

FROM THE PASTOR'S



Sixth Sunday of Easter – April 27, 2008 A

ALWAYS BE READY TO GIVE A REASON FOR YOUR CATHOLIC BELIEFS TO THOSE WHO INQUIRE OF YOU.

In the second reading today, Peter states: *Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope but do it with gentleness and reverence . . .* 1 Peter 3:15

This verse could be interpreted on two levels—a spiritual and theological

Spiritual Level: On the spiritual level the verse is an exhortation for us to be always ready to witness to our faith. Millions of believers belong to a church family today because of the witness of other believers. This is especially true of Protestant Evangelical churches. Their leaders have done a great job at teaching and motivating their people to witness to their Christian beliefs and they have done a great job in motivating them to invite others to come to their churches. While we all know ‘*witness of life*’ is more important than ‘*witness of words*’, words are also important—especially when people are going through a tough time spiritually. If the Samaritan woman in John 4, had not been willing to share her witness with the people of her village, they might never have come to know Jesus. Fortunate for them she had no desire to keep her encounter with Jesus her best kept secret.

I sometimes wonder how many people are lost to our Catholic church because so many of us are timid about inviting others to church or timid about sharing our faith with others. Needless to say the ‘*witness of life*’ is our best advertisement for our faith. After all, St. Francis of Assisi used to say: “Speak the gospel always. If necessary use words”. Sometimes example is the best way to go. But sometimes example can and should be accompanied by words. So in the often used words of the late Pope John Paul” “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid to share your faith. Do not be afraid to invite a non-church goer or a seeking non-Catholic to church. I do know that some of you have grown very much in this area of your spiritual development because I have met people who now come to our church because of the good example and invitation of some of our parishioners.

Theological Level: The above named verse from our second reading could also be interpreted to mean that

we Catholics should be ready to explain to others why we believe what we believe. Needless to say that is not an easy thing for the majority of Catholics - especially for Catholics who go through life with an elementary school understanding of their faith. But even for the informed Catholic it is a challenge. It is a challenge because we are sometimes trying to explain mystery, which, of course, can never be fully explained. Who can fully explain the mystery of the Trinity or the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. But there are lots of things we Catholics should be able to explain so as to dispel some of the misinformation about some Catholic beliefs. I will now look at some of the areas of belief that are confusing for non-Catholics.

Catholic Belief about Mary

Many converts to our church will readily admit that Catholic belief about Mary was a huge block for them. As we know, many non-Catholics think Catholics *worship* Mary. One can see why they believe this when they see Catholics kneel before Mary or when they see Catholics carry a big statue of Mary in procession. In some Latin American countries, one could easily get the impression that Mary is more important than Jesus.

The truth is that Catholic do not worship Mary. Rather, we *venerate* her and *honor* her because of all the women in the world, she was the one chosen to give birth to our Savior Jesus.

But why do Catholics pray to Mary? Why so many Marian devotions? Same answer. In honoring Mary we are honoring Jesus. In praying to Mary, e.g., the Rosary, we are meditating on events in the life of Jesus. We are honoring Mary and seeking her intercession. We could bypass Mary and go directly to Jesus. Many do. Down through the centuries, Catholics have come to believe in the powerful intercession of Mary. If one goes to Lourdes, France, where Mary appeared to Bernadette, we will hear about many miracles and healings that happened through the intercession of Mary.

John 2:1-12 indicates briefly the power of Mary’s intercession. At the wedding Feast of Cana, Jesus worked his first miracle as a result of Mary’s intercession. So while one can be a good Catholic without having a devotion to Mary, all are encouraged to have a relationship with Mary—simply because she

is the Mother of our Savior. For more information about the four beliefs connected to Mary: her perpetual virginity, Mary Mother of God her Immaculate Conception and her assumption into heaven, see my article on our website. Click on *Catholic Beliefs & Practice*, then go to *Mary*, the article *Mary, the Mother of Jesus and our Mother*.

Catholics and Confession

Even though confession, more accurately called the Sacrament of Reconciliation, is one of the seven sacraments, it is not popular with most Catholics. Why? Because most of us, do not like to go and confess our sins to another person. Why do Catholics believe in the Sacrament of Reconciliation? Is confession a Catholic invention? The answer is no.

It is clear from the scriptures that Jesus gave his church the power to forgive sins when he spoke these words to his disciples on Easter Sunday evening:

*As the Father sent me, I send you.
After saying this he breathed and said
Receive the Holy Spirit
Whose sins you shall forgive
They are forgiven (John 20:21-23)*

In these verses, Jesus is sharing his power to forgive sins with his church. Just as Jesus told his Apostles to preach in his name and to baptize in his name, he is now sharing his power with his Apostles to forgive sin in his name. Of course, *how* the church exercises her God given power to forgive sins is a whole other question. We can blame or praise Irish monks in and around the 6th century for introducing *individual confession*, a practice that was only blessed by the church centuries later. It is interesting that none of us have a problem with Jesus giving his church the power ‘to preach and baptize in his name’, but many have a problem when it comes to ‘forgiving sin in his name’. None of us have a problem dealing with a ‘middle man’ when it comes to baptizing children and adults, but many of us have a problem dealing with the ‘middleman’ when it comes to confessing our sins. I wonder why? The answer has got to be more psychological than theological. It is just awkward for us to confess our failings to another person. All of us can understand that.

