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Razing the Bastions, Yet Again

(GSN) Reflecting on God's Gifts
With Gratitude and Joy

(podcast) A Good Steward
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Razing the Bastions, Yet Again

As featured in the June 2010, Homiletic and Pastoral Review

By Fr. David Vincent Meconi, S.J.

In his 1952 *Razing the Bastions* (*Schleifung der Bastionen*) Hans Urs von Balthasar challenged the Church to replace any posturing of fear with a more world-friendly embrace. (1) In what proved to be a much disputed work, von Balthasar argued that the Church must leave the security of Catholic isolation and move into a more confident involvement with anti-Catholic worldviews and biases. Sensing the call to be more actively engaged with Protestants as well as non-believers in institutions of learning, in the marketplace, in laboratories and in all ranges of (legitimate) research, as well as in every aspect of society and culture, the Church left the “Catholic ghetto”, making the middle of the 20th century a unique opportunity to “take every thought captive in obedience to Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). This of course meant risking a sense of surety for the entry into—but hopeful conversion of—those places of modernity where the Church was then still leery to tread.

The call foreshadowed by von Balthasar was vindicated by future Popes and (in part) realized with the Second Vatican Council's aggiornamento (updating). Paul VI's first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964), for example, presented God the Father's love for sinful man as the fundamental dialogue (a term which appears 81 times in the English edition) in which God makes himself accessible and therefore vulnerable in the sending of his Son. Willing to enter into the “messiness” of human life, God thus invites all to a dialogue of mutual understanding and charity. God longs to bring all things into himself through his Church and, stripping himself of all glory, draws near to wherever the imperfect find themselves. Toward the end of this encyclical, Pope Paul VI called on all Catholics to continue this mission by being as catechetically learned and articulate as possible, by assuming the good will of those with whom they aim to evangelize, and by being sensitive to the needs and histories of others. Above all, charity must mark this exchange and here

the Holy Father warned:

It would indeed be a disgrace if our dialogue were marked by arrogance, the use of bared words or offensive bitterness. What gives it its authority is the fact that it affirms the truth, shares with others the gifts of charity, is itself an example of virtue, avoids peremptory language, makes no demands. It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction and inclines towards generosity. (2)

But if the Church's authority is known by its charity and generosity, as Pope Paul VI maintained, perhaps it is once again time to examine how we in the Church relate with one another, especially with those with whom we disagree or hold in contempt. It is once again time to look at how we interact with our adversaries because the landscape has surely shifted. For almost two generations after Paul VI's fatherly admonition, can one not hear how the “bared words” and sometimes “offensive bitterness” are aimed not so much at those outside of the Church as at sisters and brothers within? Or as John Paul went to great lengths to point out, there remains a divisiveness within the Church that has only intensified since the Second Vatican Council and there must thus: “...be a sincere effort of permanent and renewed dialogue *within the Catholic Church herself*. She is aware that, by her nature, she is the sacrament of the universal communion of charity; but she is equally aware of the tensions within her, tensions which risk becoming factors of division.” (3)

I became a candidate for religious life almost two decades ago and then the divisions and tensions within the novitiate were thick. Holding fast to my defenses, I would dismiss someone just after one conversation. “Well, he's one of them.” “He's a dissenter.” At one level it was so understandable, so natural, yet so *unChristian*, so unloving. I see now that in a time of battle I allowed myself the uncharitable sally, the harsh judgment, the one-sided perspective, and then simply

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chalked it up to the tensions of the day or to the gravity of what was at stake. But how do we witness to the beautiful integrity of Catholic orthodoxy without putting up walls between ourselves and those who disagree with us? How do we live the truth in love? I see now how I used the Faith, not as a means of building unity, but as a sword of division and as a way of making myself feel good about my own position, my own worked-out systems, my own orthodoxy. Because I was not wholly motivated by love, fear was still present (cf. 1 Jn 4:18)—fear of looking dim, fear of not knowing more than those who criticized the hierarchy, fear that maybe the way I had learned or had come to explain the tradition was not as unassailable as it could be. *How often the truth became a club*, a place for my self-complacency and separation built on the implicit creed, “Oh, God, I thank you that I am not like other men—extortionists, the unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” (Lk 18:13).

