

Easter Sunday, 2010

Msgr. Kevin Irwin

In 1968 the former Chair of the Theology Dept. at the University of Notre Dame, Fr. Richard Mc Brien, published his first book entitled *Do We Really Need The Church?*

Those were the immediate post Vatican II days in the Catholic Church...lots of changes were apparent, including increased use of English at Sunday Mass. It was also a time of social upheaval in our country and throughout Europe. What was unthinkable even a few years earlier was now not only thinkable but possible and doable.

The title of Fr. Mc Brien's book caused few raised eyebrows...and it was a fascinating read.

Given the recent spate of bad publicity for the church these past weeks and more poignantly these very days of holy week I wonder whether some of us might be asking the same question Fr. Mc Brien raised.

This is compounded by the fact that surveys of younger twenty and thirty-something Catholics find that they replicate the reaction of the American population in general to organized religion: denominations matter much less than they did a generation ago, many find themselves "believers but not belongers," spiritual but not religious," who like occasional sacramental ceremonies but who do not accept the Catholic church's teachings as acceptable as a totality. It seems "pick and choose" is more acceptable than commitment to all that the church holds and teaches.

Allow me to enter this discussion on this Easter Sunday – the holiest and most important of the church's feasts and doctrines. And allow me to argue that given all this contrary evidence and poll results that we really do need the church, now more than ever.

Why?

1. *Imperfect.* To be a Catholic means that we belong to a community of believers not all of whom are perfect. In fact we belong to a church that looks to the successor of St. Peter, the main character in today's gospel, whose profession of faith made him the most important of the apostles. But we must never forget that this same St. Peter denied knowing Jesus on the night of his agony in the garden. And it was only after the resurrection that he was rehabilitated and became a rock of faith and a steadfast believer.

What is the church? It is that community of imperfect disciples, some of whom have performed acts of betrayal in terms of sex abuse beyond imagining. Yes, that is a sin that is horrific and they are part of the filthy church on earth.

But at the same time the church is comprised of fellow believers in every generation who have helped the church reform itself and come back stronger after scandals of church laxity and lack of orthodox belief.

Who are the Franciscans and Dominicans but the men and women who since the thirteenth century have shown the church that it must and can reform itself in every age? The church had grown slack and fat. These reformers and their followers helped to “build the church..” the real church of God on this earth. And who are the Jesuits but that group of priests and brothers who led the church intellectually after the Council of Trent to defend orthodox belief and practice? The church needed spokespersons and that is what the Jesuits were and are.

When the TV personality of ABC News Cokie Roberts was asked “are you really a practicing Catholic?” She answered, “Until I get it right!”

2. *Universal.* To be a Catholic means that we belong to each other in a world wide church. On Easter Sunday we welcome many guests among us and say you are all welcome at any time and at any place. After all one of the meanings of the word “Catholic” is universal...we populate all parts of the globe. The present sex abuse scandals affect the first world church in Europe (Ireland, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Spain and now Italy). Just as they affected us in the “new world” in 2002-03. But in point of fact the fastest growing part of the church today is south of the Equator...in Africa, Latin and South America and in Asia. And the greatest number of those becoming Catholic are laywomen. Sometimes we confuse the institutional and clerical church with the real, worldwide church.

There are signs of hope there as well as in this diocese with catechumens and candidates coming into the church last night at the Easter Vigil. And what is the church but that community that sees in them our future together? And who are we but those who have responded to Peter’s invitation in today’s first reading to be baptized.

They are we, we are they. We are in this together.

For the past two years one of my most vivid memories of the ceremony of baptism here at St. Mary’s at the Easter Vigil is when the catechumens walk down the three steps into the font of water and walk out the other side dripping with water. And on each end there is someone to help them walk down without not falling and to emerge from the font, again without falling.

For me that is an image of the church. We are in this together. We are a community of faith. To be a Catholic is to belong to a church. It is as simple as that. And who are we but people who are always there for each other. We are always there to help each other from falling...whether physically from a water bath at baptism...or when life’s sufferings get us down spiritually or when scandals in this very church of ours weigh us down emotionally. It is then that we realize the genius of Catholicism..where two and three are gathered in my name I am there in the midst of them.

And when one part of the body of Christ suffers we can and should look through the wide angle lens that is Catholicism..five continents, four directions on the compass...and when one part is weak we can draw strength and courage from other parts that are more obviously strong.

3. *A Sacramental Church.* Unlike some other Christian denominations which are heavily reliant on the personalities of ministers and preachers, we are not. In essence priests and bishops are ordained to serve at the altar, to preach the Word in the pulpit to celebrate the sacraments at altars like these and to engage in the ministry of charity and service. While we may be characters (!) we are not meant to foster a personality cult or to allow the emphasis to be on any one of us. It is about the church's sacramental and charitable needs. One of the reasons why Catholicism is so concerned about doctrine and correct teaching is that the teaching does not depend or rise and fall on charismatic teachers. It rises and falls on 2,000 years of tradition – teachings defined and refined with debate and, yes sometimes controversy. It is not up to individuals. It is up to the body of Church as a whole – which body is nourished by preaching, the sacraments and pastoral charity.

In terms of church leadership this parish has just seen the transition from one pastor to another. What remains the same is the Word, sacraments and pastoral charity. The universal church saw the change in leadership from pope to pope..John Paul II to Benedict XVI...and what remains the same is the Word, sacraments and pastoral charity. This diocese saw the change in bishops from the native born Walter F. Sullivan no to Francis De Lorenzo. What remains the same is the Word, sacraments and pastoral charity.

Ours is a church that is larger than any individual parish, or diocese, or nation, or continent. It is a worldwide church that on this Easter day is experiencing discomfort at the actions of some of its priests and the cover up by the hierarchy.

But it is a church, as the PBS advertisement says, which is “people like you” who make up the twos and threes who gather in the Lord's name this Easter day to hear the Word about resurrection, who receive broken bread and cups of wine to dine in the company of the resurrected Christ and to recommit ourselves to pastoral charity.

This is why we need the church. This is what indeed the church itself is...

And we need always to remember that this side of heaven it will always be the imperfect church on earth, whose expanse is far beyond the Vatican, or this diocese or this parish, and whose life blood is not the personality cult of popes, bishops or priests but whose very life breath comes from the death and risen life of the Lord we worship today, Christ risen from the dead.