



*A Simple Menu*

“Who do people say that I am?” This is the question that Jesus puts to his disciples in the Gospel today. They begin to answer him by appeal to other people’s opinions. But that is not what he is after so he asks the question again. Finally it is Peter who answers, “You are the Christ”. In Matthew’s Gospel this is when Simon receives the name of Peter and the keys of the kingdom before proceeding to the passage that follows. But Mark skips over the naming and focuses on the immediate betrayal of the name. Jesus began to speak to them about how he must suffer. Peter attempts to rebuke Jesus. Jesus in turn says “Get behind me Satan, you are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.”

There is a parallel to this story going on right now in our own Church and even in our own hearts. Who Jesus is seems to be up for grabs, with people redefining him in every conceivable way to make him fit into the categories of thought that are in vogue or to make exceptions for human weakness and the proclivities of disordered affections. There are people who are walking away from the Church and we are told that we have to accommodate them and change in order to make room for their unrepented sin, heresy or apostasy. The role of Peter after he falls and is redeemed is to “confirm the faith of the Brethren.” It is now Peter who should be saying “Get behind me Satan, you are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.” Every preacher of the Gospel is charged with the same.

But we live in a presumptive age. We have a presumption that we’re all going to heaven. Isn’t that nice? “In the pre-Vatican II days all they talked about was hell. Aren’t we glad that we have been liberated and emancipated from such bad thoughts. We don’t ever have to worry about sin or hell ever again because everything is giggles and rainbows and sunshine.”

Have you looked around lately? Read the news? Looked at your own heart? There are at lot more hurricanes than we let on. Even if they may get downgraded to tropical storms, they still cause havoc and chaos, death and destruction. There is a naive optimism in the ‘new-fangled’ Catholicism of the 60’s, 70’s and 80’s that is not tempered in reality and which now must be approached with sobriety.

If we’re honest and truthful the presumption should be not that we are going to heaven but that we’re going to hell. You may think that to be harsh, but can you tell me a more humble approach to the reality of death? “domine, non sum dignus” But here is the good news. Our God doesn’t want you to go to hell, because he loves you. He sent His son into the world to rescue you from Hell. Jesus Christ is the Way. If it weren’t for Jesus we would have no hope but for hell. But see how this faith thing works: We must cling to the Way or be lost. If we belong to Jesus we have hope of salvation; we have the hope of heaven. If we do not cling to Jesus he will not force our hand. That’s why our song is not “Jesus is a swell fella, y’all should get to know him, but don’t worry if you don’t, everyone is going to heaven”, nor is it “Jesus has some nice things to say that will make you feel good inside and all that counts is warm fuzzy feelings.” Rather our song is “Thank you Jesus, without you we’d be lost!” “Praise be to you Jesus! Without you, the doors of heaven would be inaccessible to us! Glory be to you Jesus, you paid the price that I could never



have paid and I owe you a debt of gratitude that can only be paid by a life of at least attempted virtue.”

Jesus is the just judge and our lives are owed to our Creator. It is only in humble submission of our lives to Jesus Christ that we will stand before that judgment seat and have a claim. “Jesus, you could rightly condemn me to hell, but remember, you claimed me as your own and made me a part of your body, so I beg of you, for the sake of your sorrowful passion have mercy on me and on the whole world.”

People ask me why I am traditional and seemingly ‘old-school’ or as some say, Pre-vatican II. I tell them, well first of all, the Catholic Church did not begin to exist in 1962 and 1900 years is a lot of time to exist to just to be forgotten or done away with; there is wisdom there to be had and I am not going to take it for granted especially in exchange for the beige and mauve of the 60’s. Also, I hold firmly to all of the documents of the Second Vatican Council as inspired by the Holy Spirit and I see them as a part of a continuity with the movement of the Holy Spirit throughout the ages including all the other Ecumenical Councils before. There is no such thing as a pre-Vatican II church and a post-Vatican II church. Anyone who tells you there is, is selling you a bill of goods, a white elephant, and whether wittingly or not is doing the devil’s work of rupturing or dividing. Sure there were changes on the surface level and discipline just like in every age there must be, but the substance of the faith did not change and what earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too.

