

Jesus and the Church: God's Ultimate Intervention in Human History AND THE BEST NEWS POSSIBLE.

The other day I was talking to a fellow you said, "I decided to read through the Gospels, Matthew/Mark/Luke and John and Acts of the Apostles...and when I got to the part where Mary Magdalene is at the empty tomb and realizing that Jesus HAS RISEN FROM THE DEAD it struck me that 'this is real' – that this truth that I have known for years as a Catholic – it struck me at that moment like it never has before – that THIS IS REAL."

Indeed, it is real that God became one of us and taught us and suffered and died out of love for us. And that's why all the disciples gave their lives preaching it had happened to them. That, as we remember in John 3: 16 – *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son....*

And John 15: 13 -- *No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*

And I'll add that "it's real" that Jesus also gave us the Church: as we hear in Matthew 16: 13, 16-19 – when *...Jesus....asked his disciples, "...who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said in reply, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus said to him in reply, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."*

And "it's real" that Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to us and to the Church to help us follow him: As we hear in Acts 2: 1-4 --*When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the holy Spirit.*

The whole point of THE NEW TESTAMENT is that God so loved the world that he sent his only Son:

- a. to become ONE WITH US and to THEREFORE HELP US TO UNDERSTAND GOD because now we can RELATE TO GOD who has become one of us...and through his teachings and actions among us, which were chronicled in the New Testament....
- b. And that we would KNOW that God loves us because "no greater love does anyone have than this: To lay down one's life for a friend" and now GOD HAS LAID DOWN HIS LIFE FOR US.

- B. **And then the whole point of the FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH** is that God wanted to have a community, enlivened by the Holy Spirit, through which God could work in the Holy Eucharist, the Bible (put together by the Church), saints and leaders (starting with the apostles and handed down from them.)

God loves all of us.

- That's why He sent Moses and all the prophets.
- And then finally God did the ultimate intervention in human history: He became one of us. And he started a community where we say we receive His very Body and Blood when we gather for the mass.
- The Early Christians believed that Jesus was God – the apostles all gave their lives saying this was so and, indeed, Jesus said it was so...so he was either crazy or God....not just a nice man.
- And the Early Christians believed that the Holy Eucharist at mass was God too.
- And today we're going to dwell a bit on the enormity of what these beliefs of ours have to say about our lives.

Because they are like no other religion....They are like no other belief system. They are about a God who comes to us AS ONE OF US so that we could relate to God...and who taught us....and then who LOVED US AS MUCH AS HE COULD → even DYING FOR US....and that He comes to us still: Through the Holy Spirit, working in our hearts, among us when we love each other and help each other, and through the mass and other actions of the Church He gave us.

- And while life can still be a challenge: This is good news the best news.
- And while we, and other people and the Church can be sinners at times, this is still good news, the best news.
- And I hope that we can really let this BEST OF NEWS hit us between the eyes today like it struck the this member of the parish the other day.

THE BEST NEWS IS SOMETHING WE WANT TO SHARE WITH EVERYONE....JESUS AND THE CHURCH. But maybe part of the Best News is that we believe that God never stops trying to save and heal us...even after death – which brings us to the notion of purgatory, and that non-Christians can be saved by Jesus.

Indeed -- Jesus wants us to be saved. That's why he came among us. And he taught us that through believing in him (i.e., John 3:16 and in good works, i.e. Matthew 25) we could be saved and to be close to God in heaven.

INDEED, Catholics say that this BEST NEWS is offered to people EVEN AFTER DEATH – if there is a need for “purification” that it can happen AFTER THIS LIFE. (**CATECHISM 1030** *All who die in God's grace*

and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.)

This is a great aspect of the Catholic faith that I feel shows a very loving aspect of God: For, in this life we know that people can suffer greatly....and maybe someone had a terrible childhood or was never shown true love in their family....or maybe they were abused....and so they WON'T or CAN'T turn to Jesus in this world....well, God reads the heart and says "I will heal them" even after death. That's why we pray for the deceased.

And, that God can work on the soul of someone who did ask Jesus for salvation before they died....for example, a guard at Dachau who, the day after finishing work at the camp, professed faith in Jesus and then died. Certainly God would need to "work on them a bit" when they died – this is what the word "purification" talks about....that God would "work on us."

