

**JANUARY 6, 2019**

**\*WHAT WILL THE CATHOLIC CHURCH LOOK LIKE IN 100 YEARS?**

As space permits, I started last week sharing a talk I have given several times to Catholic high school seniors called “Back to the Future,” because we have to look back at what the Second Vatican Council unleashed fifty-five years ago, in order to understand what is the likely future of the Catholic Church. Vatican II itself looked back at four key areas of the Church’s history which defined who we are as a Church, and rethought how we can build on those areas today. The first area reevaluated the Church’s strong anti modern stance that reached a pinnacle at the First Vatican Council in 1870. Without denying the centrality of papal authority or the importance of doctrines of faith (emphasized by Vatican I as a way to protect the Church against the emerging modern world), Vatican II moved the Church from being strictly anti-modern on almost every issue to being a Church in dialogue with the modern, contemporary world. The key question for the future is: Where will the Church choose to embrace something from that modern, secular culture and where will the Church never give in and always be counter-cultural? Personally, I believe that gathering around Sunday Eucharist and a commitment to the dignity of every human life (what might be called a pro-life commitment across the board and not just one or two causes) will be the key ways the Church will always remain counter-cultural.

Vatican II did not just go back a century and move the church past its anti-modern stance. It went back 450 years and moved the Church off its anti-Reformation stance. Up to Vatican II nearly all that the Church said and did vis-à-vis other Christians was dictated by the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the Catholic Counter-Reformation summed up by the Council of Trent (1545-63.) In other words, enmity, suspicion, condemnation. Vatican II, in its Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*, “Light of the World”) and its Decree on Ecumenism acknowledges the divisions in the Christian Church universal, affirms its belief as Catholics that the fullness of Church resides in the Catholic Church, but does not use language of heresy or condemnation toward other Christians. *Lumen gentium* talks about how all Christians, by virtue of their baptismal identity, are already at least partially incorporated into one Church; the Decree on Ecumenism talks about a “hierarchy of truths” that guard the central Christian mysteries, but allows for a unity amidst differences on that which is not so central.

This re-thinking of the Reformation has led to all sorts of shared statements and ventures among Christians. The stumbling block to more visible unity continues to be the role of the pope and the understanding of Holy Orders. But still, in principle, Vatican II saw the possibility of full Christian unity. There are a number of Catholic commentators who became upset with this because they believe it is watering down Catholic identity. They range from those who want more or all Latin back into the liturgy to those who practice what is called Catholic apologetics aimed at trying to “prove” the Catholic understanding of faith and its practices over against the Reformers. Instead of starting with what we hold in common, they feel the need to re-assert the differences as strongly as possible. That is one possible future. Also, in the last 120 years a new challenge has arisen from Pentecostal Churches, especially in Latin America and Africa. These “Spirit-led” communities challenge existing Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant models of Church.

The future of the Church, I believe, will be shaped by which form of ecumenism influences the Church the most—unity with Protestants, Orthodox, or Pentecostals. At present it does not look as though it will be ecumenism with the classical Protestant denominations. Such ecumenism seems to have lost a lot of energy. Part of the problem is that the more we move toward unity in that direction, the more we seem to emphasize individual belief over communal practices; personal interpretation of the Bible over communal wisdom; and so forth. Another possibility is a greater unity with the Orthodox. If that were to happen, it would strengthen a highly ritualized liturgy, the impossibility of women as priests, and focus on the authority of bishops (including the pope) as the key to the future of the Church. Pope Benedict clearly wanted to see greater ecumenism with the Orthodox and used much of his papacy to try to open that door. A greater embrace of Pentecostalism, on the other hand, would open up a more uncertain future. To be truly “Spirit-led” would mean an openness to bringing old and new practices together, to rethink what is essential to the tradition and more. Pope Francis is more inclined, it seems at this point, to an eclectic, charismatic openness to the Spirit, and unafraid even if that means rethinking many time honored practices. Will the Church universal follow his lead? Which type of ecumenism gains the most energy will shape the future of the Catholic Church. More next time.