Yet twenty years later now, I realize that the teachings and practices central to our lives and worship as Catholics are never (and never were) going to change. The “revolution” of the 60s and 70s has obviously come to pass and only now after 40 years of sway, the barque of Peter has been clearly steered back on course. The self-appointed revolutionaries have grown old and with the passing of each day those battles lose immediacy and intensity, as what the Church teaches and where she is heading is clearer than ever. Today we encounter not so much an entrenched group of anti-Catholic ideologues, but rather a vacuum crying out for evangelization: for a bold and clear love of Jesus and the witness of his ability to convert all of human living.

Most of the young people I know here at Saint Louis University, for example, take their daily reception of the sacraments very seriously, they clamor for Eucharistic Adoration, common recitation of the Rosary and they organize their own Stations of the Cross on Fridays. They adored John Paul II and they are simply enamored with Pope

Benedict; they pray for their priests and cannot wait until the next World Youth Day. During the week they also volunteer with the inner-city poor and illiterate. Over Spring Break they go and work with Habitat for Humanity in Appalachia, with Sioux children on the Reservations in South Dakota, or with the poor in Latin America. What these college-aged students (born the same year I entered religious life) have taught me is that my concerns are not theirs, my “siege mentality” does not resonate with their own ecclesiology. They don't appreciate my jibes against a post-Vatican II liturgy gone awry nor do they understand one of my favorite jokes involving the Dutch bishops and a hot poker! They are not reacting against anything internally within the Church but only outwardly against the alienating harshness of secular modernism. In fact, they want to be led more intensely into the depths of doctrine, the splendor of sacred scripture, the beauty of Augustine's *Confessions* and the symmetry of Thomas' *Summa*. They see a Catholicism that only attracts, heals, and transforms.

This is surely why in comparison to just a couple of generations ago, many novitiates and seminaries are now having to renovate or build anew. See the diocesan seminaries of Detroit and Denver, or the Josephinum in Columbus, visit the burgeoning houses of Dominican sisters in Ann Arbor or Nashville, Franciscan sisters in the Bronx or in Alton, or the Apostles of the Sacred Heart in Hamden, Connecticut, to observe how the Holy Spirit is still calling young men and women up the mountain of prayer and sacrifice. Moreover, these “children of John Paul II” (as I call them) constitute one of the healthier generations in quite a long time. In a recent study Benedictine Sister Jane Becker has likewise witnessed how:

The core of the student population [today has] settled down as a less polarized group than in the eighties and a more psychologically sound group than in the seventies. The majority [of today's seminarians and religious] are simply

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conservative youth seeking the sacred—God, Church, commitment, and symbolization of these values. (4)

Unlike Catholics a generation ago, this generation is more psychologically sound and in comparison with the similar sample group of 30 years ago, there is less polarization between “liberal” and “conservative”. So, what does this mean for how we teach and preach and live in what is becoming our “post dissent” Church? In the rest of this essay, I would like to offer four brief reflections that helped me to “raze the bastions” of my own short-sightedness and frigid lapses of charity when discussing the Faith today.

Proper Profession is A Divine Gift to be Distributed

First is the intimate awareness that orthodoxy and rightful assent to the teachings of the Church is a gift from Christ. One's theological positions are not simply the result of intellectual rigor and hours of study (as essential as these are). With Peter, we confess Jesus Christ as “the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” because it has been revealed to us freely by our loving God: “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father” (Mt 16:17). Commenting on this passage, Pope Leo the Great preached that Peter's blessedness—and by extension, the blessedness of every Christian—comes from the fact that the Father himself instructs him in the proper way to confess Jesus of Nazareth as Lord and Savior, because Peter was unwilling to “let human opinion deceive, but to let heavenly inspiration instruct”, an enlightenment, moreover, intended to give Peter a participation in the very nature of God (cf. 2 Pet 1:4). (5) Doctrinal orthodoxy leads to deification, a free and unmerited participation in the divine Trinity's own life. The gift of orthodoxy must thus be translated into the loving appropriation of Christ's life or else it lies dormant and maybe even inimical in our souls.

