

THE TWELVE-STEP REVIEW

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Dominicans in their litany refer to Saint Francis as “Our holy father Francis,” and Franciscans in their litany refer to Saint Dominic as “Our holy father Dominic.” This is because both Saints lived in the same period of history and their religious Orders were born at the same time—the 13th century. These two religious Orders began because the corruption in the Church at that time needed reformers.

In that context I’d like to give some understanding to the current crisis in the Church, for which many good Catholics and many good priests and bishops will suffer and are suffering. Why will they suffer?

Those familiar with Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* will remember the character Fagin as the leader of a group of children (the Artful Dodger among them) whom he teaches to make their livings by pickpocketing and other criminal activities in order to enrich himself. He is a miser and as such is portrayed as a Jew. Dickens said that he had made Fagin Jewish because “it unfortunately was true, of the time to which the story refers, that the class of criminal almost invariably was a Jew.” In response, novelist Norman Lebrecht wrote, “A more vicious stigmatization of an ethnic community could hardly be imagined and it was not by any means unintended.” Many good Jews have suffered because of such stereotypes.

Growing up in Connecticut in a town with various nationalities, many of them recent immi-



Holy Father Francis and Holy Father Dominic

grants, people could be very prejudiced in stereotyping various ethnic groups. Thus **all** Irish were dismissed as drunkards. **All** Sicilians were *mafiosi*. **All** Polish were thick-headed, and **all** Jews were portrayed as misers. And so on with other nationalities. Terrible prejudice.

The same thing happens today: **All** Muslims are evil and terrorists. **All** atheists are vile persecutors of religion. Unfortunately this is what sinful man is like, making no distinctions. And likewise, **all** Christians are now portrayed in movies as hypocrites. For example, in the BBC series *Poldark*, the religious people such as Poldark’s father-in-law and brother-in-law are self-righteous fanatics—weirdos, if

you will. The religious people are the fanatics, while the heroes lead immoral lives.

In the popular English series *Downton Abbey*, no one is truly deeply religious. The same is true of the characters in the Australian series *A Place to Call Home*, with the exception of the character Bridget Adams—once she converts from Catholicism to the Jewish faith, changing her name to Sara.

So given the current and vile scandal in the Church, we will see the persecution of good Catholics, good priests, and good bishops coming from this situation. **All** priests are sex abusers; **all** Catholics are hypocrites, etc. With that in mind, let’s continue with our theme:

The Tale of Two Cities

The year 410 was a pivotal moment in Western history. At that time various Germanic tribes had been invading the Empire, and some, like the Vandals under the command of their king, Alaric, succeeded in capturing the city of Rome. **Horrrifying!** Why was it horrrifying? Rome was known as the **Eternal City** because the Romans thought that it would literally never fall (as I’m sure many Americans think that the United States will never end), and the year 410 shook this belief to its foundations and ultimately led to the collapse of the Roman Empire.

Imagine these pagan tribes pillaging

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and raping and burning Roman villages. St. Augustine, who lived during those times, attributes the fall of Rome to the immorality of the people. He says:

Their gods provided no useful laws and no moral code of life.

I think the same can be said of the United States today. The gods that the Hollywood industry portrays offer our young people **no useful laws, no moral code of life.**

As St. Augustine lay dying at the age of 75, the Vandals were invading North Africa, destroying, killing, and pillaging. It was in this context that St. Augustine, some years earlier, began to write his famous classic *The City of God*. He describes his doctrine of the two cities, one earthly and one heavenly. These so-called “cities” are symbolic embodiments of two spiritual powers—the power of faith and the power of evil—and they have contended with each other since the fall of the angels. They are *intermingled* on this earth—it’s not as if the evil people are in Hollywood and the good people back at home. No, they are intermingled and will remain so until the end of time. They are intermingled in countries, in cities, in communities, in families, and in the Church itself. And even in ourselves! (More on that coming up.)

Now Augustine makes the point that Christians often forget: proper self-love is a part of the Gospel call. It is a love of self that wishes good for itself by loving God above all else. In other words, says Augustine, proper self-love is theo-centric, not ego-centric. It is theo-centric because God always wills what is universally best. However, we see within ourselves a struggle to evangelize our evil desires such as lust, anger, envy, pride, sloth, avarice, and gluttony. Therefore, Augustine distinguishes between a distorted love of self and holy love. He says that the fallen angels preferred their will to the will of God, as did Adam and Eve, and so evil entered the world. Holy love is to put God and His will first in our lives. That is proper self-love.

One love is social, the other individualist. Why? Because we were created in the image of God, and God is not solitude enclosed upon itself—as you would have in strict monotheism like Judaism and Islam—but a Trinity of persons. Thus created in the image of God, the natural life of man, like the natural life of God, is a social life. Alienation and isolation create a mental health crisis and lead to addiction and codependency. Addicts begin to isolate themselves, preferring their drug even to the good of their family.