**JANUARY 13, 2019**

**\*WHAT WILL THE CHURCH LOOK LIKE IN 100 YEARS?**

This is the title of a talk I have given to Catholic high school seniors several times. As mentioned in the previous articles (December 30, January 6), I think the future of the Catholic Church hinges on four ways that the Second Vatican Council fifty-five years ago re-opened questions that had been long considered closed. By going back into our history, the Second Vatican Council unleashed dynamics within the Church that are not yet settled. The first factor that will determine the future is how open the Catholic Church will be to the contemporary world versus how counter-cultural it will be. Vatican II re-opened Vatican I's completely counter-modern stance and recognized a need to dialogue with the modern world. At the same time, it insisted that the Gospel message has a unique and essential role to play, never losing its ability to act as leaven within the world. We see this challenge played out in the area of biotechnology, end of life issues, beginning of life issues, feminism, marriage and sexuality, immigration, economic policies and the like. Where the Church as a whole digs in and says "No" (and so remains counter-cultural on those issues) and where the Church embraces within its own identity what the world is discovering will shape the Church of the future.

The second factor is Vatican II's opening to ecumenism and Christian unity. It was one of the most astounding changes of attitude, after 450 years of antagonism with other Christian Churches and communities. To which stream of Christian faith will the Catholic Church be most open? Classical Protestantism which seems to have gone down a very individualistic road and has had a difficult time distinguishing itself from the surrounding culture? Evangelical Protestantism which has life and energy, but tends toward a dismissal of contemporary science and a very narrow reading of Scripture? The Orthodox Church which would unite the oldest and largest groups of Christians, but solidify the Church as focused on the role of the bishop with no women in leadership? Or, the Pentecostal Churches which have the vitality of the Evangelical Protestants, but more community-oriented and open to re-shaping the Church based on the gifts people have? It is too early to tell, but the ecumenism that gains the most energy will have a profound effect on the shape of the Church in a hundred years.

The third way the Second Vatican Council reached back into the past was by its emphasis on the importance of the sacrament of Baptism/Initiation. In the first millennium, to be baptized and enter into the Church was nothing less than a "new birth," from the darkness of the past into the light of the Christian faith. Even though the hierarchy of orders—deacon, priest, and bishop—developed integrally from the time of the latest New Testament writings into the 3<sup>rd</sup> c. and so was certainly an essential part of that first millennium Church, still baptism was key. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium there is a general sense that, in areas under Christian influence, every child was to be baptized. With the whole society baptized, the key differences for the Church had to do with whether you were part of the clerical state or not, and if so, which rank of orders, minor and major, you had. The role of the non-hierarchy was to fight the battles and govern (nobility) and till the soil and produce the food (serfs). The role of the hierarchy was to guide and shape the Church.

Vatican II reaches back to the first millennium to re-claim the centrality of baptism. The document on the Church (*Lumen gentium*), deliberately re-arranges the order of topics and treats of the "People of God" first before talking about the service that hierarchy plays within the Church. The focus on ecumenism and shared baptism; the chapter on the universal call to holiness rather than the specific religious call to holiness; the recognition that laity have a responsibility to use their gifts and wisdom for the good of the Church, even within its internal structures; the rejection of what was thought to be a permanent distinction between the "teaching Church" (*ecclesia docens*, the hierarchy) and the "listening Church" (*ecclesia discens*, the laity)—all point to a recovery of the centrality of baptism. In a practical sense we experience this in the architecture of most new or renovated Catholic churches with central, larger baptismal fonts. A baptismal focus calls all of us to be missionary disciples (in the words of Pope Francis) and not simply fund religious to do the work. A baptismal focus energizes the idea of the "new evangelization," that we all need to be sharers of the Gospel and its mission.

