

Factions and Divisions

“The Devil is prowling like a lion, looking for someone to devour.” (1 Peter 5:8)

The above quoted verse is preceded by the admonition, *“Stay sober and alert!”* Sober, rational attentiveness is an easy thing to lose. And one way people seem to be losing it is in “ideologies.” It is bad enough to see this unfold in our civil government with the two-party system locked in a “left-wing/right-wing” grid-lock. Now, my smart phone---apparently recognizing that I am a Catholic---automatically sends me news feeds from Catholic conspiracy theory outlets who are obsessively anti-Pope Francis: They are putting forth stories ranging from he is a heretic who denies the divinity of Christ to the notion that he is a statue-worshipping pagan.

Against these characterizations, another outlet described these attacks in terms of, what they called, *“a hermeneutic of suspicion;”* which is just a fancy way of saying *“looking for anything which can be held against the Pope.”* This is, very much, what we see occurring in the political sphere of our country: Wild conspiracy theories about political opponents abound! People retreat to their own information bubbles to hear whatever supports what they already believe.

The problem in the Church begins with a reactionary impulse which followed the Second Vatican Council in the 1960’s. The “reactionaries” looked upon the council as a sort of complete break from the past; as if previous councils, forms and devotions were no longer valid. From this attitude there arose many abuses of the Sacred Liturgy (The Mass), and very naïve expectations that a “dialogue with the world” would somehow make the Church more “relevant” in the modern context.

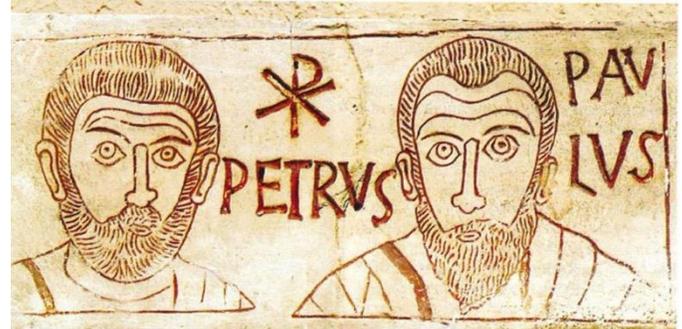
In reaction to this, it seems that somewhere in the 1980’s there arose a traditionalist back-lash against the abuses and the jettisoning of devotions and long-held traditions. Understandable as this is, a “reaction” to a “reaction” often turns into an “over-reaction.” Now we have a sub-culture in the Church stridently promoting forms and modes going back to the period before the Second Vatican Council wherein Mass was prayed in the Latin Language and the Priest’s back was to the laity, and

the vestments were of a certain “Roman” style developed during the period after the Council of Trent, (some 500 years ago).

Regrettably, what we are seeing now is a troubling divisiveness and the cultivating of mutual suspicion between “Vatican II Catholics” and “Traditionalist Catholics.” The former are considered the “liberals” and the latter are the “conservatives.”

In truth, we are all “Vatican II Catholics” in the sense that we are guided by that council’s mode of expression of our Faith for the modern world. Pope Benedict XVI endeavored to convince us that we could interpret that council in “continuity” with the past, not as a rupture or a divorce from it. And this, of course, can only be true! It cannot be that there was one Catholicism then, and a different Catholicism now: It is an updating of the expression of faith which the Council endeavored to provide, in the service of helping modern people comprehend its beauty and profundity.

However, factions in the Church interpreted Benedict’s message as, somehow, encouraging a return to Latin, Roman vestments, and the Tridentine form of the Mass as correctives to the original “reaction.” And what we have now is confusion and divisiveness.



In this context, the very different emphases and styles of Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have been seized upon to define factions: It is Benedict Catholics vs. Francis Catholics. Benedict is a brilliant and holy theologian. Francis brings to bear the heart of a pastor for wounded souls living in messy circumstances. Benedict rejoices in the beauty and profundity of doctrine at a high level. Francis is concerned with how that message is delivered to the weak and the bewildered. These are not mutually exclusive. The current climate of suspicion is terribly toxic. All should re-read 1 Corinthians 1:12ff.