

A PROTESTANT LOOKS AT CATHOLICISM

INTRODUCTION

When I chose the subject of the sermon this morning, I did so knowing all too well that this subject was too vast for me, or for anyone else, to speak about in twenty minutes. I chose it knowing all too well that I could only explore the fringes of it, knowing too that the subject is charged with controversy, and that even within our own ranks there would be differences of opinion. I think you know me well enough to know that I do not enjoy controversy, and, if possible, avoid it. On the other hand, however, I knew that this was a subject of vital interest to all Christians, especially in our own country and at this particular time. My intention here this morning is not to raise more dust than is already contaminating the air we breathe, but rather to settle some of that dust and to inject into the atmosphere whatever reconciling influence I can by asking you to look at the facts with me as objectively and as sanely as possible.

WHAT DOES HE SEE?

And so we begin our thinking together this morning with this question: when the average American Protestant looks at Roman Catholicism, what does he see?

First of all, he sees an institution magnificently organized, with at least 1500 years of experience behind it, and in this country at least, growing by leaps and bounds. It might be of interest to you to know that since 1949, the number of Catholics in this country has increased by 47.8%. And in 1959 there were $3\frac{1}{2}$ million more Catholics than there were in 1958. The sight of this institution frightens him. It is so big and thoroughly unified. Granted that within the Catholic Church there is not the complete unity that the Protestant is likely to think there is, nevertheless, in contrast with his own small and pitifully divided institutions the Catholic Church presents a unified front which by its very massiveness frightens many a Protestant. There is something, is there not, about big things that frightens us. Big buildings overwhelm us; big nations scare us; big corporations make us feel uneasy - especially if we are engaged in operations that are smaller, less thoroughly organized, and therefore less efficient. This may not be a rational or a justifiable fear, but it is a fear nevertheless.

And then in the second place the Protestant's fear of the Catholic Church is increased when he sees what great power the Church has over the lives of its people. For instance, he sees his Catholic friend going to Church regularly Sunday after Sunday, never missing - not because he feels like going, not because it is convenient for him to go, not because he likes the priest and gets a great deal of help from the service. He goes because the Church tells him he must go! Or he may see his Catholic friend confessing his sins to a priest before receiving Holy Communion - not because he wants to, not because he receives a great deal of therapeutic help from this spiritual exercise, but because the Church requires him to do this. He hears of his Catholic friends refusing to use contraceptives in the planning of their families, not necessarily because they believe that contraceptives are wrong, but because they are forbidden by the church. He sees them staying away from a movie, or refusing to read a popular best seller not because they have chosen to do this, but because these things have been added to the list of things forbidden by the church.

Perhaps he sees his own daughter falling in love with one of their boys and though she cannot sincerely become a Catholic, if her husband is to remain in his Church he must be married by a priest of his church, and she must sign a statement promising to bring up her children in the Catholic Church, and if a marriage of a Catholic and a Protestant should unfortunately end in divorce, he has seen the Catholic husband remarried by the church on the assumption that since the wife was not a Catholic, there really was no true marriage in the first place.

I am not saying that all these Protestant fears are justified or that there is nothing to be said on the other side. What I am saying is that they are natural and understandable. I am not asking the Catholics to change their position on any of these matters knowing that in good conscience they cannot. What I do ask of them is not to be surprised when Protestants are frightened of an institution so vast and so powerful which exercises such great authority over the lives of its people. We have had some rather bad experiences in the past with authoritarianism when it got out of hand, and it is only natural that we should be wary of it when we see it in the Christian Church and especially when we Protestants, who believe ourselves to be sincere Christians, are often treated - courteously to be sure, as though we were outside the realm of Christian grace. I think if Catholics could see this and make allowance for it, not interpreting it as sheer bigotry (even though they could easily find evidences of real bigotry among us, as I fancy, they could among themselves if they looked for it), if Catholics could see this and make allowance for it, some of the tension between these two great branches of Christendom would be eased.

It is not only the size of the institution, it is not only the power it exercises over the lives of its people that tends to frighten many Protestants, but it is also the fact that it's all so strange to him, almost completely unknown. If he has been brought up in a Protestant community, what goes on behind the doors of the local Catholic Church on a Sunday morning is a complete mystery. He seldom goes inside the doors except perhaps for a wedding or a funeral of a close Catholic friend, and what he sees and hears is so strange to him and so unfamiliar that he's ready to agree with the first person that comes along who suggests it's just a lot of mumbo - jumbo. That's what it sounded like; that's what it looked like; that's what it must be.

Let me say this to you. You know as well as I do that oftentimes we are afraid of the unknown and strange. People whose way of thinking and speaking we do not understand are, consciously or unconsciously - rationally or irrationally, something of a threat to us. But on the other hand, once they are no longer strange to us, though they may still be quite different from us, they cease to be a threat to us. And in connection with this I have often felt that if the Protestant could ever get close enough to the Catholic Church to have some intelligent knowledge of what is going on, some of his fear might disappear. He might still be just as firm in his Protestant convictions, perhaps firmer, but more intelligent, more understanding, and less fearful.