If every baptized disciple is called to holiness, then the future shape of the Church needs to be able to integrate that reality into its structure. It is not a matter of jettisoning the hierarchy (though many have called for that in light of

the clergy abuse scandal and cover up!). Rather, it is actively re-shaping all structures using the gifts and talents of all its members. After Vatican II, we saw some of this in the rise of the number of lay ecclesial ministers far outstripping vocations to priesthood and religious life. Do we continue to let that develop and give them real authority? For example, the Pope allowed the Synod of Bishops to include non-clergy voting members for the first time (heads of religious orders of brothers), but no laity. Entrenched power is hard to re-shape. Pope Francis (and before him Pope Benedict but for different reasons) has speculated on the value of decentralizing the papacy a bit. Perhaps re-instituting the first millennial practice of patriarchs of certain key dioceses who would have most of the day to day power/role in their geographical area that the Pope currently has in the whole Church.

Here there is an interesting alignment of both more traditional-leaning Catholics and liberal-leaning Catholics. Many on both sides are suspicious of the power of the clergy and have called for a revamping, but in response many bishops have dug in their heels and re-asserted their authority and have been reluctant to envision and encourage new structures. Finally, the Church has many international movements of spirituality which cross normal diocesan and hierarchical borders (Opus Dei, Focolare, Comunione et Liberatione, etc.), along with many religious orders acknowledging that their old models do not work. How far do we allow this focus on the centrality of baptism to re-structure what a parish or diocese or other structures of the Church will look like in the future? Concluding thoughts next time.

**JANUARY 20, 2019**

### **\*WHAT WILL THE CHURCH LOOK LIKE IN 100 YEARS?**

In the bulletin articles for the last three weeks, I have suggested three ways that the shape of the Catholic Church in 100 years will be determined by how the next couple of generations respond to options opened up by the Second Vatican Council fifty-five years ago. That council of bishops reached back into our history as a Church and re-thought some issues that had long been considered closed. Instead of an anti-modern stance to all things new (various social movements, religious freedom, democratic nation-states, theory of evolution and other scientific findings, etc.), Vatican II invited Catholics to engage in dialogue with the world. In that dialogue we not only have to be critical of developments that contradict the Gospel understanding of the human person and his/her dignity, but also appreciate the developments that support that understanding. It is not always a “No” to something new. The Second Vatican Council reached back to the Reformation times and overturned the adversarial relationship we have had with Protestant Churches. We are now asked to work together as much as possible. Which set of partners will the next generation focus on the most: Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Pentecostal, or Orthodox? That decision will have a huge influence on the shape of the Church in the future. Thirdly, the Council reached back into the first millennium of the Church’s history to once again raise up the importance of baptismal identity. It strongly affirmed the importance of ordained clergy, even strengthening the role of the local bishop, but it re-claimed baptismal identity as more foundational than hierarchy and ordained identity. How far we let that focus on baptismal identity re-shape the structures of the Church is the question for the next couple of generations.

This brings me to the fourth and final “looking back into history”—right to the earliest times of the Church, when the Jesus movement shifted from a mainly Palestinian Jewish reality to a Hellenistic (Greek and Roman) Gentile (non-Jewish) reality. The need for the shift comes from the success of Barnabus and Paul and others in planting the Gospel in various cities of the Roman Empire and finding that Gentiles were more open to its message, in many cases, than those practicing the Jewish faith. It is hard to find an analogy for this huge cultural shift. It required re-thinking how to talk about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in a new way. “Jesus is the Messiah” (“the Christ”) no longer meant much. “Jesus Christ is Lord” now becomes something that can reach that culture. How much of the Jewish Scriptures should we keep? (All of it, but the order of books arranged differently.) Which Jewish practices and rituals? (None specifically, though the synagogue service and Temple worship will have a huge impact on shaping the structure of the Eucharist).

