

A Third Father James and the Illusion of a Third Way

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Fr. Dwight Longenecker's recent *Crisis* article, "[The Tale of Two Fr. Jameses](#)," warrants a revisit in light of the emergence to the national stage of a **third Father James, Fr. James Parker of the Rockford, Illinois, diocese**. In his article, Fr. Longenecker suggests that neither of the two ways, represented by Fr. James Martin and Fr. James Altman, has proved throughout history to be the best way forward. Instead, he cites a "third way" described by historian Joseph Stuart, the "simple way of radical

discipleship.” But is the third way Fr. Longenecker presents the path to peace in a common Church?

The case of a **third Fr. James** suggests that the answer to that question is no. Fr. James Parker is the very epitome of what Fr. Longenecker describes as living a “radical Christian life.” He does not curse the dark, but rather lights a candle everywhere he goes. He is the essence of a priest who lives that “radiant, radical, and revolutionary Christianity” focused completely on doing what he can with what he has where he is. He serves his people through the sacraments and through devotions to the Eucharist, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Immaculate Heart of Mary.

Fr. Parker livestreams Mass every morning, followed by a Divine Mercy Chaplet (which he livestreams again every day at three o’clock). He then makes visits to hospitals and the homebound, and he visits the school, when in session. He ends each day with a livestreamed Rosary Holy Hour before the Blessed Sacrament, which is usually watched by as many as 70 parishioners. Every night.

Contrary to how some may want to characterize him, Fr. Parker does not represent any “extreme.” He does not publicly call out politicians, he is the very opposite of “confrontational,” and he offers the Ordinary Form of the Mass. He doesn’t call for its replacement by the Extraordinary Form. But neither does he accommodate the Age in which we live. He wears a cassock and thought at one point to install a communion rail. His homilies defend human life from womb to tomb, and he gathers groups to pray the Rosary at Planned Parenthood clinics. He calls on all his parishioners to practice their faith in just the kind of radical way Fr. Longenecker calls the “third way.”

And yet, [his bishop is currently trying to cancel him.](#)

Fr. Parker was told two weeks ago by Bishop David John Malloy that he will no longer be pastor of his parish and has been given no new assignment, something which has set off a firestorm of protest in the diocese, with one rally after another and more than \$87,000 raised to assist him. Rather than his radical Christianity being a “third way” that brings peace, it has led to his being removed from the parish he pastored.

How do we explain this? Perhaps the answer can be found in the way Fr. Longenecker describes the first two Fr. Jameses: poster boys for two completely different Catholic Churches. They are not merely two different “responses” to the Age, one resistant and the other accommodating. Rather, they are two completely different definitions and understandings of the Catholic Church, of who she is and what she exists to do.

The idea that they are two different responses suggests that Fr. Martin and Fr. Altman share a common set of beliefs but simply differ on how to bring those beliefs to the world. But they do not share a common set of beliefs at all.

Fr. Martin doesn't just “accommodate” the spirit of the Age, he fully and wholeheartedly embraces and accepts that spirit. He doesn't just “accommodate” homosexuality, he openly celebrates it. His view of the Church is best seen in the sign greeting those recently entering the Rockford Diocese Cathedral: “Eliminate poverty through systemic change.”

Fr. Martin's Catholic Church is a thoroughly human institution founded by those seeking to live out the teachings of the man Jesus, whom he sees as a great moral teacher. This Catholic Church is a tool for bringing about social change, including equality, justice, and the elimination of poverty. It is a completely natural

institution, driven solely by the work of human hands, inspired anew by the great social thinkers of every Age. Its goal is to create a more just world.

Fr. Altman represents an entirely different view of and understanding of the Catholic Church, one that has been held by the Church since her inception. In his view, the Church is both natural and supernatural, the Mystical Body of Christ on earth, founded by the man who was also God Himself, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, in order to give mankind a means to attain the knowledge and grace needed to come to know and love God while here on earth so that we may one day be with Him for Eternity in Heaven. In this view, the Church is no mere human institution, but rather a supernatural as well as natural one. Sacraments are the visible means by which the invisible God transmits grace to us, not so we can end poverty, something Jesus said would be with us always, but so that we can live holy lives. Joyful lives.

One Church is man-made, the other is God-made. One exists to change the world, the other exists to prepare God's children for the next. One believes men can create Heaven on earth if just the right people are given the right power to impose the right public policies. The other believes men can attain Heaven in the next life through the graces offered through the sacraments of the Church, graces that help us live holy lives that lead us to union with God, our Creator. One trusts in men, the other trusts in God.

And therein lies the rub. Fr. Longenecker is right that it is in living lives of radical Christianity, of complete faithfulness to God, that the Church has prospered throughout history. **Fr. Altman and Fr. Parker fill up every parish they are assigned to. People flock to them. Their confessionals**

are filled, their pews are filled, their schools are filled. The young flock to them. Ordinations are growing. The “traditional” Catholic Church is thriving. It is alive and it is vibrant. People long for the fullness of the Faith.

But the other “Catholic” Church? The man-made one focused on systemic change? Its pews have emptied, its youth are turning away in droves. And why would they not? If your Church’s only function and mission is to change society, make the world a better place, then your Church offers nothing that cannot also be found in a thousand other social institutions that don’t come with all the trappings of a Church. Especially when the Fr. Martins rail against the traditional Church, the traditional approach to religion. They are learning that you can’t have it both ways: you can’t denigrate traditional religion, and say it’s all about this world, and still expect the young to view any religious institution as the best way to change that world.

The radical Christianity that both Fr. James Parker and Fr. James Altman embrace is not a “third way.” It is The Way—the way God gave the world more than two thousand years ago when He founded His Church and gave her the Mission to bring the Good News of Salvation to all the ends of the earth. The other Catholic Church in America, the one that Fr. Martin and Bishop Malloy embrace, is the World’s Way. It is the same battle fought from the Creation of the world.

There is no third way. Today, yesterday, and forever, there have been and always will be just two ways: the Way of God and the Way of the World. They aren’t two different extremes of one common Faith. They are completely different Faiths. Bishops and priests who embrace the World’s Way

know this, and they also know that the Faithful will choose The Way—the One True Faith. It's why they cannot abide any priest or any devotion that is traditional, and they seek to cancel it.

Embracing the radical Christian life is indeed the answer, as Fr. Longenecker suggests. But it will not bring peace to the Church. However, it very well might bring revival.

[Photo Credit: Shaw Media]



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