



Allocutio



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Allocutio: Some Marks of the True Church

We are accustomed to hear that the Church of Christ can be identified by criteria that the Lord Jesus gave. And so we hear of references to St. Peter and the Sacraments but I would like to point out some others which have tended to be ignored, perhaps out of embarrassment but which are not irrelevant in these times.

Our Lord for example said that the devil would sow darnel among the wheat (Matt 13:24ss). He warns us that children of the evil spirit would appear among the sons of the Kingdom. He warned of wolves in lambs clothing. He said that some would come in his name saying that they were he. In other words he warned that the journey of the Church through history would not be easy but could become quite messy. But that of course did not mean that it would not be his Church. In fact a Church which appears squeaky clean, suave, always projecting nice words, whose members were nothing but perfect could not be the Church that Christ founded. Jesus came to save sinners and call them around him. The Church that Christ founded for sinners, that was built on the foundation of Apostles who had betrayed and abandoned him, which had tensions and disputes in it even in its early years, will always have the mark of imperfections in it. But it still does not lose the status of being his Church. If we are going to work in the midst of a wounded humanity so as to help Christ heal it we must expect to end up with some muck on our faces.

To understand this we must understand why Christ came and what is in his heart. As I said, he came to save sinners. He did not come for the perfect. And he knew then as he knows now that his followers are on a journey of Christian growth and maturity which can only reach perfection with patience across time. Indeed the Church knows so well that so many souls will struggle with their faults to such an extent that they may still have to spend "a period" in Purgatory before they can reach heaven.

Making a decision to go with Jesus means making an act of faith and staying faithful in a fundamental way. However you can expect pride and selfishness to show itself in many forms as we journey through life. What hopefully will happen is that our souls will grow more and more in the likeness of Christ. That is in fact the best way to go, to imitate Christ because by opting to say and act as he did we leave aside the more selfish and proud ways we once lived by. But like weeds in a garden sin and faults will tend to still spring up in our souls. It is by prayer, Mass, the sacraments and other devotions that we overcome our weaknesses as we let Christ grow in us more.

Sometimes I am embarrassed about people we have had in the Church. Like the so called Yorkshire Ripper or Adolf Hitler. It would be so convenient to not have embarrassments like that or the child sex abuse thing. Or the few bad popes. These are crosses for us. But let's recall St. Peter who said to us, "This is a cause of great joy for you, even though you may for a short time have to bear being plagued with all sorts of trials; so that when Jesus Christ is revealed your faith will have been tested and proved like gold" (1 Pt 1:6-7). The history of all the holy people is one of having their faith purified through a series of trials, trials even within their own families and from among their friends. And let us not forget that even in the very early Church the Christians had to put up with trials not just from without but also from within.



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God knew there was only one way to overcome sin and he dropped Jesus in it big time. He dropped him into a sewer of sin, our world. He suffered at its hands. And his Church can be no different. We must know that the battle against evil requires confronting it and that means getting our hands dirty at times albeit unpleasant.

Sometimes members of the Church, be they big or small, do really bad things. Or maybe let really bad things happen. But let's be fair. Would any of us have known what to do with Hitler? Very few in Europe saw the problem before it got too great. The fact is that some are occupied with their own problems, or have no energy, or are put off by the thought, perhaps realistic, "Who will listen to me?" And lastly, but by no means unimportant, by fear. It does take courage sometimes to stand up to evil and courage is a very special grace.

Sometimes we all do the small ordinary faults of human nature. On the one hand we dare not be casual about that. As Our Lord said, "He who is faithful in little things will be faithful in great!" So we cannot be complacent even if our faults seem small. On the other hand neither can there be a judgemental attitude. We never know the full story.

How is evil overcome? Let's go back to the parable of the wheat and the darnel. The servants wanted to root up the darnel. But the master saw that this could only create a bigger problem. And in fact you often find in life that attempts to deal with evil only create bigger evils. I believe the invasion of Iraq is one such case. I believe that when parents are too harsh on children in an effort to "control" them and either protect them from evil or punish their bad deeds, they often create worse problems.

For you and I personally our aim should be to have good thoughts and seek to be positive and reach out and think of others. The more that good grows in us the more evil is overcome. As St. Thomas said, "Evil is the absence of the good that should be there." And the more we have good people who are dedicated to the right way the more social evil is overcome. I think we all regard John Hume highly. When bombs were going off and bullets flying he stuck to his task of proclaiming a different way and found a door to open the peace-process. But he was helped by our prayers and he was helped by the many people who believed in his vision and values. For me he illustrated the way of finding a good path against those who would have retaliated with violence.

Sometimes too the battle against evil will require strength, deep inner strength. And that is where some penance in our lives would be good. The value of disciplining yourself occasionally, but never overdoing it, is that it can dispose you to make sacrifices for others and for God when you have to. The person who pampers themselves risks running away from the cause when troubles arise.

Our job in the midst of all our trials and the sufferings of the Church is to be faithful to Our Divine Lord all the time. We must never forget that lesson given us at the end of his Gospel by St. John when Peter turned to Our Lord and pointing to John, asked "What about him Lord?" And the answer Jesus gave to Peter he gave to the whole Church. "Your job is to follow me; it is none of your business what I will do with him!" And that is how we will strengthen our Church and overcome evil: we will keep following Jesus through thick and thin. We will keep close to him and draw light and strength from him. And we will persevere in it. And through us Christ will overcome evil in so many forms.

Amen.

Fr Paul Churchill