

The Bishops' Bind and Their Cross

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As the November USCCB meeting demonstrated, the bishops find themselves in a bind as they strive to foster a coherent Gospel witness among Catholics. Events inside and outside the Church continue to outpace and obstruct their efforts. Additionally, **the institutional failure to instill personal and ecclesial discipline during the last half-century has deprived them (and us) of the experience needed to guide the Church through the ensuing crisis.** There is a path forward, but the way is narrow – and hard.

Although attention has recently focused on the **false witness given by several Catholic politicians and their reception of Holy Communion**, those are just symptoms of the problem. **It's difficult to blame politicians when for more than fifty years many priests, bishops, and Vatican officials have explicitly or tacitly supported false teachings and taught the laity they can do the same.**

To present a coherent Gospel witness, we have to return to Jesus' original message of on-going conversion (*metanoia*) and belief. These two elements were imbedded in his final mandate to the Apostles: "Go, therefore, make disciples. . .teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

Note that apostolic ministry entails more than preaching. **The bishops must call disciples to observe (i.e., to actually live) *metanoia* and the Gospel by laying aside error and sin in order to put on the mind and heart of Christ. [but not fossil fuels, open borders, virus/vax, accompanying sexual sinners, etc.] Only by sharing his life can we bear the fruit of holiness that sanctifies us and becomes an effective communal witness transforming others and the world.**

Christian belief and practice are thus ecclesial matters, not strictly private ones. Every mature person knows that **conscience isn't self-sufficient and that as individuals our ignorance and sinfulness can lead to misjudgments about ourselves, others, the world, and God's specific intentions for our daily life.**

For those reasons, **Jesus entrusted the Church** – and in particular the Apostles and their successors – with the task of making disciples by **fostering the personal and ecclesial *metanoia* of prayer, self-sacrifice, and works of mercy lived in fidelity to the Gospel.** He supported that disciplined life (or “discipleship”) by conferring on the Church the obligation and authority to correct those who through error or sin depart from Christian life and witness. He also obligated his disciples in conscience to accept that authority.

The terrible truth is that **for multiple generations, the bishops and clergy haven't systematically called us to *metanoia*.** For example, the USCCB hasn't issued a pastoral letter on the spiritual life or norms for meaningful penitential observances. Consider our Lenten “discipline:” the Lord's *40 day* fast has been replaced by meatless Fridays and by *2 days* of “fasting” which may include a full meal each day plus two smaller ones that together are less than the full meal (so, almost two full meals)!

Instead of a communal life of *metanoia*, **we've allowed discipleship and witness to become individualistic and unaccountable. Close to the heart of that crisis is a corrupted teaching on conscience, which holds that Christians can follow their moral judgments provided they aren't aware of any guilt.**



This individualistic theory makes the Church and her communal witness “outsiders” to conscience, thereby destroying the internal foundation of the Lord’s command that the Church form disciples and that they accept correction. It isn’t surprising, then, that Holy Communion is mistakenly believed to depend solely on an innocent conscience rather than also on sharing the faith and life of Christ’s Body and Bride.

But we can’t expect the bishops to foster communal *metanoia* and fidelity to the Gospel when they don’t agree among themselves. That’s the real heart of the crisis.

It’s a crisis inseparable from the dissent over contraception. After *Humanae Vitae* (1968), many priests and bishops embraced the so-called “**pastoral approach**” of telling the faithful they could practice contraception and still receive Holy Communion if they were following their conscience.

That “pastoral” approach proved convenient for many pastors. Priests and bishops didn’t have to take a stand on contraception and were thus able to minimize conflict with their brothers, superiors, and people. **This led to the classic dysfunction of refusing to address the real sources of a communal problem. It’s a strategy that readily isolates or intimidates as “not pastoral” those trying to confront the problem openly.**

Since then, homilies and religious education have rarely included a detailed presentation of Gospel teachings on the human person, sexuality, marriage, and family – or on their connection to political life. This is also the period when many practices of the spiritual life were set aside.

Most bishops today, like most Catholics, have been deeply affected by these multi-generational pastoral, catechetical, and formational failures. Moreover, to the extent they’ve embraced these failures, they have difficulty seeing any need to alter course.

The bishops who *do* recognize the root problems, then, are in a real bind. **The culture won’t support actions where the Gospel departs from societal values.** Many of their brothers and people won’t support actions that contradict innocent but erroneous consciences. Yet those are the very issues the Church must address to form disciples capable of bearing a faithful and communal witness in the contemporary world.

So, bishops desiring to confront the crisis must be prepared to accept painful realities: open disagreement within the Church, including among bishops; social and ecclesial pressure deployed to stymie their efforts, especially when opposing false theories of conscience; and their own missteps as they attempt to learn the lost art of making disciples and practicing ecclesial discipline.

As difficult as that path is, we already know the price of inaction, false “pastoral” compromises, and **the fear of confronting brother bishops and Vatican officials. Those approaches haven’t led to the long-promised renewal of Christian life but to its withering.** Like Peter, the bishops must accept the bind they are in and be led where they otherwise would not go. Their cross is an ecclesial, indeed a hierarchical, conflict.

For them – and us – that means accepting the Lord’s mandate to embrace *his* Cross through *metanoia* and the observance of all his commands.

***Image:** *Jesus Sends Forth the Apostles* by Duccio di Buoninsegna, c. 1300 [Metropolitan Cathedral of Saint Mary of the Assumption, Siena, Italy]