I'd venture to say that the majority of Protestants know very little about Roman Catholicism. Very few, for instance, know what the

intelligent Catholic believes takes place in the Mass. Very few Protestants have ever read an article on the meaning of confession and absolution, or on the role of the Saints in intercessory prayer. We know so little concerning the basic beliefs of our own faith and even less concerning the beliefs of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, most Catholics know very little about Protestantism. Occasionally I'll run into Catholics who are really surprised to discover that we celebrate Holy Communion, and that we believe that Jesus is God incarnate. In other words, there is a tremendous ignorance on both sides, and I often feel that at a time like this when the Christian forces of the world should be consolidating, we cannot afford the luxury of ignorance. Ignorance is the worst possible atmosphere in which human beings can live together.

There is a fourth reason why so many Protestants are afraid of Catholicism. It rests in the fact that they see in Catholicism things which they sincerely believe are a distortion of the Christian Gospel. For instance, when they see the Mother of our Lord gradually elevated to a position virtually equal to that of deity, they become troubled. When they see the mystery of life after death more and more departmentalized and the status of the individual soul more and more controlled and determined by the prayers of the faithful on earth, they are disturbed. When they see scholarly investigation of the Scriptures hindered and hampered by authoritarian control, they are alarmed. I was delighted to read in our new community newspaper, Manhattan East, just this past Friday that the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, located at Park and 84th, has announced a series of lectures on topics such as "The Archaeology of the Dead Sea Scrolls," and "The New Testament and the Scrolls". When Protestants see the Catholic Church in places where it is powerful make life and worship for other Christians both difficult and dangerous, they are afraid and fearful - not only that their own basic right to worship may be some day challenged, but that the basic freedom from legalism which Christ died for and which Paul lived to proclaim may be in real danger.

I would not for one minute minimize these serious differences between us. I myself feel quite strongly about them, but I am also aware of the fact that the modern Catholic in this country looking at the modern Protestantism has his own grounds for real misgivings. Protestantism, I am bound to admit, has often wandered so far away from the real intent and spirit of the Gospel that in some places it is little more than a secular or social club. If we as Protestants have good reason for thinking that the Catholics often fly to high in the clouds of magic and mythology, Catholics have good reason for thinking that Protestants often fly so low that they never get off the ground of materialism and the American way of life.

Again, I say, if both sides had the grace to admit this, we would take a great step forward toward a better understanding of those with whom we find ourselves in disagreement, as well as be in a much better position to face the colossal issues of our day, and face them together, bringing to bear upon them the whole weight of the Christian witness rather than just a fragment of it.

OUR PART IN ALL THIS

Perhaps by now you can see what my own position is. I am a Christian, a follower of Him in whom we find the greatest revelation of God in human terms, and I hope by the grace of God to remain one, and little by little become a better one. As a Protestant Christian I believe that I have

been reconciled to my fellow man and to God by Christ - by his life, death and resurrection. I also believe I have been sent by him to be a reconciling influence in the world whenever and wherever it is possible. This is true, not only of myself, but of all Christians whether they be Roman Catholic Christians, Protestant Christians, or Greek Orthodox Christians.

I know that we cannot by simply waving a wand wipe away long standing antagonisms between divisions in the great body of Christ. Nevertheless, I feel it is our solemn duty to do what we can, and I believe we can do far more sometimes than we think we can - not by getting our dander up, not by losing our temper or by stiffening for a fight to defend our position - but by trying at all times to follow the example of our Lord. By being like him - both firm and gentle, neither condoning what we seriously believe to be wrong nor condemning those who do it and by being at all times charitable. There is no room in our Christian family for bigotry. I love my fellow Roman Catholics and I will continue to love them no matter what the events of time produce. But it is not bigotry and it is not enmity to face as reasonably as possible the differences which do exist between us. Only by knowing the differences can we ever come to better understandings. Not only should we be aware of the differences, but we would do well to emphasize more than we do the things we have in common. Both Catholics and Protestants are Christians, believers in the same God, followers of the same Lord and nourished by the same scriptures and loyal essentially to the same faith. There are many opportunities for Christians today to play their reconciling role on the stage of human history. There are parts for everyone, and one of the best places is in the household of our own Christian Faith and to do what we can to bring about a better relationship between Catholics and Protestants.

In closing, I would say this. The world today is in desperate need of the vitality of Christian love. So far as I can see, it is our only real hope. And if we do anything to dilute or dissipate that love, if we overlook any possible occasion to bring that love to bear upon the terrible tensions that are tearing our world apart, we shall be guilty of neglect of duty and of failure in our unique mission. You and I may never live to see one harmonious household of the Christian faith, but if we do not try to do it, if we are not willing to at least look in that direction of one harmonious household of Christ, then we have no right to claim to be faithful and loyal followers of Him who gave his life for us!

LET US PRAY: I would close by reading to you one of my favorite prayers. A prayer written by Francis of Assisi, one of the great figures of the church before the division took place: