

Saint Leo the Great - Lenten Parish Retreat
Reflection IV. Saturday, March 28, 2020

Over the past three reflections I have covered the necessity for us to take stock of our lives in relationship to the way we have lived (the past) with a mind to making things right in our relationship with God and others (the present) through Reconciliation and the importance of taking stock of the world in which we in the Church live. I touched on only some of the many major issues. that we should know God would find offensive according to the order in which He created all things, we face today and while personally we may not be participants in some of these issues, we are called to stand up against them in a culture that only too easily wants to *live and let live*, mind your own business and say nothing. Even when we are presented with ways in which we can make our Catholic voices known, we often neglect to do so.

This brings us to my fourth and final Reflection: the way in which we live in this world.

Venerable Fulton J. Sheen in a talk he gave to priests several decades ago, stated something to the effect that:

Every five hundred years the Church, and the world too, undergoes a major change. In the first five hundred years of Christianity the issues she dealt with were about Christ Himself with questions like the humanity and the divinity of Christ; how many intellects and how many wills were in Christ. This is a time when the Church was making clear what it had always believed and had to contend with many heresies and heretics who were suggesting otherwise. In the second five hundred years there was the question of who was the head of the Church, resulting in the schism between the Catholic and the Orthodox church. In the third five hundred year period there was the culmination of questions concerning the body of the Church which resulted in the Protestant Reformation when they eliminated many of the most important elements of the Church with the abolition of the priesthood, many of the sacraments but principally the Eucharist, and an emphasis on the Word of God alone being the rule of faith. Sheen then said, at the time he was speaking, that we are nearing the end of another five hundred year period and what do we have? No more heresies (to speak of) and no more schisms. The question is the world in which we live. Christ is saying to us – and is asking us in our time – will you become secular? Will you leave Me?

Today we witness a general and continuous falling away from the faith. Many people who once had the faith, lost it. Many left Catholicism altogether and went toward an evangelical form of church which emphasized greater attention on the word of God in long sermons, moving, performance-style music ministries and an overall emphasis on the individual.



In fact, the largest growing community within Christianity in North America is ex-Catholics. It would be easy to assume that this steady decline and falling away from the Catholic Church was due to some specific factors that were the fault of the Church herself, though in reality the faith and the teaching of the Catholic Church had not changed in two thousand years. In some areas, perhaps some were looking for better quality teaching by preachers that were on fire with the Gospel and Jesus Christ Himself, which, admittedly, many Catholic priests

might not see as their best gift and prefer to capitalize on others. Yet, we don't go or shouldn't go to Mass for the priest or a homily but for Jesus, Himself. Often when Catholics left the Church they said they did so because "they didn't feel they were being fed", which is an interesting phrase as one leaves a

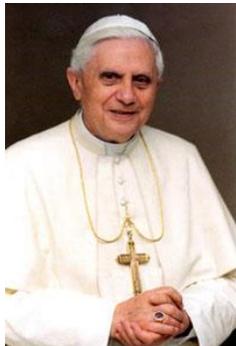
Eucharistic (fed-based) Church that has since the institution by Christ Himself the night before He died, believed in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist: Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. Catholics have always been fed by Jesus Himself in the Eucharist and yet, so many haven't learned this, been taught this, had this reality presented to them as solid, revealed teaching.

There have also, in more recent times, been those who may have left the Catholic Church over the great scandal and evil (and it is evil) of paedophile priests who have sexually abused children and young people and whose actions were often covered up by their superiors in the Church, often allowing the abusers themselves continue on in their abuse or were moved elsewhere to unsuspecting parishes that would also in time, suffer in their members for the evil that a single priest could do, harming and permanently injuring the innocent. While the Church has been forced in more recent times to seriously and finally address this issue and create hard and fast policies that would ensure that no further cover ups would take place regarding any priest who was legitimately accused of sexual abuse. It is rightly a grave scandal that those who were called by Christ to be shepherds after Christ Himself would themselves end up devouring the sheep entrusted to their pastoral care.

So the Church herself must undergo change and reform in response to the serious ways in which she has been corrupted with sin and evil actions. Throughout history, when the Church has been holy, the attack has come from the outside. When the Church is unholy, the attack comes from within, in its members.

