

THE GIFT OF THE CHURCH; JUNE 30, 2019

If you are a Christian in the United States, you can hardly have avoided the clichéd question: “Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?” If the questioner suspects that you are a Catholic, they will likely emphasize the word ‘personal’ to make the point that in their eyes you enjoy nothing of the sort. The question itself is a trap, as it is asked fully from the ground occupied by an Evangelical set of presumptions. Over the centuries since the Reformation, this perspective has resulted in a type of Christianity that is both highly individualistic and increasingly privatized. Its only recognition of authority is your personal relationship with the Lord as mediated by your own interpretation of the Bible. This development has persistently ignored the fact that Jesus chose to form the Church as an institution upon the faith witness of his Apostles, with Peter as the acknowledged head. In so doing, Christ granted to them and their successors authority to govern the Church and to bind and loose her members with any necessary ecclesiastical discipline.

Such a Church is therefore both firmly anchored in this visible world, yet of the Spirit in its essence. It is the Body of Christ, an oft-used phrase which obviously draws its meaning from the Incarnation itself. The Church on earth must therefore always be institutional in its here and now manifestation. Notions of an exclusively ‘spiritual’ Church are as nonsensical as the heretical belief that Jesus only rose in a ‘spiritual’ body. There are three interwoven aspects of the Catholic Church which I would like to sketch out today. They are the Marian, the Pauline and the Petrine.

The Marian (*viz.* 'of Mary') is foundational and predates Jesus' formal establishment of the Church upon his Apostles. In deliberate imitation of the Blessed Mother herself this aspect of trust inspires the Christian in his humble surrender of faith unto the will of God. Think of Mary's reply to the angel Gabriel: "*Let it be done unto me according to thy word.*" It is this humility which is essential in preparing our souls to accept baptism into the Church and whose ongoing presence keeps us within her. One wonders how many Catholics today have lost this needed humility.

The Pauline aspect of the Church is catechetical and formational and builds upon our surrender of faith. Paul was a warrior and spoke with great zeal to the Ephesian Christians of the necessity of '*putting on the armor of God.*' Zeal without humility could lead one to arrogance, even violence, yet tempered by Marian sensibilities such zeal emboldens members of the Church to successfully engage in the spiritual combat which is always needed while living in a fallen world. St. Paul is the consummate Apostle to intercede for all of us living and growing within the Church militant. More zeal is clearly needed on all of our parts to witness to Christ in a hostile culture.

Finally it is St. Peter himself who would anchor us in the safety of God's Church through the virtue of obedience; namely obedience to Christ through and in his Church and to the competent authority established by Him for its governance. Without doubt many in the modern Church struggle with both humility and zeal in their faith lives, but it is obedience that is most needed. Without it the Christian cannot maintain the humility or zeal necessary for the faith journey. Remember that it was the pride of disobedience which resulted in our expulsion from Eden.