



Homily for 7/28/2019

7th Sunday after Pentecost

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Letter to a Suffering Church

Evil trees and evil fruit. Wolves in sheep's clothing. This sounds a lot like what is happening not only in the world today but also within the Church. There are many things to be scandalized about. There are many who are saying "Lord, Lord!" as if they were believers but are not doing the will of the Father, and the faithful are mortified. In every age we have had to approach God humbled by our many sins but it seems impossible now. The temptation is to flee. To try to find some other hide-out. This is of course the devil's playground. He likes to lure us with the promise of things being better on 'his side of the fence' in some 'perfect church' where there are no heresies and no sinful men.

Vade retro satana! Numquam suade mihi vana! Sunt mala quae libas. Ipse venena bibas! Step back, Satan! Never tempt me with your vanities. What you offer me is evil. Drink your own poison. (the Benedict medal exorcism)

Do not be caught in the lure of the schismatic mind that promises perfection when in fact it is the devil's rouse to sever you from the true vine of Christ's Church. But what are we to make of all of the rot and ruin, error and vice that seems rampant?

Bishop Robert Barron has composed a beautiful "Letter to a Suffering Church" to answer that very question. I was very moved by his words and I wanted to share them with you today.

Bishop Barron starts by telling the story of fallen humanity in Sacred Scripture. That sin and corruption, betrayal and vice is part of the story of salvation. He talks about the devolving sin of Lot who strays from the Lord little by little until he finds himself at odds with God surrounded by sodomy and incest - a perversion of God's plan of human flourishing. He tells about the perversion of holy things and sacred power in Eli and his sons Hophni and Phineas in Shiloh. How Hophni and Phineas 'took the best meat from the sacrifices piously offered by the supplicants at Shiloh and that they were sexually abusing the women who worked at the entry of the meeting tent.' And then, while Eli had strong words against them, he did nothing to stop them. This was accounted as a crime by God: "Though he knew his sons were blaspheming God, he did not reprove them." "In short" says Bishop Barron, "it was not the crimes of Hophni and Phineas that particularly aroused the divine ire, but rather Eli's refusal to act when he was made aware of them."

Of course there is the lesson of David and Bathsheba, which was, like Lot, a fall from one sin to greater sins. David's preference for comfort rather than the rigors of a military campaign led to his indulging in a forbidden desire of adultery. And then, to cover his tracks, he plotted and connived trying to make an innocent man cover for him. When this didn't work he resorted to outright murder. All this from a king of Israel!

He then proceeds to remind us that sin has remained with us even in the new covenant church. He traces the many times that St. Paul had to upbraid the early Christian church for falling into all kinds of immorality. Just read 1st Corinthians or Galatians for starters. But then, even after the apostolic age, our history has some very unflattering characters. He quotes Hilaire Belloc on the Church's leadership, "The Catholic Church is an institution I am bound to hold divine - but for unbelievers a proof of its divinity might be found in the fact that no merely human institution conducted with such knavish imbecility would have lasted a fortnight!" We have had saintly popes and we have had some pretty devilish ones too. Consider too, that though we think that clergy abuse and scandalous behavior is bad today, St. Peter Damian wrote his famous work "The Book of Gomorrah" in the



year 1049 in which he complained of “The befouling cancer of sodomy [which] is, in fact, spreading so through the clergy.” That was 900 years ago.

Bishop Barron then asks the question, “Why should we stay?” We are in good company because even Jesus, when He had given the famous Bread of Life discourses, asked his disciples if they were going to go away, too, after many left Him on account of the hardness of his teaching. The answer is known to us all, and it was given by Peter, “Lord, to whom else are we to go? You have the words of everlasting life.” Bishop Barron says, “Now to be sure, the context today is different, but the fundamental principle remains the same: if you have found in Jesus everlasting life, salvation, the answer to the deepest longing of your heart, then no matter how difficult things become, and no matter how many of your fellows might drift away, you must stay.”

Then he brings to mind the image that St. Paul used when he spoke of treasure in earthen vessels. He says, “I don’t think anyone . . . could doubt . . . just how fragile and compromised the vessels are and have been. If we look around at the situation, we see it; if we look back to the Scriptures, it is evident; if we survey the twenty centuries of Church history, we cannot miss it. Yet the treasure remains. And we stay because of the treasure.” He then makes a blunt point, “There is simply never a good reason to leave the Church. Never. Good reasons to criticize Church people? Plenty. Legitimate reasons to be angry with corruption, stupidity, careerism, cruelty, greed, and sexual misconduct on the part of leaders of the Church? You bet. But grounds for turning away from the grace of Christ in which eternal life is found? No. Never, under any circumstances.”

Bishop Barron then points us through the Mystical Body of the Church, to which we belong by means of the Sacraments, to the true fruit of the Faith – the Saints. He says, “Those who have put on Jesus Christ, who have been divinized through the sacraments, who have the Holy Spirit in them, who have become conformed radically to the Trinitarian love, are called saints. The entire purpose of the Church is to produce them.” “Even as we look around and see sickening corruption in the Church today, and even as we look back at myriad examples of immorality on the part of ecclesial leaders, we must never overlook the saints, who are present in every age and are operative in the world now. They are the lights shining in the gloom.” We call them out in our Litanies and hold them up – Polycarp, Sebastian, Felicity, Perpetua, Lucy, Agnes, Benedict, Dominic, Francis, Catherine of Siena, Ignatius, Francis Xavier, Francis de Sales, Peter Claver, Therese of Lisieux, John Henry Newman, Frances Xavier Cabrini, Damien of Molokai, Maximilian Kolbe, Teresa of Kolkata – the list goes on. These are the fruits. They are the fruits of the Catholic Church.

Bishop Barron concludes his letter by exhorting those who have grown weary to stay and fight. “Above all, fight by your very holiness of life; fight by becoming the saint that God wants you to be; fight by encouraging a decent young man to become a priest; fight by doing a Holy Hour every day for the sanctification of the Church; fight by coming to Mass regularly; fight by evangelizing; fight by doing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.” He concludes by saying, “Perhaps the very best way to be a disciple of Jesus right now is to stay and fight for his Church.”