The turmoil we are seeing in the Church now is a direct result of those who ruptured this continuity. It was sprung from disobedience. We see this in the dissent from authentic church teaching, especially in matters of who the human being is and therefore the nature of sex and sexuality. There was dissent on the matter of artificial contraception, which, by the way, continues to this day to be proclaimed as intrinsically evil. There was dissent on the matter of divorce and remarriage, which should have been settled by simply appeal to the very words of Jesus Christ in the Gospel. Now, there is dissent on the matter of the intrinsically disordered nature of same-sex sexual activity. This dissent happened among the laity for sure, but more scandalously it happened among the priests and bishops of the Church! There are so many who are acting like Peter in today’s gospel, thinking as human beings do and not as God; who are trying to accommodate the sinner rather than accompany him to the truth. How many bishops and priests have made excuses for the flesh to the faithful because first they had made excuses for the flesh for themselves. There is no wonder then that we are seeing its ramifications in the latest scandal the Church is facing.

If all I do as a priest is accommodate broken humanity, I offer nothing of substance to the world. My role is not to accommodate the sin but rather to present the gospel to the sinner so that he can be set free. My job is not to make people feel good about themselves, rather it is to help them to actually be good!

Let me give you an example of the signs of our times - I was called to the hospital this past week. A woman was dying. I explained that I would celebrate the Last rites of the Church, which includes absolution from sin. I invited the woman to turn her heart to the Lord and ask him for forgiveness for any and all sins. The husband of the woman perked up and said, somewhat sentimentally, if not piously, that she never sinned; she was just good all her life. He even concluded that she didn’t need the absolution that I was offering, that she was just fine the way she



was. While I thought this a very sentimental thought it had eternal ramifications if left unanswered. In the most tactful way (the proper definition of pastoral by the way) I explained that we should leave that matter up to God and say the prayers anyway. He agreed. If I were to have simply taken his word for it, I should have omitted the absolution from sins. But I didn't. If he were directing the rites he would have omitted that part out of a disastrous presumption. But that was my role, was it not? To be a shepherd, to lead the sheep to safe pasture. I know that we are all sinners and are in need of redemption by the saving and atoning blood of Christ. Just because the man felt that his wife never sinned in his eyes doesn't mean she actually was sinless in the eyes of God. The husband, in his sentimental state, would deny his wife the saving sacrament of reconciliation in order to prop up an image of her as sinless when she was in fact a sinner like the rest of us. This is indicative of a false religion that has crept in to even those who would self-identify as Catholic Christians. Now mind you, I do not think the man to be evil, I just think him to have been misled. Many who wave the flag of the 'spirit of Vatican II' have recreated religion into a 'feel-good' activity. We have replaced the pantocrator, the judge of all, with the sentimental Jesus. Most are not evil people. They are just misled or are naive. But reduced to its logical conclusion, sentimental Jesus is simply 'nice' Jesus who never has a hard word, who grants all of our wishes like a genie and of course would never condemn anyone to hell. "Get behind me Satan, you are thinking not as God does, but as man!" Just read the Gospel and tell me how many times Jesus talks about wailing and grinding of teeth?!?