It's not easy or popular to go against the crowd. In fact, it's quite uncomfortable and unattractive particularly when we want to be accepted by others. How easy it is to desire to go-with-the-flow rather than stand up against the crowd to defend what is right, good and in line with the teaching of Christ and His Church. Yet, the reality is that this life as we know it is short. We are not meant to live in these bodies we borrowed from our parents forever, but for a very short time compared to the Eternity that is promised by Christ and awaits those who are faithful to Him in both small and great things.

"God is thinning our ranks", said Ven. Fulton Sheen. "In every age, God has done His best work with minorities, never majorities." Pope Benedict said when speaking on *Faith and the Future* in San Francisco in 2009, *"She (The Catholic Church) will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity."* He also said words that should bolster us as Catholics in a world where Catholics fear what is to become of the Church Christ Himself said would not be prevailed upon by any earthly forces... "the gates of hell will not prevail against it". (Matt. 16:18)



"Dear friends, may no adversity paralyze you. Be afraid neither of the world, nor of the future, nor of your weakness. The Lord has allowed you to live in this moment of history so that, by your faith, His name will resound throughout the world."

It would seem that the lack of success in continuing to expand but rather experience a constant decline in her numbers is yet a sign of God's calling to us Catholics to a new authenticity. Institutions which bear the name 'Catholic' are no longer necessarily so and in time these may pass away altogether as they conform more and more to the standards of the world and not of Christ. We have Christ's assurance that the Church will not fail even though now she appears as giving confused messages and as if she is all for conforming to the world and its spirit. In every age Christ has been calling all members of the Church to face the world and the future with courage and fearlessness. We have only Christ to be faithful to and it is He who will protect and sustain the Church throughout all manner of adversity, oppression and attack. We know how this story of salvation will end – in the ultimate and lasting triumph of Jesus Christ, our King and Lord. He calls us to be faithful to Him and all He has given us.

Christ cares for the world He made and the Church He founded and throughout history has called great popes, saints and martyrs and everyday Catholics to witness to His truth and teachings. Through these giants of the faith Christ has provided us with great and holy leadership and at times has allowed corrupt leaders to do their evil for we always get the pope we deserve as they are a reflection of the Church and society and our desire to go the way of the world. Yet Christ, in every age, raises up holy men and women and tells us not to be afraid for He has already conquered the world.



LOVE OF THE BLESSED MOTHER

In 'looking back', part of the theme of this retreat, we may have touched upon memories of our childhood, which can be both positive, fond and nostalgic or even painful and sad. Perhaps one of the great sadness's of our time, a tragedy in fact, is that so many of our children are not being raised with any exposure to the faith, or perhaps worse, exposure to that which is not authentically Catholic and Christ-centered at all. One can have everything and nothing at the same time in that having faith and having faith passed on to us is everything when one thinks of eternity and life with God in the here and now of the earth and forever.

In the last century Our Lady, the Blessed Mother of God, has been sent by God to appear to people on earth, often mere young children, to deliver a message to the people of the earth that they need to come back to love of God, for God loves them greatly. Devotion to Mary, which is experiencing a return in our time, is important as we see her as the woman who was chosen by God to give Him a human nature. Since God made His own Mother He had the power to make her the most perfect woman who ever lived – and she is. Pray to her. Ask her to pray for you and pray the powerful form of prayer known as the Rosary. It will be a grace to you as you

pray to the Mother of Jesus, who told His disciples, "Do whatever He tells you." Be a child of Jesus and Mary.

Lovely Lady Dressed in Blue by Mary Dixon Thayer

Lovely Lady dressed in blue—teach me how to pray!
God was just your little Boy, tell me what to say!

Did you lift Him up sometimes, gently, on your knee?
Did you sing to Him the way mother does to me?

Did you hold his hand at night? Did you ever try
telling stories of the world? O! And did He cry?

Do you really think He cares if I tell Him things---
Little things that happen? And Do the Angel's wings make a noise?

And can He hear me if I speak low? Does He understand me now?
Tell me --- for you know.

Lovely Lady dressed in blue, teach me how to pray!
God was just your little boy, and you know the way.