

Item #35 (A Homily for a Baptism)

This was Entry #40 on my previous website.

Some years ago a colleague of mine at the Pontifical Biblical Institute accused me of hiding the unsavory aspects of the Church's past in my weekly class on Church History for the Rome novices of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. (I ended up teaching Church History to them for 29 years, as well as a month's intensive course to older sisters of the order in Calcutta, before leaving Rome in 2010.) "Quite the contrary, Hans", I replied. "I teach them all about Pope John XII and how according to one account he died committing adultery". "What? What are you saying?" were his startled words. "Hans", I continued, "you can find this in any history of the Church or any encyclopedia". End of conversation. (Hans never teased me again about the course.) As a matter of fact, it was one of my goals in the course from the first day I taught it, to mention the evil done by persons in authority, and I explicitly mentioned this to the novices. Mother Teresa must have approved, for soon after I began the course in Rome she asked for my notes so that my course could be taught in the other novitiates of the congregation (Calcutta, Manila, Warsaw, Nairobi and San Francisco). My purpose in giving the story about John XII was not to provide titillation for the novices, of course, but to inoculate them against being scandalized by malfeasance in the Church, malfeasance which is exemplified by (among many other things) the contemporary child abuse by clerics which has been so catastrophic for the lives of so many people and for the preaching of the Gospel.

But, of course, the history of the Church has been marked by much more than malfeasance. There have been many, many more edifying saints than scandalizing clerics. And my course mentioned dozens of these, with an attempt to situate them in their historical context. (Not only sheer ignorance but judging the past by the present is another source of misconstruing an institution that has a 2,000-year history).

Of course scandals and saints are not the essential element of the Church. The essential element of the Church is that it is the Mystical Body, unworthy in varying degrees as all of its members have been of this extraordinary gift. This is the center of what is happening today to our new Christian. She is becoming a member of the Mystical Body of Christ. She has received this great gift which is absolutely gratuitous, and she thus joins the untold billions in the past who have been unworthy of it in one way or another, Mary Mother of God excepted.

The English convert G.K. Chesterton once wrote that when faced with the possibility of an adventure one must have enough trust in oneself to accept it and enough mistrust of oneself to enjoy it. Our new Christian is not yet old enough to do either, but eventually she will be. My wish for her is that when she is, she look upon the great gift of

Faith as an invitation to the greatest adventure one can conceive of, an adventure that can end up for her in the Vision of God for all eternity. Being baptized into a Christian family will assure her of the help she will need adapted to her age to have enough trust in herself to accept the adventure of life in the Church when she is old enough to understand it, and enough mistrust of herself to enjoy it. That is to say, mistrust of herself but trust in God and His Providential Care. This does not mean that there will be no suffering in her life. If the Cross was the destiny of her Lord, the Cross will be her destiny as well. But it does mean that she can be absolutely sure of God's constant Love.

Keep the faith, Meghan! It is being given to you now by God through your parents. Keep the faith, Meghan! You are not free to accept or reject it now, but the time will come when you will be free to do one or the other. Keep the faith, Meghan! None of us is really worthy of it. But keep it, unworthy as you are. Keep the faith, Meghan! Trust yourself and keep it, mistrust yourself and enjoy it! **(21 November 2011) (10 October 2019)**

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