Another thing that happened this week is that I was discussing the state of the Church with a young man. We were lamenting the fact that we as a people have lost a sense of the proper 'fear of the Lord' and that it was because we have lost a sense of the temporal punishment due to sin. You will remember from your catechism that all sin has both temporal (that is, worldly) consequences as well as eternal (that is hellish) consequences. Forgiveness of sins is geared towards the hellish consequences but it is reparation and atonement that are geared towards the worldly consequences. That is why every time you go to confession you get a penance - it is usually just a token of reparation but we must participate in our little way in the rebuilding of what we have destroyed by sin. Absolution absolves one of the eternal consequences of sin, but the penance is an acknowledgment that there are temporal effects that need dealing with too. The problem we have seen is the movement away from any acknowledgement of the temporal effects of sin to a simple "good feelings" approach because we are forgiven. Friday abstinence still remains the rule for practicing Catholics, but many are ignorant of this practice. Fast days that before had been prescribed, like ember days and rogation days have all but disappeared. We don't know how to mortify the flesh by giving up good and pleasurable things because we are told it is a psychological illness to deny ourselves. The practical ramification in this current abuse crisis is that while bishops often saw sin for what it is, hellish, they failed to see the temporal effects of this sin, much less do anything about it. They did not punish the guilty because they didn't want to appear judgmental. Canon law has procedures to punish criminals and yet in the name of false mercy these bishops denied the temporal punishment due to sin and gave a pass to people who should have been punished. We have forgotten Justice because it requires suffering, and we say with Peter, "God forbid anyone should suffer!" "Get behind me Satan! You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."

I will tell of one positive tale. It is an unlikely success story of a company that thinks as God does and not as man. You will immediately recognize this company; you may have even frequented it. There are many who revile it and claim hatred and bigotry. And yet this company thrives. Chick-



fil-a is a fast food chain that sells chicken sandwiches. Their menu, though amplified in recent years, is uncommonly simple: chicken sandwiches. Their surprising lack of diversity should make them unattractive. Furthermore, they have the gall to close their doors on Sunday, not even opening for sporting events! Surely, they are doomed to fail. And of course the last nail in their coffin, their founder Dan Cathy, dared to promote a natural law based and biblical understanding of marriage as being between one man and one woman. Surely, their doors are about to be shuttered the other 6 days of the week.

And yet, just the other day I saw a new Chik-fil-a opened in Ooltewah on my way to Knoxville. I decided to stop by. You should have seen it. To go through the drive-thru they have double lanes because one would not be enough to accommodate the traffic. Both lanes wrapped around the building and stretched well beyond building itself. They even had to block one of the entrances into the parking lot to control the traffic because the line was so long. They were quick and courteous with their service and of course the food was good. As I drove off, I passed Burger King, McDonalds, Wendy's and Krystal - none of them had a line more than a few cars deep.

Imagine if the Catholic Church simply did the work of Faith like this company. If she just lived what she taught without trying to accommodate public opinion. With no malice in mind or heart, let us simply state what we have received from the Lord through His Catholic Church, "You are the Christ!". Let's not conform our minds to this age but confirm our faith that Jesus Christ is the Lord of Church, of our Hearts, of our Minds and yes even of our bodies! He has asked us to pick up our cross and follow him. If you want to do it another way, there is an Episcopalian Church down the street as well as a Unitarian Universalist church. I don't say that in a mean spirit. I just want us to be honest and fair - if you don't believe what the Catholic Church believes and teaches, don't try to change it. Our menu is pretty simple - The Body and Blood of Christ, Sunday is our holy day and we proclaim sex is meant for marriage between one man and one woman. This is not a consumer product looking for Yelp reviews. It is a voluntary association; you can leave whenever you want to. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord in His Catholic Church, not trying to change it, but humbly submitting to her saving doctrine.

I will close with a prayer by St. Francis Xavier that has always been dear to me:

My God, I love Thee, not because I hope for heaven thereby; Nor yet since they who love Thee not must burn eternally.

Thou, O my Jesus, Thou didst me upon the Cross embrace;

For me didst bear the nails and spear, and manifold disgrace;

And griefs and torments numberless, and sweat of agony;

E'en death itself; and all for one who was Thine enemy.

Then why, O blessed Jesus Christ, should I not love Thee well, not for the sake of winning heaven, or of escaping hell;

Not with the hope of gaining aught, not seeking a reward;

But as Thyself hast loved me, O ever-loving Lord?

E'en so I love Thee, and will love, and in Thy praise will sing, solely because Thou art my God, and my Eternal King.