

OUR COMMITMENT TO THE CHURCH

BY BISHOP FELIPE J. ESTÉVEZ

THE AMAZING LAST WORDS of St. Teresa of Avila displayed both the determined ideal and the clear goal of her life: "In the end," she said, "I die a daughter of the Church." St. Teresa lived in one of the most turbulent periods of church history, but she never lost her profound sense of belonging to a mystical family that transcends time and space, one whose purpose is to lead all people to salvation. Her creative response to the problems of the church was to write volumes of spiritual theology, reform a religious order, and inspire thousands to pursue holiness. I turn to St. Teresa's example to remind me of the power of creative fidelity to the church in times of greatest need.

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Historians will remember the year 2018 as a crisis year of scandal at high levels of the Catholic hierarchy, followed by powerful currents of anger from the laity toward church leaders, the intervention of multiple federal and state audits on church governance, intense media coverage of negative practices and immoral personal conduct. In spite of it all, the vast majority of the faithful of this diocese continue to gather for the Eucharist around the altar of the word and sacrifice each week, bringing into reality the ancient axiom that "Where the Eucharist is, there is the true church." To see the fidelity of so many people to the central sacrament of the church's life is extremely encouraging to me.

Surely the present crisis serves as a test for Catholics. Each must ask himself: Do I move away from the church or find deeper reasons for belonging? This is a true challenge for many. One of the most painful experiences I have had recently has been reading letters from the faithful who have decided to suspend their support to our charities, and even in some cases to change church affiliations based solely on the information they are getting from the secular media. For example, even though the Diocese of St. Augustine has not had a single allegation of child abuse among its clergy in the past eight years, many of the letter-writers took the Pennsylvania grand jury report as if it were happening in our diocese today. Some even accused me personally of culpable negligence in matters that took place decades ago in other states! Such irrational anger based

on misinformation is always a formula for division, never a creative solution to anything.

What is most damaging in this scenario, however, is not the withdrawal of support but the failure to perceive the mystical quality of Christ's Church, which exists to lead all people to eternal salvation despite the failures of its leaders and members. The history of the church shows us that the grace of Christ is operative through every sort of human tragedy and calamity as well as through its holiest members. The church is divine as well as human. That dynamic surely has not ceased in our day and age. As we gradually emerge from the fog of this collective angst, I believe that it is opportune for each of us to renew our love for the church and to become a living member of the body of Christ in its multiple dimensions.

The church at its most basic is lived at the level of the family. The "domestic church" is the faith community led by our parents where one learns the basics of community living: respect and appreciation for the uniqueness of each member, collaboration in the chores and needs of the family, learning to make and keep good relationships with our neighbors, etc. It is also a training ground for faith: prayer at meals and recitation of the rosary, the study of the Bible, care of the sick and the poor to name a few. The Holy Family of Nazareth is the model of the domestic church. Few take into account the simple fact that God wished his beloved Son to live 30 out of his 33 years on earth in the quiet experience of his own family.

Pope St. Paul VI preached one of the best homilies ever uttered when he visited the Holy Land in 1964 and celebrated Mass in the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth. He focused on the life of Jesus in Nazareth as a school of silence, work, and family life. He especially noted the Holy Family's "harmony of love, its simplicity, and austere beauty, its sacred and inviolable character" as a model for all families and then added, "May it teach us how sweet and irreplaceable is its training, how fundamental and incomparable its role on the social plane." In short, the domestic church is a microcosm of the whole church, the church that Christ founded upon the rock of Peter's faith.

The next experience of church is the parish, which is the network of families within one same neighborhood or region. Europeans and Latin Americans marvel at the central role of the parish in the Church of the United States. The Sunday Mass is the most important activity of the parish. A third party observer would be amazed to witness all that happens in this one hour prayer event: neighbors get to know one another; people pray for each other's needs; musicians, ushers, greeters, lectors, Eucharistic ministers, deacons, and priests serve this community of faith and enable it to reach beyond itself and beyond the time of worship to a greater sense of purpose in multiple ways.