As I stated above, the practice of private, individual confession was not a practice of the early church.

I for one hope that the church will soon allow parishes to use what is called *RITE 3* of the Sacrament on special occasions. *RITE 3* is a Penance Service with General Absolution and individual confession for

those who would wish it. *RITE3* can be a most wonderful experience and it would mean that at least once a year hundreds of parishioners who have given up on private confession would avail themselves of the sacrament. Having said that, I believe that private confession also remains a powerful experience—especially when one is dealing with heavy issues.

The Papacy

We have just witnessed in America in a very powerful and positive way the Papacy. The Pope is clearly a moral and spiritual voice that people of all faiths are willing to listen to. Despite this, many non-Catholics have a difficult time with the Papacy and do not believe that Jesus intended it to be an integral part of the church which he founded. The development of the papacy is a long and complex story. So I will just say a few things here.

- Nearly all, if not all, Christian churches accept the fact that Peter exercised a special leadership role in the early church. He is always named first in the list of the Apostles. During the Last Supper, Jesus prayed for Simon (Peter) that after he recovered from his sin of denial of Christ he would be the one to ‘strengthen his brothers’ (Luke 22:32). After the resurrection, Jesus came to Peter and told him to be the one to ‘feed us the sheep’ of his flock (John 21:15-17). In *Acts* he is one who coordinates the replacement of Judas and he is the one who gives the first homilies after Pentecost.
- Catholics reason if a small fledgling church needed a leader where the ‘buck stops’, how much more would a growing church of millions of people need a leader whose special ministry would be to protect the unity of the church.
- We have quotes from the writings of the Church Fathers (those highly regarded theologians who followed the Apostles) to show the Primacy of the bishop of Rome.
- Martin Luther, the Catholic monk who founded Protestantism rejected the Primacy of the Bishop of Rome. He replaced it with the ‘Primacy of Scripture’. Whereas Catholics look to the *Magisterium* (the bishops in union with the Pope) for guidance on Christian beliefs, Protestant’s look to the Bible. The big problem with the latter is that everyone becomes his/her own Pope when it comes to the interpretation of scripture. The truth of this statement is borne out by the fact that since the days of Luther in the 16th century, Protestantism has been sadly divided thousands of

times. The inherent weakness of Protestantism is its lack of a central authority. An inherent strength of the Catholic Church is the Papacy—despite the fact we have had some very immoral and corrupt Popes and many weak Popes. It would seem that Jesus' promise to be with his church until the end of time is very obvious as we read the pages of church history. Needless to say the *manner or way* in which the Papacy is exercised can and should change from era to era. Humbly, I would say that every movement towards removing worldly trappings from the Papacy would be welcomed by Jesus, the humble servant of God.

The Sinfulness of the Church - The Sex Abuse Scandal

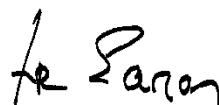
The sex abuse scandal here in America has done enormous damage to the Catholic Church spiritually and financially. It boggles the mind how it could have happened. But it did. Last week, we witnessed a Pope willing to deal with this issue head on. Even the media was surprised to see the willingness of Pope Benedict to deal with the crisis. The only thing that bugged me about the media coverage was the constant question: Will the Pope's remarks bring about any real change? I wonder where the media has been hiding in the last three years when sweeping changes have been made in this area of the church's life. Anyone who works in any way with children or the elderly has to be fingerprinted. If there is an allegation brought against a priest or church worker the person is pretty much considered guilty until proven innocent.

The failures of church members, clergy or lay will always be a reason why Catholics may leave the church or quit attending or why some non-Catholics may not consider joining the church. Having said that the amazing thing is that the Catholic church in the United States continues to be very strong when compared to the church in other parts of the world—especially Europe. The amazing thing is that many young men and women continue to enter the seminary and religious life. Another amazing thing is that during the height of the sex abuse scandal Protestant ministers were being drawn by the Holy Spirit to come home to Rome. Why is this? One answer - Jesus is still the One in charge. Jesus promised not to abandon the church and he has not. Having said that, it does not mean that the church has no problems. It does - especially when it comes to recruiting young men and women to the priesthood and religious life. A very healthy church should not have to go overseas for vocations.

In your opinion what issues block non-Catholics from crossing the Tiber (the river that runs by Rome)? I'd love to hear from you - especially if you are not Catholic.

Prayer intentions: Pray often that all those whom God is calling to enter into Full Communion with our church will hear and answer God's call. Also pray that all the men and women whom God is calling to enter the priesthood and religious life will also hear and answer God's call.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr Sean". The "F" is large and stylized, and the "r" is small and connected to the "S".