

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, B – July 29, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,300 words

This weekend begins a series of several Sundays going through chapter six of John’s Gospel: the great chapter on the Holy Eucharist. And, as is usually the case, the first reading each week will in some way be an Old Testament prefiguration or complement to what Jesus teaches about his Body and Blood in the gospel. The second reading often does not directly relate, but affords the possibility of seeing another dimension of the gospel in its light. And this week that is the case, as we hear the famous passage from St. Paul: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”; our patron thus invites us, as it were, to consider our unity in God – and this certainly has to do with the Holy Eucharist as well.

Starting in the fourth century and taking about a hundred years to resolve, there was a controversy that split the Church in Africa, wounding the unity of which St. Paul speaks. It was known as the Donatist heresy.<sup>1</sup> Heresy always has some element of truth, but it’s only partial, because some other aspect of the truth ends up being sacrificed or distorted. The Donatists taught that if a bishop or priest were guilty of a mortal sin, then his sacraments were invalid. The consequences would obviously be great – especially with regard to the Eucharist. The Church, of course, clarified that the sacraments work *ex opere operato*:<sup>2</sup> that is, if a validly ordained and duly authorized priest or bishop celebrates with the correct form and matter and the right intention, then the sacrament happens regardless of his moral condition. This is because Christ himself is the minister of the sacrament, acting through the bishop or priest. And so we say that bishops and priests act *in persona Christi* – in the person of Christ – when celebrating the sacraments.<sup>3</sup>

Now a priest or bishop should never celebrate a sacrament in a state of mortal sin. We intuitively understand this: he, consecrated to God through the sacrament of Holy Orders – set apart for divine worship – should approach the altar in purity of heart and clarity of conscience. We might recall various scenes in the Old Testament where a minister was struck dead if he approached the Holy of Holies in the wrong way!<sup>4</sup> Therefore, we could perhaps sympathize with the Donatists, as they rightly sensed the dignity of the priestly office and what that requires. But ultimately, it’s as if they focused so much on that point that they excluded the action and promises of Christ, who will never leave his Church and works even through very sinful ministers to bring his presence to his people. “The gates of hell will not prevail”:<sup>5</sup> he is “with us always, until the end of the world”.<sup>6</sup>

In the last month or so, grave and credible allegations of predatorial actions have arisen concerning an American cardinal, accused of homosexual behavior with seminarians, priests, and at least one minor. The details, in fact, can rightfully be described as ‘monstrous’. Grave charges have also been brought against an auxiliary bishop in Honduras, and the Holy Father accepted his resignation: this suggests that the allegations (again, predatorial in nature and involving seminarians) are substantial and credible. There are a few other current situations I could name, but suffice to say, we find ourselves in another major ecclesial crisis – one which now directly implicates even bishops and cardinals. Many of you have heard about these things in the news and are angry and fed up. I don’t blame you: I feel much the same way.

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<sup>1</sup> I have greatly “boiled down” the explanation of this heresy here; for more, see the *Old Catholic Encyclopedia* article on it, accessible at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05121a.htm>

<sup>2</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1128.

<sup>3</sup> See *Catechism*, nos. 1548-1551; see also no. 1348.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Leviticus 10:1-3.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 16:18.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 28:20.

We as a Church have been through so much already in this regard, and even if these types of sins and crimes happen at all levels of human society – and thus, there is a wider problem that still needs to be addressed – yet they should never happen among men of the Church: men who have been consecrated to God, whose hands have been anointed with the sacred Chrism, whom Christ has claimed for his own; men who, by doing such despicable things, not only cause untold harm to souls and such great scandal, but also deeply offend our Lord and prolong his suffering through time. In the present case, these are literally “sins that cry to heaven for vengeance”, as the scriptures teach and the Catechism reminds us.<sup>7</sup> It is proper and normal to be upset. Perhaps, for some, this situation is even a test of faith. But that’s why I bring up the matter of the Donatist heresy: no matter how morally evil a minister may be, Christ remains faithful, and so we should remain faithful to Christ: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism”.

Indeed, God, in his providence, has chosen for us to live in this time and not some other – not in some golden age but in this present “valley of tears”. So we must ask him what he wants us to do. How may we be “part of the solution”? Even if we are not victims, our hearts go out to those who are, and we sense that we can help them with our prayers. More than that, we see that these sins and crimes gravely wound the unity of the Church and undermine her credibility in the world. My mind goes to the gospel passage where the disciples were perplexed for being unable to cast out a certain demon; the Lord responded to them that “this type is only cast out by prayer and fasting”.<sup>8</sup> Prayer and fasting: yes, this is, I believe, what we may be lacking at present. How many scandals have we already witnessed in our time? How many yet remain to be revealed? We must pray. And I would invite you to join your prayer to fasting, to sacrifice.

Thursday, in fact, is the day of the week that Jesus instituted the priesthood and gave twelve men and their successors the power to make his saving action present in the world, regardless of their moral worthiness. It has always been a privileged day of prayer for priests and bishops. I know that many of you already pray for the Church’s ministers, but I would invite all to step up their prayer and add some element of sacrifice to it – and then to persevere. Perhaps the fruit of our reflection this week could be a resolution to do something particular each Thursday: making some sacrifice known only to the Lord and offering it up for the purification of his Church. This demon must be cast out. O Lord, deliver us from it! Help all of our bishops and priests to have the holiness that befits their high calling – and raise up many more good men who will be shepherds after your own heart and never tolerate any such evil!

If you take up this challenge, you will merit special graces for the purification of the Church – graces which you may never know about till heaven, but important graces nonetheless. Acts of charity such as prayer and sacrifice help us to overcome any anger and persevere in God’s love. They help to strengthen the Church’s unity. Yes, in this situation justice is needed; more laws and policies probably need to be enacted. But let us not rely on merely technical solutions. The reform of the Church begins with you and me, through deeper conversion of life and greater fidelity to God’s call.<sup>9</sup> This crisis is thus an opportunity for us all. The Lord has chosen us to live in this time and to be part of the solution. I could say far more than I already have, and indeed, feel I have hardly done this matter justice. But the time has come to pass from words to silence, and consider what indeed the Lord is asking of us – and how we will respond.

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<sup>7</sup> See Genesis 18:20, Genesis 19:13, and *Catechism* 1867.

<sup>8</sup> See Mark 9:27-29.

<sup>9</sup> The maxim *Ecclesia semper reformanda* – The Church must always be reformed – has consistently been interpreted by the saints as requiring the personal conversion of each one of her members. The greatest times of reform in the Church’s history have coincided with the raising-up of great saints.