One of the most enriching experiences I ever had was a three-month sabbatical in southern Chicago in 1997. I would visit a different parish each weekend and sit in the pews with the laity worshipping as if I were one of the parishioners. I paid special attention to elements such as architecture, liturgy, and organization as well as the parish's impact on the life of the community around it. This experience affected my future in a significant way. It taught me that while the pastor is the most significant leader in the parish, the people who form the parish community have a very reciprocal influence on him as well.

In our current situation, I believe the fidelity and generosity of our parish priests get easily overlooked. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to our priests who have had to guide the flock through this difficult period. They are at times perplexed by shocking information, troubled by serious misinformation, or even judged "guilty by association" in the same profession as the other small percentage of priests who failed in their witness of service and care. I can attest that my brother priests in the parishes of this diocese have been good and faithful stewards of the faith during very dark times.

On another level, the diocese is a network of parishes, institutions, and communities, which is also known as the local or particular church. The bishop is not elected by the clergy or parish councils but is sent by the Bishop of Rome who acts in his capacity as the successor of St. Peter. The diocesan bishop presides over the diocese from a particular parish, namely, the Cathedral, which is a word that comes from the Latin term for chair and is an ancient symbol of authority for teaching and guidance.

The diocese is the incarnation of the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic church in a local area. The clergy and faithful, united to the bishop and invoking the Holy Spirit, make present the universality of God's people. It is the mission of the laity to make the presence of Christ visible and tangible in society. Vatican II expanded the mission of the bishop to emphasize his collegial responsibility with all the bishops of his country and the entire world. The annual Mission Appeal is born of this responsibility, which our parishes make possible with such generosity.

Another sign of diocesan collaboration with the larger church is the 12 annual collections approved by the U.S. bishops showing solidarity with major needs such as the retirement fund for religious, the Church in Latin America and Africa, the defense of the sanctity of life, special aid for disasters and emergencies, etc.

At the highest level of organization is the Church of Rome, presided by the Bishop of Rome, the Vicar of Christ, who we commonly call the pope. All the dioceses of the world are linked together through their communion with the pope who has been recognized from antiquity as exercising a service of unity and charity


for the entire world. In Latin, the phrase "urbe et orbe" means "to the city and to the globe" describing both the particular and universal ministry of the Bishop of Rome. In recent decades we have seen the universality of the church in the papal office as never before: an Italian pope followed by a Polish pope and a German one and most recently by an Argentinian pope. Whatever the face or origin of the Vicar of Christ, however, we respect his pastoral care, we support his charities, and above all, we pray for him often.

Honestly, I have been alarmed recently by the prevalence of unfair and persistent criticism toward our Holy Father Francis found even in Catholic media sources and in prominent lay Catholic benefactors. A great theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthazar, studied this trend and named it "the anti-Roman complex," which may be rooted in a lack of acceptance of authority figures whom we perceive as undermining our freedom.

I pray that all Catholics, especially those active in public service or ministry, may adopt the humble but principled spirit of St. Catherine of Siena, who also lived in extremely troubled times. This laywoman and Doctor of the Church was creative in addressing the serious problems of her day. She traveled, she negotiated, she encouraged, and she taught all people with candor. Like Teresa of Avila, she modeled an immense maturity of love for the church and its ministers while at the same time vigorously working toward the needed reforms. Even regarding the highest office of the Roman Pontiff, she respectfully voiced her critical opinions while having a profound recognition of the pope's magisterium from Rome.

In this time of turbulence, our church has experienced unusual unsettledness and even confusion. That is completely understandable but also not without precedent in church history. The saints have shown us that the solutions to any problems in the church are always creative and life-giving, not divisive or destructive. The saints counted themselves not only lovers of Christ but dedicated sons and daughters of the church. It was from that stance of creative fidelity that they were able to bring change. And while our opinions and observations are valid in themselves, they are not as important as our devotion to the church of which Christ is the head.

Neither are they as powerful in bringing change as our daily quest for holiness of life.

When the church finally passes through this present crisis, there will be another one. And another one after that. But just as in hindsight we can admire the heroism of the saints, so too future Catholics will look back on this period and identify the men and women of the church who brought reform by their creative works of charity, their fervent prayers, and their deep love for the church that Christ loves as his bride. 



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