

As some of you know I write a blog on various spiritual matters that is published on-line every couple of weeks. Last week my blog was on seeking to be perfect in trying to follow Christ. I received a number of responses, some of which detailed how the writers had been caught in the perfection game in their lives.

One fellow told me the story of how he had once been a seminarian. When he came home for vacation from the seminary, his mother would not allow him to take out the garbage because he might dirty his 'holy hands'. His brother hated him for it and the poor guy was burdened with this expectation of being put up on a pedestal.

This is a good example of what Pope Francis calls the plague of clericalism. This is the disease that many priests and bishops catch in assuming their roles as leaders of the Christian community. It is expressed in the superior position of clergy over laity. But the story also indicates how many lay people absorbed the disease as well. The poor mother in the story had been trained to reverence the holy clergy. Now my mother had a touch of this too and was very proud of "my son the priest". But she had the sense to put me in my place away from the admiring crowds. She could see the flaws in priests.

The Catholic Church has been in crisis of late because of priests' immoral and authoritarian behavior, and bishops' lack of honest accountability. The Pope says that clericalism, patriarchy and the superiority of some priests must give way. But the laity have to change as well. It is time to be less passive, less reliant on structures.

The call to take part in a world-wide Synod is the Pope's opening to such a renewal of the church. The scriptures and traditions of the church remain basic but we have neglected to pay attention to the Holy Spirit who speaks to us through our experience. You will notice in today's song sheet information about the Lay Initiative of Glastonbury Abbey inviting you to take part in an on-line Synod preparatory meeting this Wednesday evening. If you want to save the church for yourself and your children, get involved!

The season of Lent begins this Wednesday. It is an invitation to come to know Jesus Christ better; to study, read and pray the scriptures; to read the Pope's wonderful encyclical letters; to claim your active place in the church.

On this Wednesday the Pope is asking Catholics throughout the world, to pray and fast for the people of the Ukraine and for peace. The Archbishop of Canterbury has accepted this call on behalf of Anglicans and Episcopalians as well. Don't waste the coming Lenten days in things appropriate for children such as giving up chocolate. Yes, it is good to learn self-denial but the time of Lent is a communal time of renewal for all Christians. On Wednesday we can pray and fast with one voice and raise a cry for the end of war. And that begins a time of forty days of lamenting the sins of the world and the church. This is not just for priests and monks. It is for all God's people.

The scripture readings for today, especially Sirach and the Gospel, are timely, emphasizing wisdom, honesty and recognition of faults. Jesus shares a variety of proverbial wisdom statements and rhetorical questions to inspire and challenge his followers to learn and grow. The insights from today's gospel are particularly relevant to the challenges facing the church today. They call on hearers to look inward and make corrections so that they are prepared and able to help others in their growth.

In 1989 Sister Thea Bowman addressed the American Bishops and shared various insights especially those coming from Black Catholics in the church. She stressed that the Bishop's role is to help and empower people to address the needs of the world, to teach, preach, witness, worship, serve and reconcile. And the laity, she said, are also empowered to participate, not passively observing what happens in the church but actively participating in worship, leadership and correction of failures that happen within the church. Sister Thea has since died but her words still challenge us all to wake up, not to be the blind leading the blind, but be committed to Jesus Christ and his challenges to us.

I ask myself today, and I ask you, what can I do to wake up to what my faith in Jesus Christ asks me to do. Instead of complaining what others are doing or are not doing, what is it that I can do? It is time to get past the passivity, individualism and indifference that so easily come to people when things are going well and when we live in a stable and affluent society.

Saint Paul, in today's second reading, leaves us with this

exhortation:

“Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know, that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain.”

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