

Dear Bishops, Beware

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SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2016

The American bishops will be gathering in Baltimore this week for their annual Fall conference. They will have many issues to address – and a new president of the bishops’ conference to elect (which some are suggesting may be a kind of referendum on the past three years of Francis’ papacy). But in the unlikely event that they asked me for advice about the future life of the Church in America, I might offer them something like the following.

Beware of sophistry concealed as wisdom; hedonism masquerading as morality; skewed ethics cloaked as settled doctrine – none of these has anything to do, even remotely, with the Magisterium of the Church. The *Catechism* is explicit: “The law of God entrusted to the Church is taught to the faithful as the way of life and truth. The faithful therefore have the *right* to be instructed in the divine saving precepts that purify judgment and, with grace, heal wounded human reason.” (¶2037)

Remind the people that, sometimes, even ardently desiring what is good, we do evil. (cf. Romans 7:19) When we do, we should be contrite, and express that contrition sacramentally, vow our best efforts not to repeat the offense. Above all, repent. “Where there is no repentance,” Gene Wolfe wrote in his insightful novel *Pirate Freedom*, “forgiveness is only permission by another name.”

There is no room for *deliberate perversion of the Gospel*, for any priest or prelate to torture established Catholic teaching – which is the Mind of Christ. Anyone who does so is a fifth columnist, a surreptitious supporter of the profane in the midst of the sacred, (cf. Mt 10:36)

In 1 Timothy, we read that if anyone aspires to the office of bishop, “he desires a noble task” (3:1); but a bit earlier (1:3), St. Paul warns that some people are teaching false doctrine, and they must be ordered to stop by, among others, their bishops.

What do we learn from this command to Timothy? That bishops must be orthodox, devout, and competent teachers, for theirs is a soul-saving task.

The faithful, for their part, “are obliged to submit to their bishops’ decision, made in the name of Christ, in matters of faith and morals, and to

adhere to it with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind.” (*Lumen Gentium*, 25).

Can it be that prelates and priests may take it upon themselves to decide and declare matters “in the name of Christ,” which, in fact, profane the sacred name? Can it be that there are, among those entrusted with the gravest duties, some who, like the priests Nedab and Abihu (in Leviticus 10), in one manner or another infringe the rules of worship, doing only what they want, as and when they want it? Nedab and Abihu, by the way, were promptly devoured by divine fire.

To be clear, we should take this as not a threat but a warning, in the spirit of the first pope, that “there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master.” (2 Peter 2:1). This is not merely the stuff of the latest Dan Brown novel; it is, in a regrettable and even bizarre way in these times, the vital concern of all prelates, priests, and other faithful followers of Christ the King.

Something is not true because the Church teaches it; rather, the Church teaches it because it is true. *The Church. Teaches. The Truth.* “The world,” wrote Servant of God Bishop Fulton Sheen, “has been attempting to preserve the fruits of Christianity after having surrendered the roots.” Among the finest sons and daughters of the Church are noble bishops and priests who have preached Christ’s truth in word and deed. But, as the proverb has it, “The corruption of the best is the worst.” Those who can and should do great good may also do great evil.

We the faithful are called to be obedient (see CCC ¶144) to what *the Church truly teaches*. Here, as everywhere, biblical wisdom helps: “Test everything; hold fast to what is good, [and] abstain from every form of evil.” (1 Thess 5:21-22). And: “Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world.” (1 John 4:1)

Are there bishops and priests knowingly teaching what the Gospel rejects, deliberately leading us astray because of their egos or because of our hedonism, rooted in our desire, partial or plenary, for a secular, sybaritic message (cf. 2 Tim 4:3-4)?

The core of the message of the good prelate and priest is always about trying and trying and trying again to be fully Catholic in thought, word, and

deed, believing that full achievement of our greatest goal – the salvation of our souls – will not be realized without divine grace.

Knowing that the moral permissiveness trumpeted by today's false prophets is mere sophistry concealed as wisdom and knowing, too, that “the necessary precondition for the development of true freedom is to let oneself be educated in the moral law” (*CCC* ¶2526), we pray for, respect, and obey all those faithful prelates and priests who “live in a manner worthy of the call [they] have received.” (*Eph* 4:1)