

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

February 3, 2019

Spiritual Ponderings

Divine Renovations Old Heresies Made New

Last October, I attended a conference entitled “The Amazing Parish.” One of the keynote speakers at this conference was Fr. James Mallon. Fr. Mallon is a priest of the Archdiocese of Halifax-Yarmouth in Nova Scotia, Canada. Fr. Mallon became a best-selling author. His book *Divine Renovation: From a Maintenance to a Mission Parish* Fr. Mallon talks about how he was able to lead a parish from the brink of closing to become a very vibrant Catholic community. I was very impressed with his insights into the current problems that are plaguing the Church and I enjoyed listening to some of his ideas of how to address these issues. As soon as I returned to my hotel room that night, I ordered his book using my smart phone.

In the first few chapters of his book Fr. Mallon talks about the major problem in the Catholic Church today is one of identity – that the Church (us) have forgotten that part of the Church’s fundamental identity is to be missionary and we have replaced this missionary identity with some ancient heresies that have been modernized.

As the early Church tried to understand what it meant that “God so loved the world that he gave[a] his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” (John 3:16). Many different ideas emerged. The word “Heresy” became the term the Church uses to label erroneous ways of thinking about God’s relationship with man. For example, a bishop named Arius believed that Jesus was True God and True Man but rather that Jesus was only a “super creature.” The Church, guided by the Holy Spirit rejected this way of thinking and labeled it a heresy. This particular erroneous way of thinking was called Arianism.

The Church over time has become to realize that many heresies keep coming back slightly modified so it appears to be new. Heresies are always wrong and always damage the Church. I think it is important to realize that thinking erroneous thoughts about God’s relationship with human beings does not make one a heretic. As I learned about these heresies in college, I began to realize that sometimes, I find myself unconsciously believing in them. For example, when I think God cannot do something like forgive a sin I or someone else committed I am falling into the fallacy of Arianism because I am believing that Jesus was a super creature who has limited power verses believing that Jesus is God and is capable of doing anything. When I think that I have earned the right to sin, then I have given into the heresy of Pelagianism which states that a person can earn his or her salvation.

Before we reflect on these heresies that are plaguing our Church today, I would like to reflect on a couple of quotes from Fr. Mallon’s book. Quotes from Fr. Mallon’s book will be in bold and my commentary/reflection will be in regular font.

In the seventeen years that I have been a priest in the small patch of the world that is eastern Canada, I have witnessed no lack of pain in those who are “the living stones” of God’s house. To begin with, there is the all-too—common pain of seeing so many family members and others walk away from the Church, from faith in Christ and even from faith in God. This pain is especially acute in the lives of so many of our parishioners who have witnessed the wholesale apostasy of their entire family. Bewildered, faithful ask, “What did I do wrong!” as they struggle with children and grandchildren who are indifferent or hostile to the Church and faith. So many tears have been shed. St. Monica has never had so many spiritual children seeking her intercession for their wayward sons and daughters.

The most important lesson, I learned in my battle with depression is that ignoring my pain and issues does not make them go away. I may not know why I feel the way I do or why I am in the situation that I am in but I know that unless I acknowledge it, I will never make any steps to get better or to improve my situation.

The Church for better or for worse has to admit that we have a problem. More and more Catholics are leaving the Catholic Church for one reason or another. My parents were faithful Catholics who attended Mass every Sunday, I believe my grandmother was a living saint and yet most of my brothers and sisters do not practice. While they are responsible for their own actions, I also at the same time cannot assign full blame to them. Their experience of growing

up Catholic was not the most positive experience. I still have memories of watching a religion teacher scold one of my siblings for not have the Our Father memorized.

Our faithful people have every right to ask us shepherds what they did wrong, because they honestly do not know. They did for their children what their parents did for them. There is nothing more natural than this. The problem was that no one told them the rules had all changed. Like a rugby match that, without warning has become a soccer match after half-time, so many suffer from the experience of being penalized without knowing why. Everything they did for their children would have sufficed if it has still been 1956, but that age might as well have been a thousand years ago. Our people need to have this pain addressed, and they need to find the Lord's peace.