And another loving aspect of our Church teaching is that we believe that while all people need to be saved by Jesus, that for people that don't know Jesus can "participate with Jesus" even without knowing it. That a child brought up in an atheist town in Siberia in the 1950's might have participated with Jesus through being kind and good – without knowing it...and so will "know Jesus" when they die...And that a Hindu woman who was kind and generous to all throughout her life in some forgotten little village in India will be "know" and be accepted by Jesus when she dies because she "participated" with Jesus in her life. This is in the Vatican II documents (Lumen Gentium) and the Catechism (839-843).

Of Course, it is better, in our minds, to introduce people to Jesus and his Church, CONSCIOUSLY in this life. That is, indeed, why Jesus came and established the Church – to help us. So we are called to share this BEST NEWS always. But it is good to know that our faith tells us that God is a loving God who WANTS TO SAVE AND HEAL US IF AT ALL POSSIBLE.

AND, WE BELIEVE THAT THROUGH THE BELIEVERS OF TODAY AND THE CHURCH, WE ARE CALLED TO MAKE THE WORLD THE BEST IT CAN BE AND TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD INTO THE LIKENESS OF HEAVEN.

Indeed, Jesus said, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." So we are called to build up a world where we follow the ways of heaven in this world.

And trying to follow Jesus in this world has a good effect: The Church is the largest provider of education, health care and charities in the world.

And the book AMERICAN GRACE (2010) by Putnam and Campbell, described how people who go regularly to religious services are much more likely to give to charity (including secular charities) and to practice various acts of kindness and charity than those who do not attend religious services.

SO, What's Not to Like? Why wouldn't you and I just take this gift of Jesus and the Church?

Well, Fr. James Martin, SJ, wrote in a book called The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything, about people today in America who don't want to be tied down to "organized religion." He writes that some today have made a conscious decision to separate themselves from organized religion, but they still believe in God. Maybe they find church services meaningless, offensive, dull, or all three. Maybe they've been hurt. Maybe they've been insulted or abused. Or they feel offended by certain dogmas of organized religion., Or they find religious leaders to be hypocritical. Or maybe they're just bored.

One strength of this group is a healthy independence that enables them to see things in a fresh way – something that their own religious community often desperately needs. But a danger for this group, he writes, is a perfectionism that sets up any organized religion for failure. For example, Fr. Martin describes a friend of his who was looking for the "perfect" church.

Not long ago, a friend stopped attending his family's church. My friend is an intelligent and compassionate man who believes in God and whose parents had deep roots in Episcopalianism. But he believed his local church was too aligned with the affluent. So he decided to search for a community that recognized the place of the poor in the world.

After he left his church, he toyed with the idea of joining the local Catholic church, which he noticed many of the poor attended on Sundays. But my friend disagreed with their prohibition on ordaining women. So he rejected Catholicism.

Next he experimented with Buddhism, but he found it impossible to reconcile his belief in a personal God, and his devotion to Jesus Christ, with the Buddhist worldview.

Finally, he ended up at the local Unitarian church, which initially seemed to suit him. He appreciated their broad-minded Christian-based spirituality and commitment to social justice, as well as their welcome of people who feel unwelcome in other churches. But he eventually ran into a problem: the Unitarians didn't espouse a clear enough belief system for my friend. In the end, he decided to belong to no church. Now he stays home on Sundays.

HAS THE CHURCH DONE MORE HARM OR GOOD?

Fr. Martin continues: *Some say that on balance religion is found wanting. Still, I would stack up against the negatives some positive aspects: traditions of love, forgiveness and charity as well as the more tangible outgrowths of thousands of faith-based organizations that care for the poor, like Catholic Charities or the vast network of Catholic hospitals and schools that care for poor and immigrant populations. Think too of generous men and women like St. Francis of Assisi, St. Teresa of*

Ávila, St. Catherine of Siena, Dorothy Day, Mother Teresa and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King again. Speaking of Dr. King, you might add the abolition, women's suffrage and civil rights movements, all of which were founded on explicitly religious principles. Add to that list the billions of believers who have found in their own religious traditions not only comfort but also a moral voice urging them to live selfless lives and to challenge the status quo.

