

PASTOR'S CORNER

Plague Journal

Reading the Signs of the Times

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Douglas Farrow

Attached is the article referenced above. It is the best I've ever read on the crisis that now faces the Catholic Church in these Last Days. Bear in mind that this article was written before the coming of the plague. Things are now worse.

The Church,” says *Gaudium et spes*, “has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.” A few paragraphs later, that duty is parsed in a positive way. The Church, we are told, “labors to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other men of our age” (emphasis added). As Aidan Nichols puts it in *Conciliar Octet*, it labors to discern “God speaking through secular events.”

This was the Council's most ambiguous document, and the storm of controversy over its ambiguity would likely have proved fatal to it but for the sea anchor dropped in the nick of time at §22, reminding us that the mystery of man and of human history is disclosed only in the crucified and resurrected Christ. Even that, however, was not sufficient to prevent the post-conciliar Church from being blown off course by appeals to supposed signs of God's presence that owed far more to the optimism of John XXIII in *Pacem in terris* than to the warnings of Jesus in Matthew 16 or 24. Harbingers of judgment, of the coming of Jesus and the close of the age, were not much in vogue. A new openness to the world was in vogue. Just how open, we have lately begun to see in that soi-disant sign of the times, the Pan-Amazonian Synod.

We need to return to Jesus, mustering the courage to read the signs of the times as he taught us to. We need to recover our sense of the conflict between the Church and the world, the same conflict that took our Lord along the *via crucis*. We need to grasp not only the signs of the times but the sign of the cross, not forgetting this basic principle: that the relation between Jesus and Israel is reproduced, *mutatis mutandis*, in the relation between the Church and the Gentile world. As with Jesus in Jerusalem, so also with the Church; the *via crucis* must be her way also. That is the framing we need if we really wish to understand our situation.

In the dying days of the Hasmonaean regime, with its faux royal priesthood—already on the way to an equally faux messianism—Herodians and Sadducees and Pharisees and Zealots joined forces to betray the God of the covenant by co-opting the powers of imperial Rome to crucify Jesus of Nazareth. Of course this was utterly disastrous. Judgment fell on the former by way of the latter, when the imperial army crushed Jerusalem and destroyed its temple in A.D. 70. Meanwhile, the disciples of Jesus went out from Jerusalem to carry on the true mission of Israel by taking the gospel of Messiah Jesus to the ends of the earth. This eventually produced, not without the sacrifice of numerous martyrs, the period we call Christendom, in which the Roman empire, after its own decadence and collapse, gave way to nations that learned (however imperfectly, and not without sporadic appearances of animus toward Jews) to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ.

But Jesus, who predicted success for his followers in their mission to the ends of the earth, did not predict for them any triumph over the world such as many Christians, buoyed by Christendom or lately pining for Christendom, vainly imagine. On the contrary, he spoke both of the judgment that would fall on Jerusalem and of a judgment that would fall on the nations—a judgment and suffering in which the Church would share, just as Jesus shared redemptively in the judgment and suffering of Israel. He predicted, that is, the fulfillment of Daniel’s dire prophecy about the end of the age, when St. Michael, the protector of the sanctuary and people of God, would be told once again to stand down and allow the violation of the sanctuary and the people, to permit the mystery of lawlessness to deceive many and to prevail.

St. Paul, following Jesus and Daniel, spoke to the Thessalonians of that mystery penetrating in the last days even the temple of God. As it had done before under Antiochus in the days of Jason and Menelaus, as it did again when Caiaphas and company conspired to put Jesus to death—tearing down God’s living temple in a vain attempt to preserve a temple of stone and their own religious regime—so it would do again, deploying the same greed, hubris, self-deception, betrayal, and violence. While the fathers pondered the rebuilding of Herod’s temple as the specific site for the fulfillment of all this, it is much more likely, as some allowed, that Paul had in mind the Church itself, which he identified, in its union with Jesus, as God’s living temple.

Now, here is a parting of the ways in the discernment of our present situation. There are those who think that the Christian gospel proved the key to an age of progress that will continue to the end, if ever there is an end. They are postmillennialist in their reading of history, though we might more accurately call them adherents of the Myth of Progress developed by Lessing and Hegel. And, like the latter, they see a hand writing on the wall, inscribing the words *mene, mene, tekel, upharsin*. It is not inscribing them against Babylon, however, but against a rigid and stultifying Church that insists on clinging to outmoded concepts of revelation, such as that found in Matthew 11:27. It is inscribing them against a Church that will not sacrifice itself to the new and universal paths of Spirit or Geist. Even the successor of Peter now opposes what, with no small irony, he calls “petrification”—while welcoming syncretistic developments that threaten to turn the bedrock of the Christian confession into loose shale.

