the guilty, the life of the infant over the life of the soldier, the life of the American over the life of the Iraqi. Every human life (innocent and “guilty”) is precious in the eyes of God, whose perfection we are asked to strive for.

I would like to see the Republican Party distance itself from a White House that is making personnel changes that will assuredly result in an even more belligerent foreign policy. This is a life issue.

I would also like to see the Republicans distance themselves from their support for the death penalty, and its champion, the former Governor of Texas. This is a life issue.

We don't need a Democratic Party that moves to the center. We need one that is, and continues to be, radically pro-life.

I am proud to be a pro-life Democrat. And I feel welcome.

Sincerely,  
Anthony S. Ercolano

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A friend from Mineola, NY sent this article to me and asked for my opinion. My response follows the article.

You will find the article [HERE](#)

Dear R,

I think Bishop Bruskewitz may be a good Catholic but he is not a very good Christian. While he is canonically within his rights to excommunicate anyone he wants, something in me feels that Jesus would not be pleased.

Jesus did not have litmus tests. Anyone who came to him wanting to be fed was fed. He didn't ask, "Are you practicing birth control? Do you masturbate? Have you had an abortion? Are you re-married? Are you offended by the presence of my female followers?" He just fed them. Jesus was not about excluding people but making all feel welcome.

The only ones he reprimanded were the self-righteous religious leaders of his day who "laid heavy burdens on others' shoulders, but did nothing to help them carry them." I wonder where Jesus would stand today. Would he be outside the whited sepulcher in Lincoln?

(By the way, I believe that Bishop Bruskewitz is the only American bishop refusing to go along with United States' Bishops' Conference norms on clergy sexual abuse. Jesus said, "Whoever scandalizes one of these little ones would be better off with a millstone hung around his neck and hurled into the sea." Should Bishop Bruskewitz be excommunicated for his failure to address the scandal?) Conversation is not a sin. It is the pathway to truth, and God is Truth. If we can't talk and disagree and espouse challenging issues, then let's just stop pretending that we are the Church. If you read the "Acts of the Apostles" you will see that the early Christians argued long and hard about very divisive issues. At no point did Peter stand up and say, "This conversation is over because it risks dividing the Church." They found the truth by remaining prayerfully engaged in the argument. That's my church.

Love to your family,  
Tony