Ecclesial fidelity is Christ's gift to the humble, something in which he asks me to participate but never something I myself possess. As such, it must not be turned into something I think I have worked out on my own, for myself, some problem that I myself have deciphered. God's faithful children profess the creed rightly and strive to live lives of saintly heroism because they have first been called, eternally aware that their lives need not have gone this way. Such gratitude should enable the faithful to look lovingly upon dissenters, to forgive them for the hurt and division caused by these past decades of half-truths and conflicting agendas. In fact, “the left” were never the Church's enemy—for her enemy is not flesh and blood (cf. Eph 6:12)—they are not the enemies but the victims, the sufferers of false promises. Accordingly, it is now time to recast our eyes, no longer on the old battlefields of division and disagreement but boldly on the Spirit's call to forgiveness, freedom and holiness.

Christian Truth and Love Are Inseparable

Charity is the supreme and ultimately sole characteristic of a Christian. To rest content in “the truth” without seeking passionately for ways to communicate it in love and compassion is, simply not an option for Jesus' disciples. To think with the Church is an indispensable part of personal holiness but such creedal and doctrinal correctness must be consistently translated into an undying love of neighbor. In fact, Jesus reserves his harshest words for those who think they have the truth but are unwilling to love those dismissive of God's law.

In the Gospels Jesus Christ is never severe with those fragile, broken sinners who come to him to be healed, but he is rather most unyielding when he engages those who sanctimoniously act as if they do not need him (remember that *hypo-crite* was originally a theatrical term referring to one who wore a mask and thus spoke (*cite*) out from underneath (*hypo*) a face that was not his own). He never tells the Pharisees to quit

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keeping the law—quite the opposite (cf. Mt 23:1-3)—but Jesus instead spends his life to show such people how to expand their hearts to make room for love, mercy, and for the imperfect.

As Peter van Breemen has noted, “That the pharisee fulfills the law is to his credit. But he believes that by keeping the law he saves and justifies himself, and this is his mistake.” (6) As faithful Christians we must always follow Christ’s appointed and rightful teachers on earth, but doing so should enlarge our hearts to love those who do not yet see the truth, propelling us outward to preach Christ crucified and the glory of his ability to transform. In his interaction with the Pharisees, it is clear that Jesus never came simply to impart correct teaching. Christianity is more than orthodox belief (*more*, not less!) but a radically new way of entering into relationship with God and with neighbor. Only here is to think correctly to love ardently.

The Grace to Live With Ambiguity

Third, for the Christian, living with ambiguity is a sign of spiritual maturity. The most well known sociologist to address the new springtime of the John Paul II religious and seminarians described above is The Catholic University of America’s Dr. Dean Hoge, who reaches a rather challenging conclusion when he notes that,

some younger men are... coming from a very legalistic mentality, a very rigid mentality as well, and also, frequently, a lack of personal sensitivity. Anyone coming into a parish needs to be pretty flexible in dealing with people, in that you have to be accepting of where people are at and then you work with them. You try to move them from where they are. To come in and think that people are going to listen to you immediately just because you are a priest is unrealistic... (7)

Flexibility is itself of course not a virtue nor is it an end in and of itself. It is however a quality of the mystical life.

