

TWO CATHOLIC CHURCHES

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I observe two Roman Catholic Churches.

On the one hand sits the church of doctrinal orthodoxy, and on the other the church of faith. The first represents certainty the second is full of doubt and uncertainty.

The first is the church of the catechism the second is the church of the lectionary. The first carries some force of intellectual conviction; the second has the power to transform. The first is more and more the church of the clergy and the second is more and more the church of the laity.

The first church does not listen, does not feel in any way that it could be accused of arrogance, cannot fathom why anyone would question its conclusions or its teachings. The second church knows that it dwells in uncertainty, in darkness, wanders in arid deserts and frightening wastelands.

I was brought up in the first, and I have slowly but surely entered the second. Contrary to my expectations, the second is more comfortable and more comforting. I like the aspects of search and the struggle to find God's voice. I find absolute certainty oppressive.

Truth cannot reside in human dogmatism, in the establishment. That would reduce the truth to an unchanging and dead "perfection." Rather, for human beings, the truth is ever elusive, ever open to new insights, always looks ahead, never backward. Nothing is cut and dried and settled forever. There can be no infallibility in any human organization or thought system.

I have watched with increasing misgiving how the Catholic world displays a growing chasm between the institution and the ordinary members. The world of the cleric is virtually cutting itself off from the laity. Although a goodly number of gullible lay people will always go along with the hierarchy, the number of those who walk away and the quality of those who walk intrigues me. They haven't really left the church. They just don't go anymore.

It does not surprise me. Vatican II was a valiant effort to come to terms with changes in human society. The documents purposely and purposefully departed from the language and formulas of the past. The boldness of these steps caught the entire church and the world by surprise. The establishment in Rome has done everything within its power to return to the past. That attitude was one of seeing the church as a perfect society that needed no change.

Those who bought into the thinking of Vatican II can only watch in horror as dioceses establish seminaries to fill the ranks of the clergy with reactionaries.

That church will die. In my opinion sooner rather than later is best. It is increasingly irrelevant and no amount of bombast or highfalutin dogmatism will ever save it.

Give me the church of sinners, of seekers, of doubters, of the weak, the frail, the imperfect, of those who are not afraid to rail at God for being so distant, of those who find God in all creation and all creation in God, of those who have no answers. That church is real and alive with the power of the Spirit of God who can do wonders in chaos, whose creative energy enters the empty places in our hearts, sometimes sweetly, sometimes with devastating intensity.

Give me the Spirit of Jesus Christ that rises with impatience at the misuse of power, with anger at injustice practiced under cover of law, with healing for those who mourn and cry out for relief, with forgiveness for those who sincerely strive for a change of heart.

I want nothing to do with clerical conceit, with episcopal pomposity, with papal infallibility. I do not look for an ideal church. I seek a church that is suffering, that earnestly longs for the realization of the all-inclusive kingdom of Christ where all are welcome equally, that knows that on this earth there are no final answers and that it is OK to struggle with that reality.

I have come to think that the symbol of the church's divisiveness lies in compulsory clerical celibacy. Long considered the jewel of the institution, celibacy has become its greatest liability and the worst

stumbling block to reform. Celibacy symbolizes the separation of the two churches into those with power and those who have none.

The clerical world sees no reason to listen, and therefore has forfeited its right to be listened to. The clerical world has crippled itself by adhering to the impossible dream of uniformity.

The priesthood is the link between the two churches. At present the priesthood is completely under the control of the clerical establishment. I believe the Catholic Church should abolish its two-tiered membership, rid itself of a privileged class, and return to the simplicity of Gospel equality. Let the priesthood be reserved to the sacred function of sanctification and formation through worship.

Perhaps then we will find the link that will enable us to leave behind us the scandal of a church divided into the "either/or" and bring us into that which is truly "both/and" Catholicism. At present the Catholic Church has no mechanism to set this in motion. Those who think along these lines have been forced to vote with their feet and their pocketbooks. The losses are staggering, and totally unnecessary.

May the Spirit of Jesus Christ inspire the hearts of all to work for unity amid diversity, for a church that openly celebrates the breadth of the gifts of Divine Spirit.