That willingness to significantly re-shape the Church in light of a new culture allowed the Church to become more than another division within Judaism and be planted in all cultures of the world. However, once the Church achieved

a certain dominance in the Roman Empire the process of enculturation slowed. Instead, when the Gospel was brought to new cultures, the Greek-Roman style of the Church was part of it. There are many exceptions such as St. Cyril and Methodius' work among the Slavic people. But, overall, the enculturation process stagnated for many centuries. Vatican II opens up again this idea of enculturation and uses the image of leaven. The Church is to be the leaven within every culture, working from within that culture to help it become the community God intends. How far can/should such enculturation go?

Enculturation can easily extend to things like liturgical garb, language and music in the liturgy, and other externals. But Vatican II opened up the possibility of going much deeper with enculturation. This has caused some backlash in the Church, especially with Pope Benedict XVI, who is convinced that the Hellenistic version of the Church has become essential to the proclamation of the Gospel. It is one reason why he allowed the old, Tridentine Latin Mass to be used on a wider basis and had the Roman Missal (the prayers used at Mass) re-translated so that it reflects a more Roman, Latin style of speech. In other words, a fear of further enculturation. Many (most?) other bishops and theologians would disagree. They would see enculturation as necessary to preserve the dynamism of the Gospel. Our mission is not about preserving the Catholic Church in its current form, but to allow the truth of the Gospel to permeate all peoples and cultures. What the Church will look like in 100 years will be greatly shaped by the decisions made by the next couple of generations, and on how far such enculturation goes.

Pope Francis is very open to such enculturation, when it comes to non-sacramental, devotional practices such as processions, devotion to Mary and the saints, combinations of more ancient indigenous practices with specifically Catholic feasts, and so on. But will/can enculturation extend even further to how we talk about the human-divine Jesus or God as one yet a Triune unity of Persons? In other words, is the wording of the Nicene Creed the only allowed way to express such ideas or can we discover other ways that retain the heart of the doctrine but make it more accessible to Hindu, Confucian, Muslim, indigenous and other cultures? Can gospel enculturation include practices of devotion to ancestors in the Chinese tradition or Earth-affirming ones on native American peoples? The more enculturation permeates the Church and its practices, the greater the challenge to maintain a visible unity in the Church universal. Yet a lack of enculturation may create an external uniformity that seems like unity but takes the dynamism and energy out of the Gospel proclamation. What does a world Church look like that takes seriously the significant local culture? Exactly like the current Roman Catholic Church or something more diverse, yet unified and dynamic?

A final thought on the future Church next time.

**JANUARY 27, 2019**

### **\*What Will the Church Look Like in 100 Years?**

This challenge of being both open to social change yet firmly committed to core moral principles is at the heart of the unanswered question of exactly what the Catholic Church will look like in one hundred years. Over the past several weeks I have shared in these bulletin articles the core of a talk I give to Catholic high school seniors on the possible futures of the Catholic Church. The emphasis is on the multiple ways the Church could change. There is no one right direction. It will depend on them and their children and grandchildren and the choices they make, and so at the end I challenge them to be intentional about their Catholic identity and commitment. It will come down to a willingness to witness to their faith. In that light, even though it can seem distant to us in the United States, many Catholics in other parts of the world are finding themselves persecuted for their faith. Some have even been martyred for their faith. In those areas that young people are willing to publicly embrace their faith and witness to it, the Catholic Church will remain strong. Where we simply presume that the Catholic faith will be there for us and future generations without intentionally committing ourselves to it, the Church will falter.

That is why one of the most counter-cultural actions we can do, both to support and deepen our faith

commitment and to witness to others, is to gather every Sunday for Eucharist. To know that we cannot be the best of ourselves without that Eucharist; to intentionally put our worship of God with the community of faith higher than other commitments and communities; and to know oneself as essential to the full thriving of the Church. That will make a huge difference in what the Church of the future will look like.

**Fr. Buersmeyer**