There are others, however, who think the gospel the key to an age of progress all right, but progress in righteousness and in wickedness alike. They know that evil is parasitic on good, that because of the advance of the gospel lawlessness is also advancing. They know that *mene, mene, tekel, upharsin* was inscribed against Babylon first, then against Hasmonaean and Herodian Israel—where it was written by the hand of Jesus, perhaps in the sand rather than on a wall, but certainly on the cross. They know from the teaching of Jesus that it is inscribed also against that coming alliance of those who refuse with and through him to give thanks to God, who instead suppress the truth in unrighteousness and turn the gospel into lawlessness. And they see in our present situation indications that this alliance is already being formed, though they peer ahead, through clouds and darkness, with only such light on the path as Scripture affords.

The former, of course, are convinced that the only way to move forward is to adapt the Church to the spirit of the age, acknowledging that all are children of God, whether thankful or unthankful, Eucharistic or anti-Eucharistic, obedient or disobedient, Christian or pagan. Their project is a syncretistic one. The latter are convinced that it belongs to the Church to give suffering witness for Christ to the age, inviting all to acknowledge his lordship and submit themselves to him in obedient love. They take their cue from *Ad gentes*—which is to say, from Matthew 28—rather than from the ambiguous *Gaudium* with its hint of anonymous Christianity.

The former aren’t interested in teaching men of every nation to observe all that Jesus commanded. That’s the sort of thing that must be sacrificed, as Hegel said, on the altar of History. The Jesus who

insisted that he had come to bring, not peace, but a sword—he also must be sacrificed. In his place must be put someone as presentable to the Grand Mufti as to the Masons, to the devotees of Pachamama as to the grandees of the European Union. For their part, the latter think that the Church has no other business than to testify to Jesus as the Lord of history, who will come in glory to judge the living and the dead. And that just as Jesus suffered and died in Jerusalem and for Jerusalem—yet not for Jerusalem only, but for the whole world—so the Church should be ready to suffer and die, in the whole world, for the sake of Jesus.

It is surely a sign of the times that this division is taking place before our eyes, as the apostles and fathers warned it would. It is surely a sign of the times that so many are now being misled, just as Jesus predicted. It is surely a sign of the times when even the one charged to succeed Peter in making the good confession seems to call it into question; when there is a studied ambiguity about what the good confession is; when we find ourselves under shepherds whose idea of feeding the flock is to offer them the pastures of moral and doctrinal uncertainty and a liturgical chaos that nullifies the law of prayer.

Some look for the next pope to clear up the confusion, hopeful that he will begin separating the sheep from the goats, at least at the episcopal level. I wonder. Judgment indeed begins with the household of God, but would God have permitted this situation if he did not mean to require difficult choices from us all? Certainly the present pontificate is not merely an unfortunate aberration. It is, rather, a timely testing of the people of God with a view to their purification. The period of examination and purification may well outlast this pontificate. Be that as it may, we are all faced with the question of how we ought to respond, and things are already bad enough.

In the post-conciliar period we were patiently and diligently taught the faith by the previous two pontiffs, who carried on the Leonine and conciliar project of witnessing to Christ in the modern world. But their witness, like Leo's, has not been received in large tracts of the Church and is no longer being taught even in Rome. Indeed, it is resisted precisely where it has been taught, as the fate of the John Paul II Institute testifies. What is more, those doing the resisting are not merely dissident theologians but bishops who were made bishops under the previous pontiffs, demonstrating that the whole business of discernment about the episcopate has been for some time in serious decline. Men who fit Paul's pejorative description of the pagans in Romans 1 are now being appointed, protected, and promoted in Rome. Many of them will be in positions of power and influence in the next conclave. That which is bad enough therefore threatens to become worse.

The Church has of course been through rough patches before, rough patches that tried and tested it and eventually produced renewal. At the outset of Christendom, for example, the Church was rocked by the Arian crisis. Over the past two centuries it has been rocked again by what amounts to the same crisis. But we should not overlook the fact that Christendom has now come and gone. In its place is something quite different, which is being tried in various forms, from communism to Nazism to militant secularism to religious environmentalism to a new and potent global technocracy that looks increasingly likely to combine all these "isms."

These are not attempts to return to the status quo ante, to the kind of paganism that did not know Christ. Even at their most benign, they are attempts to supplant and replace Christ. They are attempts to bring in a new kingdom of peace and concord, a New Age or *saeculum* of man's own devising. This age is not understood to be an age by virtue of the fact that it is bracketed between the first and second comings of Christ. No, it is understood to be an age because no second coming is anticipated. It is an age without limits, an age in which, by some miracle of politics and technology and human spirituality, will appear an entirely immanent kingdom of perpetual peace—the age, in other words, of Antichrist, whose own parousia, Paul tells us, must precede the parousia of Jesus Christ.