Augustine continues: one love takes heed of the common good; the other reduces even the common good to its own ends because of a proud lust of domination. The difference between the God of revelation and the gods of other religions, is that—shockingly—God is shown in Christ as a servant. Imagine God a servant: “I didn’t come to be served but to serve,” He says.

The one love is subject to God; the other sets itself up as a rival to God, like the fallen angels who then seduce Adam and Eve to join the rebellion against the God of love.

The one love is serene, the other tempestuous; the one peaceful, the other quarrelsome; the one prefers truthfulness to deceitful praises, the other is utterly avid of praise; the one is friendly, the other jealous; the one desires for its neighbor what it would for itself, the other is desirous of lording it over its neighbor (playing the ego-comparative game); the one directs its effort to the neighbor’s good, the other to its own.

“These two loves,” says Augustine, “were manifested in the angels before they were manifested in people: one, in the good angels; the other, in the bad. These two loves have created the distinction between the two cities, the one the city of the just, the other the city of the wicked. Established among people in accordance with the wonderful and ineffable providence of God which governs and orders all His creatures, and mingled together, they live out their life upon this earth, until separated at the last judgment: the one, in union with the good angels, to enjoy eternal life in its King; the other, in company with the bad angels, to be cast along with its king into everlasting fire.”

This is the situation in which Christ established His Church. Most of us would like a perfect life; a perfect marriage; parents would like great children (so they, too, can display the bumper sticker: my child is on the honor roll!), and, of course, a perfect Church. The ancient Apostles’ Creed calls the Church “holy.” **Holy ???** How do we dare refer to this corrupt Church as “holy”? Pope Benedict (in his *Introduction to Christianity*) explains:

The Church is not called “holy” in the Creed because her members, collectively and individually, are holy, sinless [people]—this dream, which appears afresh in every century, has no place in the waking world of our text, however movingly it may express a human longing that man will never abandon until a new heaven and a new earth really grant him what this age will never give him.

Even at this point we can say that the sharpest critics of the Church in our time secretly live on this dream and, when they find it disappointed, they slam the door of the house shut again and denounce it as deceit.

The holiness of the Church consists in that power of sanctification which God exerts in her in spite of human sinfulness...

Let us go a step further. In this human dream of a perfect world, [perfect] is always visualized as untouchability by sin and evil, as something unmixed with the latter; there always remains in some form or other a tendency to cut out and reject mercilessly the current form of the negative (which can be conceived in widely varying terms).

Nazis looked to the past for perfect. They were going to resurrect the Roman Empire, ruled by superior Aryan people, and they **cut out and rejected mercilessly the current form of the negative**: Jews, for example. Communists looked

to the future for perfect. They would take control and create a perfect classless society, mercilessly cutting out their enemies. How many were slaughtered by these ideologies in order to create their perfect worlds? Both are illusions. And radical Islam is the same.

Pope Benedict continues:

That is why the aspect of Christ's holiness that upset his contemporaries was the complete absence of this condemnatory note—fire did not fall on the unworthy...

Here the Pope refers to the time Jesus was preaching and He was snubbed by His hearers. The reaction of the Apostles James and John was to have Jesus call down fire and brimstone and "get them." Imagine: apostles! But Jesus simply moves on. Darn it!

[N]or were the zealous allowed to pull up the weeds they saw growing luxuriantly on all sides.

Asked what the kingdom was like, Jesus tells of a farmer planting good wheat, but then weeds appear. God created the world good, but weeds appeared. Sin is an alien power that must be weeded out of the field. All humans are enslaved to this power (cf. Rom. 3:9; John 8:34). The farmer was asked about pulling up the bad stuff, but Jesus said, "No! My Father will send His angels to do that." Man can be liberated only by a power greater than himself. This is the spirit of Step One in any 12-step group: I am powerless. The Cross of Christ is the Power that will liberate man from his slavery to sin.

The parable refers to something like darnel, a "mimic weed" that looks and behaves very much like wheat. The difference between darnel and real wheat is evident *only when the plants mature and the ears appear*. Now this is true of us. Who knew that the murderer through the purifying grace of Christ's Cross would become a saint (Paul)? Who would have believed that one of the specially chosen apostles (Judas) would turn traitor and self-destruct? We would have kept the chosen Apostle, Judas, and thrown out the murderer Saul (now called Saint Paul).

Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn, in his book *Gulag Archipelago*, reflects on the life of the prisoners in the Soviet forced labor camp:

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

So this is the situation in the world in which we live, and *it is true of each of us*. Only at harvest time when God sends His angels will we know the wheat from the weeds. Pope Benedict continues:

On the contrary, [Jesus'] holiness expressed itself precisely as mingling with the sinners whom Jesus drew into his vicinity; as mingling to the point where he

himself ... bore the curse of the law in execution as a criminal—complete community of fate with the lost (cf. 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13).