The game has changed. I can complain about it or I can do my best to adjust. The Good News is still the Good News, and I am still challenged to share it with others. The challenge today is not to share it with those who have never heard of Jesus but rather the challenge today is to share it again with those who have heard of Jesus but now have the wrong impression of Jesus and the Catholic Faith. In many ways, we are like the Apostles

We now find ourselves in a situation like that of the first Christians. It is once again unpopular to be a Christian. It is risky, costly, difficult, fulfilling and exciting. It is a time of rediscovering the essential identity of all the baptized to be missionary disciples, called to follow Jesus and make him known. It is time for all who follow Jesus to heed the call to maturity and to be equipped for service within the community of the church that takes them far from the altar from which they are sent every Sunday.

Questions to Ponder:

1. What am I going to do to help bring people back to the Church?
2. Do I think people leave the Church willfully as a revolt or more because they are lost because they did not receive proper teaching, or both?
3. How is the modern Church like the Church at the time of the Apostles?
4. What do you think of when you hear the word "Evangelization?"
5. How can I meet people where they are?

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

February 10, 2019

Spiritual Ponderings

Divine Renovations Old Heresies Made New

There are many popular television shows out there now based on people taking old houses and other buildings and renovating them. I am particularly fond of the show Fixer Upper. Fr. Mallon in his book *Divine Renovation: From a Maintenance to a Mission Parish* speaks of the need to reform the Church in a similar way thus the word "renovation" in the title. On the show Fixer Upper, Chip (the lead carpenter) always gets excited for "demolition day". This is the day in which they go through and rip out anything that will prevent them from remodeling the house. In a similar way Fr. Mallon suggests that there are certain heresies (erroneous ways of thinking about God and Faith) that need to be cleaned out of the Church before we can begin remodeling. I would like to therefore begin my reflections on Fr. Mallon's book by spending this month looking at these heresies. Quotes from his book will be in bold and my commentary will be in normal font.

1. "Social Reductionism": This is manifested by defining the Gospel and the Church by purely sociological categories, making the Church an instrument of "market liberalism" or Marxist ideology, as found in many expressions of what was known as liberation theology.

"I believe Social Reductionism happens when we turn the Church into a social club. First, I do not mean "a club for the elite" when I use the term "social club". There is nothing wrong with belonging to such a club. I am using this term to

refer to groups and organizations that exist to help connect people socially for example, the Elks, The Lions, Boy Scouts of America, etc. The Church's primary mission is not to be a social club but is rather to point, guide, and assist people to develop a personal relationship with Christ that will lead them to eternal life. While it is nice that the Church has a social aspect to it, socializing is not the Church's primary reason for existence.

We are often like people who live in a black-and-white world who cannot begin to conceive of the reality of color. The fact that so many Catholics are utterly convinced that they are missing nothing shows that the weekly experience of faith and "religion" acts as a kind of vaccine to the full power the Christian faith. Many who are no longer held in the clutches of duty, guilt, or fear walk away, rejecting a hollow version of the real thing. As a result, we have all too often capitulated as leaders and formed pastoral methodologies designed to feed those who have no hunger. We give in to pressure from distracted and bored parishioners to preach shorter and shorter homilies, aware that many would be quite pleased if we just dispensed with the whole thing completely and got to the communion it so that the mad dash to the parking lot could commence.

Growing up, my grandmother would have all of us over for dinner on Sunday nights. After dinner the adults would play cards and the kids would go out and play in the yard. My dad, though would arrive just in time to eat and as soon as he finished eating, he would go home. He missed out on so much because he saw Sunday night dinner as a social obligation instead of an opportunity to build relationships.

2. "Psychologizing": Pope Francis here identified the trend in the decades following the Second Vatican Council in many houses of formation and retreat centers, whereby an "immanent, self-centered" psychology replaced "the encounter with Jesus Christ" as the foundation of Christian life.

As someone who has battled depression all his life and has learned to deal with it, I have a lot of faith in psychology. It is important though for me to admit that I cannot simply mentally pull myself up by my bootstraps. I need God's grace. Only my relationship with Jesus will ultimately save my soul from hell.