The fathers of Vatican I did not fully foresee this. Their counterparts at Vatican II, who wished to present a more winsome face to the world, did not manage to look even the real and present danger of communism squarely in the eye. That sort of thing was left to John Paul II and eventually to Benedict. But their teaching was resented by a powerful faction and has now been shunted aside. The Catholic Church has in consequence been reduced, or so it would appear, to salvaging a crumbling liberal Protestant discourse about the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man by way of a pseudo-Catholic concern with inculturation—most recently, to baptizing animistic religion and propping up an Amazonian fertility goddess, just as in the decaying Anglosphere it is slowly making its peace with the gay gods of infertility. It has been reduced to propping up its own relevance as a “dialogue partner” to the world through whatever opportunity the age affords it.

What, then, are the faithful to do? How are they to understand their relation to the Church and to remain properly Catholic when it is no longer clear that the Catholic Church itself cares to remain Catholic, when even the successor of Peter is no longer confessing Christ in firm and unmistakable tones? I have no easy answers to these questions. But whatever else they do, the faithful must determine, as Cardinal Müller has advised, to be Christocentric—not papocentric. That does not mean failing to acknowledge the special authority and responsibility vested in Peter and his successors and reminding them of their accountability. It does mean keeping our eyes on the Lord, rather than on those called to serve the Lord in that office. Far too much, as I have argued elsewhere, has been hung on the “peg” of the papacy, which has begun to loosen in its socket.

What is the Bishop of Rome, as the vicar of Peter and so of Christ, but one charged by Christ to persist in making the good confession, to safeguard the sacraments, to exercise a ministry of unity and an extraordinary discipline where ordinary discipline fails? And why, though the gospel itself is now in grave peril, is there this deadly paralysis in the Church that is preventing a proper response? Why indeed, if not that the Catholic Church, even while its religious institutions and a good many of its prelates have been marching to the neo-Arian tune of decadent late Protestantism, has through its papocentrism become the very caricature of itself that early Protestantism drew for it? That is not the only reason, to be sure. But papocentrism has now left the Church vulnerable to those who wish either to reform it “irreformably” or to destroy it altogether.

When Pius IX recommended publication of the “Permanent Instruction of the Alta Vendita,” allegedly a Carbonari plan for corrupting the Church, did he pause to consider that his own rather heavy-handed efforts to strengthen the papacy might play into that plan? One does not have to be a conspiracy theorist or a sedevacantist to be struck by the prescience of that perverse document:

Seek out the Pope of whom we give the portrait. You wish to establish the reign of the elect upon the throne of the prostitute of Babylon? Let the clergy march under your banner in the belief always that they march under the banner of the Apostolic Keys. You wish to cause the last vestige of tyranny and of oppression to disappear? Lay your nets like Simon Barjona. Lay them in the depths of sacristies, seminaries, and convents, rather than in the depths of the sea, and if you will precipitate nothing you will give yourself a draught of fishes more miraculous than his. The fisher of fishes will become a fisher of men. You will bring yourselves as friends around the Apostolic Chair. You will have fished up a Revolution in Tiara and Cope, marching with Cross and banner—a Revolution which it will need but to be spurred on a little to put the four quarters of the world on fire.

St. Vincent Ferrer, in a sobering sermon on Luke 21, reminded us long ago of that rule of theology, drawn from Wisdom 11, which teaches that men are divinely punished by the very gifts they abuse. Does that not include the gift of the papacy? Papocentrism must be purged if the Church itself is to be purged and restored to health by the gospel. It must be purged if the Church is to be purified in holiness and

readied for the trial that is coming on the whole world. We hold to the vicar of Peter only for the sake of Christ, not to Christ for the sake of the vicar of Peter. To suppose that there is no such vicar was a mistake of the Protestant Reformation; to suppose that there is no meaningful distinction here is a still greater mistake being made by Catholics today.

Peter himself warned, as our Lord warned, that this age is advancing toward a time of trial such as the world has never seen, to be followed by a final act of judgment and deliverance. He further warned, as our Lord warned, that in this time of trial there would be false teachers among us who “secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them.” Jesus prayed for Peter that his own faith would not fail, and in the end it did not. The charism of the papacy does not guarantee, however, that each and every successor of Peter will have a faith that does not fail. It does not guarantee that none will set a bad example or confuse the faithful, as Peter himself did briefly in Antioch. It does not guarantee that the abomination that brings desolation will never be set up in God’s temple.

Yet the Church will not fail, because it is grounded in Jesus Christ himself. And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who knows those in every station who are his, is sufficient to protect them and to preserve them in the truth by his Holy Spirit. Hence the faithful must always be of good cheer. “Now when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

Douglas Farrow, Professor of Theology and Christian Thought at McGill University, is the author of Ascension Theology, Theological Negotiations, and the forthcoming Brazos commentary on 1 & 2 Thessalonians.

Fr. Steve