Unlike my own tendency in the past to police every differing thought and movement, I came to notice how the more spiritually advanced, the holier ones in the communities where I lived, did not get inordinately worried about every opinion uttered against the Church. “You will hear of wars and reports of wars; but see that you are not alarmed...” (Mt 24:6a). Or, to use an illustration closer to home (out my window, in fact), here in Saint Louis the Arch was built to “give” during winds and storms, the architects knowing that any solid rigidity would lead not to added strength but to its breaking in the winds that would inevitably assail it. I have long seen this as an apt metaphor for much of the spiritual life. Without (in the words of G.K. Chesterton) ever becoming so open minded that we become flat-headed, we must pray for the grace to live with the ambiguity characteristic of the saints most confident in the power of Christ to redeem and transform.

Such a spirituality is found in Christ’s parable of the wheat and the tares, imploring us never to grow desolate over the inevitability of imperfection which surrounds us, thereby perhaps “uprooting the good wheat as well” (cf., Mt 13:29). No stranger to dissent and factions, John Henry Cardinal Newman admits while the one true Church “cannot countenance any such misstatement of the truth, much less any degradation or depravation of it”, it is also true that,

she may find it quite impossible to root out the tares without rooting out the wheat with them—and is obliged to let them grow together till the harvest. At least, she is obliged to be patient, and waits her time—hoping that an evil will at length die of itself—or again that some favourable [sic] opportunity may occur, when she may be able to do what she has no means of doing at present. (8)

This is the springtime of the new evangelization, the “favourable opportunity” of not only rebuilding what has been torn down but, more importantly, bolstering and

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extending the reign of God to every area of human living and into every human person. But to do this we may have to be content with imperfection and with the shortcomings and questions of others.

Christus Victor!

Finally, the only way to bring the Gospel to the world rightly is to be ever mindful that the battle has already been won! I mean this both in the ultimate sense on Calvary but also in the more immediate sense in that the revolution sought in the 60s and 70s is simply not coming to pass. Not that it ever could have, as the Lord safeguards his Body from falling into certain pernicious gates, but these victories are more obvious now than they have been for half a century or even longer. So, as part of our prayer let us meditate on the confidence we should have in Christ's power in and through us, as well as the consequent gratitude we should have for his including us in his victorious mission.

In founding a Church, the Son has united a collective and called-out—*ecclesia*—humanity to his own divine personhood. Such mediation is thus at the heart of our

Christian discipleship; saying “yes” to the Church of Christ is Christ's “yes” to his Father. As such, one cannot truly love God and despise his Church; one lies if he can say he has some sort of devotion to Christ but no regard for his Body on earth, the Church. The “whole Christ” is the Head and the Body, and Christ has decided to make himself wholly accessible only through this *ecclesia*. His body is where he longs to extend and continue his transformative power: his healing, his teaching, his acts of love and divine intimacy.

When von Balthasar called the Church to raze her bastions and confidentially enter the world with message and vision renewed, he wrote: “Let us therefore not cling tightly to structures of thought, but let us plunge into the primal demands of the Gospel, which are also the primal graces, visible and capable of being grasped in the example of Christ, who gave himself for all in order to save all.” (9) In the imitation of Christ we too must let go of all that keeps us from “plunging” into the demands of love: to know the truth, to preach the truth, and to embrace the truth and in him all others.

(1) Han Urs von Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions*, trans., Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

(2) Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (Aug 6, 1964) §81.

(3) John Paul II's Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance* (Dec 2, 1984) §25.

(4) “In A Word from the Seminary World: Today's Candidates and Their Issues”, Sr. Jane Becker, O.S.B. as in *Reclaiming Our Priestly Character*, ed., Fr. David Toups (Omaha: Institute for Priestly Formation, 2008) 109.

(5) Leo the Great, *sermon 4.2*; my translation.

(6) Peter G. van Breemen, S.J., *As Bread That Is Broken* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1974) 31.

(7) Dean Hoge, as in *Reclaiming Our Priestly Character*, ed., Fr. David Toups, op. cit., 110.

(8) John Henry Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, vol. 20, 470-71.

(9) Han Urs von Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions*, op. cit., 69-70.