"Psychologizing" would be not recognizing the truth of the following quote from Ernest Kurtz & Katherine Ketcham's book *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning: According to the way of life that flows from this insight, it is only by ceasing to play God, by coming to terms with errors and shortcomings, and by accepting the inability to control every aspect of their lives that alcoholics (or any human beings) can find the peace and serenity that alcohol (or other drugs, or sex, money material possessions, power or privilege) promise but never deliver*.

Questions to Ponder:

1. How is the Church more than a social club?
2. What happens when we treat the Church as a social club?
3. How is the Church more than a self-improvement program?
4. What happens when we treat the Church as a self-improvement program?
5. What do drugs and God have in common?

Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

February 17, 2019

Spiritual Ponderings

Divine Renovations Old Heresies Made New

As we continue to look at the different heresies that the Church needs to get rid of in an effort to rebuild the Church according to Fr. Mallon in his book: *Divine Renovation: From a Maintenance to a Mission Parish*, let us ask the Holy Spirit to recognize the ways these heretical (erroneous) ways of thinking may be affecting our spiritual life and the life of the larger Church). Quotes from Fr. Mallon's book will be in bold and my commentary will be in normal font.

3. "The Gnostic Solution": Gnosticism in its various forms, ancient and contemporary, proposes salvation through the attainment of secret knowledge (gnosis). It is essentially elitist and created a class of "enlightened

Catholics” who identify their allegiance to a certain “higher spirituality” or fixation on particular disputed pastoral issues. Pope Francis does not get more specific than this, but one can think of certain expressions of liturgical traditions that fit this description.

The term “Gnostic Heresy” refers to a group of different heresies with one thing in common. People who believed in the Gnostic Heresy believed that there was some sort of secret knowledge that people had to discover in order to be saved and if you knew the “secret” then it did not matter how you behaved morally. They were basically saying that entrance into heaven had nothing to do with one’s behavior but instead depended upon whether or not someone knew the secret password that would unlock the gates of heaven. The early Church quickly denounced this way of thinking.

A modern example of a Gnostic heresy would be something like those people who believe that by going to Mass on Sunday they can behave any way they wish during the week. When I see someone arguing about a particular liturgical reform that they would like to see in an unchristian way, I think of that person as suffering from being under the influence of Gnosticism. Another example of the Gnosticism is the idea that God want’s me to love my brothers and sisters but yet I have the right to think evil thoughts about them when they only show up at Christmas and Easter.

4. “The Pelagian Solution’: For Pope Francis, this is a form of “restorationism” that is closely associated with moral and disciplinary rigorism that seeks to recover a lost past.

Pelagius was a bishop who taught that it was possible for a human being to make his or her own way to heaven without divine assistance. He agreed that it was almost impossible for a person to do this but nonetheless if a person tried hard enough he or she could live a holy enough life to EARN their way into heaven. The Catholic Church, through St. Augustine declared this to be an erroneous way of thinking. The Church says that no one can earn salvation no matter how holy he or she is. The only way we get into heaven is if God chooses to let us in. We need God’s grace (unconditional giving of his love) in order to make it into heaven. Catholics do not talk about “earning” God’s love but rather we talk about being open to receive God’s love. The image of a vessel maybe helpful—an empty vessel can hold more water than a vessel that is filled with rocks (sins).

Pelagianism takes God and transforms Him in our mind from being the loving Father that Jesus reveals Him to be and turns Him in our mind into a merciless judge, a coach whom we can never please, or a boss who only cares that we do the bare minimum. find Pelagianism is at work in our world today when people think that they have “earned” something in the Church. Someone might say, “I have done so much work for God that I am allowed this little sin.” When a person feels that he or she must talk about how long he or she has been a parishioner in order to get something from the parish or I hear someone say “I’ve done my part.” These are all people who are under the influence of Pelagianism.

One last problem with enthusiasm, is that it produces a sense of competition between Christians instead of a spirit of cooperation.



Fr. Thomas M. Pastorius

February 22, 2019

Spiritual Ponderings

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As we continue to look at the different heresies that the Church needs to get rid of in an effort to rebuild the Church according to Fr. Mallon in his book: *Divine Renovation: From a Maintenance to a Mission Parish*, let us ask the Holy Spirit to recognize the ways these heretical (erroneous) ways of thinking may be affecting our spiritual life and the life of the larger Church). Fr. Mallon dives a little deeper into the effects of Pelagianism in our Church today. Quotes from Fr. Mallon’s book will be in bold and my commentary will be in normal font.

