

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT: MARCH 10, 2019

There is a poem by the Irish poet, W.B. Yeats, that I would like to offer you as an opening this morning. The poem is called "The Second Coming."

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worse
Are full of passionate intensity.

You can take this to read again later for a good meditation. I just want to focus on the words in the first verse, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." It seems to me that these words and images describe our country right now. We await some figure to come out of the desert and bring us some new life.

It also describes very well the status of the Catholic Church.

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." Let us be bold and name the reality. The sexual abuse crisis has shaken the whole church. And those who should have led us with some light and direction have been found guilty of gross neglect of duty, of abuse of the power they were given to inspire and heal.

You will consider me naïve and unrealistic but I believe, in my heart, that the Holy Spirit is stirring as once this Spirit hovered over the chaos of the seas at creation to bring life and order.

I turn to a specific indication. Two weeks ago Pope Francis met with about 200 archbishops and others for a world-side synod on the crisis. If you read the secular press or listened to some of the popular talk shows, you have heard that he should have done this, failed to do that, that nothing has changed. From a lens of American know-how and a criterion of conservatism or liberalism, the Pope doesn't measure up. Liberals walk away, while there are some far-right groups, with big money backing them, that want to undermine the Pope and bring him down. They believe he has allowed gays in the church to bring this crisis into existence, or that he is not orthodox enough to hold things together.

Pope Francis may make mistakes but he is a genius, a radical believer in Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, committed to carry out the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. At the Synod he exposed the bishops to a three-fold process. First, nothing changes without a conversion. No outward rules without internal change. Conversion means listening to the theology of the people. It means willing to change one's own ego-centered opinions from what others tell us. Only after conversion can there be a communal discernment of what steps to take. Only after conversion and discernment can specific steps be taken.

Conversion, turning away from clerical power and listening to the people, was exemplified in listening to a number of people who had been sexually abused by priests. Some bishops were shocked. They also had to listen to three women who were bold and courageous in demanding the bishops wake up and face these issues squarely. The bishops expressed concern in a penance rite that acknowledged clerical sinfulness. Now each country's bishops must put into practice what they heard, adjusting the specific regulations according to the particular relationship of public authorities and the church in their domain. The Vatican will offer guidelines for each bishop's conference to follow so that justice and action are expected to happen. Is it fool-proof? No. But it is a way of proceeding in line with the Holy Spirit.

I offer you all this, first, for your encouragement, in facing the Church today. Lent is a good time to do penance and pray the psalms of lamentation for the church. But the three-fold plan of the Synod is also a plan for each of us on our Lenten journey. Before we decide what to do or what to give up for Lent we must listen – to the people, to children from whom we can learn so much, to the poor, to the oppressed, to the lonely, to immigrants. Then we discern. Stop and think about my behavior. How do we affect others far and near? How does my lifestyle impact on the needs of others? How are we growing in our faith? How do we share the goods we have? How do we spend our Sundays? How do I feed myself intellectually and doctrinally by good reading? Am I like Jesus tempted to misuse power and choose selfishness, power, manipulating God. I need to face conversion and discernment. Then, after these two moves, it is time for action. What shall I do?

In the end my commitment to be a Catholic Christian must be because I believe in being part of a community that embraces Jesus Christ as its Lord and leader. It is

Christ alone who is the head of this body and holds it together. And this Christ gives us the Holy Spirit if we cooperate with the Christ.

Let us turn to the second verse of Yeats's poem -

Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the second coming is at hand,
The Second Coming! Hardly are these words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight; somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again, but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to
be born?

The Spirit of Christ, the Risen Christ, is still our leader, our hope and he promised to remain with us all days. Maybe we have relied on our own power and not that of the Christ. Let us take this Lent seriously to joyfully expect the Spirit of the Risen Christ to bring new life to us and to his body, the church.

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