He has drawn sin to himself, made it his lot, and so revealed what true "holiness" is: not separation, but union; not judgment, but redeeming love. Is the Church not simply the continuation of God's deliberate plunge into human wretchedness; is she not simply the continuation of Jesus' habit of sitting at table with sinners?... Is there not revealed in the unholy holiness of the Church, as opposed to man's expectation of purity, God's true holiness, which is love, love that does not keep its distance in a sort of aristocratic, untouchable purity but mixes with the dirt of the world, in order thus to overcome it?

The way the alcoholic in AA expresses it: "*We missed the reality and beauty of the forest because we were diverted by the ugliness of some of its trees.*"

And thus are generalizations made: all Irish are drunkards; all Jews misers; all Sicilians *mafiosi*, etc. And this is what will happen in the current crisis. It will be a crisis of faith for some, for those who expect perfect bishops, priests, nuns, popes, and churchgoers. But there were no accidents in the life of Christ. He knew what He was doing when He chose His apostles. It cannot be an accident that He chose Judas as one of His closest disciples—one of His 12 apostles. Nor did Christ choose the cream of the crop for the other apostles.

Jesus did this in keeping with God's perennial way of acting, as St. Paul reminds the self-righteous Christians of Corinth:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

In chastising the corrupt Corinthian Christians, it would appear St. Paul is addressing the Church in America when he says:

It is widely reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of a kind not found even among the pagans.

And St. Paul's solution to the evil present in the Corinthian community:

The one who did this deed should be expelled from your midst.

And this is the path that the Church must follow in our current crisis. Instead of tolerating intolerable behavior among priests, bishops, and cardinals, they must be expelled from their positions.

Throughout her history, the Church has had many Judases betraying her mission. Pope Benedict, on his way back from Fatima in 2010, referred to this in the context of today's Church:

The Lord told us that the Church would always be suffering, in different ways, until the end of the world... [T]he sufferings of the Church come from the interior of the Church, from the sin that exists in the Church. This too has always been known, but today we see it in a truly terrifying way: that the greatest persecution of the Church does not come from outside enemies, but arises from sin in the Church.

As people of faith, we must remember Jesus' choice of Judas: it was not an accident. The Catholic convert Cardinal Newman once said, "Jesus' choice of Judas was to teach us that the holiness of the Church depends on Christ's holiness, dwelling with His Body the Church, which also happens to be full of sinful people." Frank Sheed (of the Catholic publishing house of Sheed and Ward), like Cardinal Newman, was a convert. People criticized him for becoming a Catholic, because of the evil that has existed in the Church's human history.

St. Catherine of Siena lived at a time of much decadence in the Church, which she relates in the *Dialogues*. She was successful in getting the Pope, who was hiding out in France, back to Rome. "There's a wound in the Body of Christ and you want to put a band-aid on it! Cut it out," she told the Pope. After his meeting with Catherine, he decided to return, but then, after Catherine left, he got cold feet. So she sent him a letter: "I beg of you, on behalf of Christ crucified, that you be not a fearful child but manly. Open your mouth and swallow down the bitter for the sweet." She also encouraged him to cast fear aside and ignore the advice of his corrupt cardinals: "I have prayed, and shall pray, [to our] sweet and good Jesus that He free you from all servile fear, and that holy fear alone remain. May ardor of charity be in you, in such wise as shall prevent you from hearing the voice of incarnate demons, and heeding the counsel of perverse counselors, settled in self-love, who, as I understand, want to alarm you, so as to prevent your return, saying, 'You will die.' Up, father, like a man! For I tell you that you have no need to fear."

So Pope Gregory XI listened to the pleadings and prayers of St. Catherine and returned the papacy to Rome on January 17, 1377. The scandal and shame came to an end. Three years later Catherine died.

And so the convert Frank Sheed responded to those who ridiculed him for becoming Catholic, given the dark sides of the Church's human history, by noting:

I was not baptized into the Pope, I do not receive the [Roman] Curia sacramentally. To leave [the Church] because of them—even if they were worse than their worst enemy thinks them—would be to give them an importance that is not theirs, and to have missed the meaning of my membership of the Church and Christ's headship of it and of me.

St. Augustine wrote:

When Christ beckoned "come," the invitation was to a house that was not so narrow as to exclude any. In a mysterious way [this passage] indicates plainly what other texts in the sacred books express, that there are within the Church both good and bad, ... wheat and chaff.

Augustine cautions those who would separate from the Church because of the evil they saw in the Church:

No one should separate from the unity of the Church, for that would be to leave the [threshing] floor before the time of final bodily separation in God's "barn" of harvested grain. In heart be always separated from the bad, and in body be united with them for a time, but with caution.

However, Augustine, taking his cue from St. Paul, stressed that evildoers in the Church need to be corrected, not tolerated. He says, "Be not negligent correcting those who in any way appertain into your charge, by admonition, or instruction, by exhortation, or by threats. Do it in whatever way you can..."

Evil, added Pope Benedict, "will always be part of the mystery of the Church"—but as we all know from Scripture, evil, no matter how much it has infiltrated (and it certainly has), will never triumph over it. There will always be those in the Church who betray the Church, but the gates of Hell will never prevail against her. ✱

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