And Jesus of Nazareth....Though he often challenged the religious conventions of his day....was a deeply religious man.....

Martin also points out that atheism doesn't have a perfect record either. In his book No One Sees God: The Dark Night of Atheists and Believers, Michael Novak points out that while many atheist thinkers urge us to question everything, especially the record of organized religion, atheists often fail to question their own record. Think of the cruelty and bloodshed perpetrated, just in the 20th century, by totalitarian regimes that have professed "scientific atheism." Stalinist Russia comes to mind.

On balance, Martin says, religion comes out on top. He writes, "*And when I think about the examples of the maleficent effects of religion, I remember the English novelist Evelyn Waugh, a dazzling writer who was by many accounts a nasty person. One of Waugh's friends once expressed astonishment that he could be so mean-spirited and a Christian. Think, said Waugh, how much worse I would be if I were not Christian.*"

WHY IS CHURCH GOOD NEWS? BECAUSE IT CAN CHALLENGE ME

Still, Martin continues, *it's not surprising that, given all the problems with organized religion, many people would say, "I'm not religious." They say: "I'm serious about living a moral life, maybe even one that centers on God, but I'm my own person."*

"Spiritual" on the other hand, implies that, freed from unnecessary dogma, you can be yourself before God. The term may also imply that you have sampled a variety of religious beliefs that you have integrated into your life. You meditate at a Buddhist temple, participate in Seders with Jewish friends at Passover, sing in a gospel choir at a local Baptist church (great again), and go to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve at a Catholic church (also great).

You find what works for you, but don't subscribe to any one church: that would be too confining. Besides, there's no one creed that represents exactly what you believe.

But there's a problem. While "spiritual" is obviously healthy, "not religious" may be another way of saying that faith is something between you and God. And while faith is a question of you and God, it's not just a question of you and God.

It's a healthy tension: the wisdom of our religious traditions provides us with a corrective for our propensity to think that we have all the answers; and prophetic individuals can moderate the natural propensity of institutions to resist change and growth.

Because this would mean that you're relating to God alone. And that means that there's no one to suggest when you might be off track.

We all tend to think that we're correct about most things, and spirituality is no exception. And not belonging to a religious community means less of a chance of being challenged by a tradition of belief and experience, less chance to recognize when you are misguided, seeing only part of the picture, or even wrong.

Consider a person who wants to follow Jesus Christ on her own. Perhaps she has heard that if she follows Christ she will enjoy financial success — a popular idea today. Were she part of a mainstream Christian community, though, she would be reminded that suffering is part of the life of even the most devout Christian. Without the wisdom of a community, she may gravitate towards a skewed view of Christianity. Once she falls on hard times financially, she may drop God, who has ceased to meet her personal needs. Despite our best efforts to be spiritual we make mistakes. And when we do, it's helpful to have the wisdom of a religious tradition.

WE NEED TO BE CONFRONTED -- Indeed, **IRONICALLY**, what is good about Jesus is that **HE CAN CONFRONT US** → through reading about other people (like us) in the Bible who deal with Jesus → through being part of a parish where we open ourselves up to another in the sacrament of reconciliation → through being in a faith discussion group or through talking about our faith or our actions with another. → through having the ability to struggle with the teachings of a Church.

A good example of this in Catholic teaching is how our Church confronts people all over the spectrum. Certainly the Church challenges everyone about protecting the vulnerable (the unborn, the poor). But many times, depending on our political leanings, we are more open to one aspect (abortion/euthanasia) or another (poverty/excesses of capitalism). People get heated up, but that's part of spiritual growth. And that is the point of Jesus and his Church – to confront us into following Jesus.

HELL -- Indeed, I haven't mentioned Hell at all in this paper...but just talked about God's love....but Jesus does say that there is a Hell. And Pope John Paul II once wrote that the definition of Hell is that we are separated from God. Jesus and the Church are the Best News because they are about **HELPING US TO FIND GOD**. Let's not just trust our own personal convictions when it comes to finding God, let's let ourselves be challenged. Can't we each think of people we know who are a bit lost but don't know it? How do we make sure we don't join that camp? Let's let ourselves be challenged by Jesus and in the Church. Because to be challenged to become a better person...and that is the Best News.