So, this neo-Pelagianism is manifested in two ways. First in the traditionally minded Catholic who sees the Christian life as a kind of scorecard with its own economy of salvation. I do certain things for God (go to Mass, be nice, say my prayers once in a while), then God lets me into heaven. Second, in the post-modern Catholic who bases his or her understanding of grace and salvation not on absolute autonomy and fundamental niceness. God is my buddy who asks nothing of me except to be “true to myself” and with obviously let me continue to party in heaven.

The following quote from Msgr. Pope (a priest who writes for Our Sunday Visitor) is how I answer the question about whether or not heaven exists and who will end up in hell: *“Respect.” God has made us free and respects our freedom to choose his Kingdom or not. Now the Kingdom of God is not a mere abstraction. It has some very specific values and these values are realized and experienced perfectly in heaven. The values of the Kingdom of God include: Love, kindness, forgiveness, justice to the poor, generosity, humility, mercy, chastity, love of Scripture, love of the truth, worship of God, God at the center and so forth. Now the fact is that there are many people in our world who do not want a thing to do with chastity, or forgiveness, or being generous and so forth. And God will not force them to adopt and live these values. While it is true that everyone may want to go to heaven, heaven is not merely what we want, it is what it is, as God has set it forth. Heaven is the Kingdom of God and the values thereof in all their fullness. Hence there are some (many?) who live in such a way that they consistently demonstrate that they are not interested in heaven, since they are not interested in one or many of the Kingdom values. Hell “has to be” since God respects their freedom to live in this way. Since they demonstrate they do not want heaven, God respects their freedom to choose “other arrangements.” - Msgr. Charles Pope of the Diocese of Washington D.C.*

Three things are consequence of the neo-Pelagianism of our time. If salvation is getting my card punched so I can meet the basic requirements for salvation, it will breed a culture of minimalism. This is not covenant faith. It is not life lived in relationship with God who says, “I am your God and you are my people.” This is fundamentally paganism under a thin veneer of Christianity. In the ancient world, the gods were manipulated to provide favors by external acts that bore no reference to the disposition of the heart.

Religion for the pagans was all about making the gods happy in order to get things from them and had nothing to do with love. Christianity is all about God loving us and wanting us to be happy.

Second, as already mentioned, people who believe themselves to be justified by their own action or “niceness” will never know the sheer audacity of God’s mercy. Amazing grace will simply be a melody that sounds good on bagpipes. The Good News of salvation will never be fully grasped, and, consequently, the joy that is the hallmark of the authentic Christian life will never be known or communicated to others. The joyful song of praise to God for gifts of salvation never rises from lips one who has no need of such a gift. I honestly believe that this is reason why so many lips remain silent in our churches on Sunday morning. Too many people literally have nothing to sing about.

We are in a relationship with God like a child to his or her Father and not as an employee to his or her boss. God desires more from us than “simply” being nice. Remember the stories of the parables of the talents. The one with one talent gets punished for not investing his talent even though he might have been a nice guy.

Third, if we cannot move beyond the bare minimum of religious observance perceived to earn our own personal salvation, and if the authentic Good News is undiscovered, why are we surprised that many in the Church show no evidence of little enthusiasm for the call to the New Evangelization? Obviously, only the Good News as good news can proclaim it to others. Good News is never a burden to share with others—indeed, it is the most natural thing in the world. It becomes a burden only when we cannot share it. In the end, with neo-Pelagianism being so present among the faithful, and even among those in ministry, it is entirely understandable that we would suffer from a deep identity crisis about our missionary nature.

I have only joined organizations or institution for three reasons, I had to (like school), I wanted to like Boy Scouts growing up, and I got something for joining like a pay check from my first job. Pay in the Church stinks according to worldly standards, and no one has to go to Church in our world today so all we can do is make the Church a place where people want to come. When we come together and ask “what can I do for you” instead of “what is the bare minimum” we create a place where everyone wants to go.