

THE CHURCH-OUR SPIRIT-FILLED EXTENDED SPIRITUAL FAMILY

Reflection for Pentecost Sunday, Cycle C

Today we celebrate the birthday of our church. Catholics believe and teach that the Holy Trinity brought the church into being. *The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* states:

*The Father called the church into existence.
The Son established the church.
The Holy Spirit filled the church with power
and wisdom at Pentecost.
The Holy Trinity abides with the church always,
creatively and providentially.
The church empowered by the Holy Spirit, brings Christ's salvation to the world.
She is the instrument of God's call to holiness.
At the same time, the church is made up of sinful people,
yet despite the personal sinfulness of her members,
the church remains holy by the presence of Jesus and the Holy Spirit who permeates her.*

These is a mouthful in the above quote from the U.S. Catechism.

The church flows from the life of the Trinity. We can say that from all eternity the church has been the plan of God. From the beginning, it was God's plan to *share* his divine life with us his children.

God prepared for the founding of the church by forming the people of Israel. Sometimes the church is called the New Israel.

Jesus, the word of God made flesh, brought to fulfillment the Father's plan for a church. He started this process by his preaching the Good News of salvation from sin and the invitation to participate in God's divine life "*I am the Vine, you are the branches*" (John 15:1-8)

Then he called together some of his disciples who in turn would become the pillars of the young church. We call these men, the Apostles.

"The Holy Spirit revealed the church at Pentecost, coming upon the Apostles and the disciples with a transforming fire and forming them into a visible community, and empowering them to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ" (U.S. Catechism P. 114).

We know from the Acts of the Apostles that there is an inseparable link between the church and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. When Saul was persecuting the church, Jesus appeared to him and said:

"Saul,, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul answered: *"Who are you, sir?"* The voice answered: *"I am Jesus and you are persecuting me."* Acts 9:4-5

When we are tempted to loose faith in our weak, sinful and imperfect Church, we must remember that it is the Body of Christ in our midst.

A Church of Sinners

Catholics believe that the church is both *human* and *divine*. It is human and imperfect in its members who are sinful and always in need of purification and interior renewal. In the Catholic church this need for ongoing conversion is symbolized by the presence in every church of one or more confessionals. We are in indeed a 'church of sinners'. In fact, if we were to place over the church door a condition of entry sign it would state:

"Only Sinners May Enter"

Remember what Jesus said: *"I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners."* (Luke 2:17). The church was *always* imperfect and sinful (recall the betrayal of Judas and the denials of Peter), *is* still imperfect and I assume will be imperfect until the end of time.

Learning to live with and work in a church that is imperfect and sometimes very sinful can be a faith challenge for many people. Unfortunately, thousands of Catholics cannot deal with the sinfulness of church and so they quit going or join some other church that is also sinful and imperfect.

The divine nature of the Church

I am not sure, but I think that only the Catholic church believes in the *divine* nature and origin of the church. Our church is not the creator of some earthly human being. Our church was founded by Jesus who promised to be with her until the end of time. Catholics also believe that the Holy Spirit permeates the church - guiding her and empowering her to continue on the work of Jesus here on earth. So while the church is *always* in need of reform and renewal, she is never in need of *replacement*- the mistake Martin Luther and the other Reformers made in the 16th century. What Jesus founded and promised to be with is *never* in need of a replacement. Reflecting on the nature of the Catholic church English Protestant and Historian, Thomas Maculay writes:

"There is not and there never was on earth a work of human policy so well deserving of examination as the Roman Catholic Church. The history of that Church joins together two great ages of human civilization. No other institution is left standing, which carries the mind back to the times when the smoke of sacrifice rose from the Pantheon, and when cameleopards and tigers bounded in the Flavian Amphitheater.

"The proudest royal houses are but of yesterday, when compared to the line of Supreme Pontiffs. That line we trace back to an unbroken series from the Pope who crowned Napoleon in the nineteenth century to the Pope who crowned Pepin in the eighth; and far beyond the time of Pepin the august dynasty extended till it is lost in the twilight of fable . . .

The church saw the commencement of all governments and of all the ecclesiastical establishments that now exist in the world; and we feel no assurance that she is not destined to see the end of them all. She was great and respected before the Saxon set foot on Britain, before the Frank had passed the Rhine, when Grecian eloquence still flourished at Antioch, when idols were still worshiped in the temple of Mecca.

And she may still exist in undiminished vigor when some traveler from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St. Paul's."

Others reflecting on the utter sinfulness of some Popes and other church leaders and on how the church has been attacked from without and within conclude that she must be *divine* in origin. Otherwise she would have disappeared many centuries ago.

Sometimes the sins of the church e.g., the recent clergy sex scandals can make us feel ashamed to be Catholic. The sins of the church should only remind us of our own sinfulness and our own need for penance and renewal. The best way for us to renew the church is to renew ourselves. Then we are in the best position to call church leadership to reform and renewal.

We should often pray for mother Church and do all that we can to bring renewal to her. But, we don't need to overly worry about the church because she belongs to God and he will protect her from self-destruction.

PRAYER OF SURRENDER

**Lord Jesus, I give you my hands
to do your work.**

**I give you my feet to go your way.
I give you my eyes to see as you see.
I give you my tongue to speak
your words.
I give you my mind that you may
think in me.
I give you my spirit that you may
pray in me.
Above all, I give you my heart
that you may love in me-
Love the Father and all humanity.
I give you my whole self that you may
grow in me, so that you,
Lord, may be the one who lives,
and works, and prays in me.
Amen.**

PRAYER OF SERENITY

**God Grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change
courage to change the things I can,
and wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time.
Accepting hardship as pathway to peace.
Taking, as Jesus did, this world as it is,
not as I would have it.
Trusting that you will make all things
right if I surrender to your will.
So that I may be reasonably happy in this
life and supremely happy with you
forever in the next.
Amen.
Reinhold Niebuhr**