

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*Pope Benedict XVI reiterated the 4 senses of scripture: 1) what was going on at the time it was written; 2) how does it refer to Jesus; 3) what is the moral response to the scripture; 4) how does it point to eternal life.*

*The following article from the New Oxford Review is dated 28 years ago, the year 1997.*

*What was going on at that time was that dissent was multiplying from Catholic leaders, the faithful were rejecting church practice and teaching, and that Catholics were more concerned with their worldly lives than with eternal salvation.*

*This situation has not changed much in 2025, in my experience.*

*Author George Kelly's solution is for the church to start appointing strong bishops who clearly and unambiguously teach the faith to guide people toward eternal life.*

*Kelly presents example of bishops of the 20th and of the 19th centuries.*

*While he notes that the bishops need to be in line with the pope, which at that time was Pope St. John Paul II, the alignment with more recent popes would have bishops being softer on faith and morals, concerned with worldly political and ecological events, and adrift from the mission of saving souls through Word, Sacrament, and Charity.*

*The article's value is in its assessment of the state of Catholics more recently in comparison to previous times of greater fidelity. Steps to recovery and keys to the kingdom are going to require a different standard of appointing priests to the episcopacy in 2025, ones that have the salvation of souls at the forefront rather than worldly and political concerns, and that the Vatican promote this priority.*

*Priests are burdened by current bishops with endless meetings, emails, flocknotes taking time away from ministry.*

*I am ready to follow any bishop who is saving souls, however, I do not look to bishops only for my responsibilities as a faithful Catholic*

*As a Christian and not just as a priest, I try to bring others to Jesus and to speak of sin, of forgiveness, of salvation, of transformation in this life to prepare for eternal life.*

*While it would be ideal to have bishops from the pope on down who speak of these things, I am neither waiting for this nor fretting that some might not do so.*

*Each Christian has his mandate to make known the name of Jesus and to witness to the Lord before men.*

# Needed: Formidable Bishops

## TO REPAIR THE CHURCH

By George A. Kelly | December 1997

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How many good Catholics are there in the average parish today? Does the pastor know? How would he decide? Would he dare to say to anyone: “You’re a bad Catholic, you know”? Forty years ago a priest could walk down a city street to inquire “Are you a Catholic?” and hear in return: “Yes, but I’m not very good at it.” Today, he is likely to be told: “Yes, but I don’t agree with the Church on many things.”

**Forty years ago the norms of Catholicity were clear: Sunday Mass, chastity, valid marriage, Catholic education, sacramental life, good works, concern for the salvation of one’s soul and the souls of those in one’s care.** By World War II, social scientists graded Catholics by the degree of their adherence to Catholic norms and structures. There were: (1) the “**Enthusiasts**,” said to compose about 10 percent of churchgoers, who obeyed the Commandments and helped run the parish or the diocese; (2) the “**Regulars**,” who did all that the Church expected of them worship-wise and sacramentally, without being activists; (3) the “**Irregulars**,” who retained Catholic identity without being noticeably pious, yet mostly managed to die with the Last Rites; and (4) the “**Apostates**.” Good standing in the Church was commonplace. Catholics knew which category they fitted into, and one did not have to be an

apostate — or an excommunicate — to “feel” a low standing in the parish community.

During the post-World War II period, the movement of American culture away from its religious roots began to have its effect in Catholic circles. One old pastor, Msgr. John Moylan, took note of the changes that were taking place in the priesthood as early as 1955: “When I was ordained in 1904,” he recalled, “my new pastor greeted me with the remark, ‘They tell me you know a lot for a man your age. I don’t care what you know. **Are you willing to work hard to help me save the souls of our people?**’” Msgr. Moylan then added: “Sentimentality is creeping into the Church. Our new curate expects me to pay more attention to his excuses for not doing what he is supposed to do, than to the priestly work that we all must do.” The old man had the strange idea that the young priest came to St. Monica’s “to serve the parish and the pastor, not to have his personal wishes control what he would or would not do.”

Through most of John Moylan’s 50 years of parish priesthood the norms of Catholicity were clear, and respected. And to the amazement of Europeans, 75 percent of all American Catholics took those norms seriously — by living their lives according to Catholic norms.

Was that so bad? Surely not to those Catholics who had faith, and the majority did; but living it was becoming more difficult at the middle of the century than it had been at the beginning. America was becoming secularized, becoming whatever free people by themselves wished to make it. Thunderbolts from on high were no longer needed in the modern world, so it was being said outside.

Here was the rub: **Few propositions are more infallibly true for good Catholics than the one that says good standing with God is the heart of their religious system. The avoidance of His displeasure is also a key element of that faith.** As Psalm 10 says: “The wicked man boasts of his

heart's desires; the covetous blasphemes the Lord. In his pride the wicked says: 'He will not punish. There is no God.'" In the best Catholic days, therefore, **it was inconceivable that truly believing Catholics would fail to recognize that their vocation was to worship God properly and obey His Commandments.** Catholics who thought otherwise deprived Christ and His Church of any objective meaning, at least in their own lives. Did Christ not excoriate the Scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 15 and Mk. 7) for preferring their human ways of responding to God over His revealed Word? The Church's function since New Testament days was to turn out Christians who glorify God by witnessing to His holiness, not church members who think that the end of human life is to eat, drink, work, and copulate.

Did Vatican II upset these Catholic directions? Not at all. The Council documents make clear that the Church's primary mission is to signify and effect faith and holiness among Christ's people, virtues which achieve their perfection, the Council Fathers said, "only in the glory of heaven" (Sacrosanctum Concilium, #8, and Lumen Gentium, #39 & #51). The new Catechism of the Catholic Church specifies the mission no differently: "[**The hierarchy**], **who are invested with a sacred power, are, in fact, dedicated to promoting the interests of their brethren, so that all who belong to the people of God...may attain salvation**" (#876).

It may be well to remind the perennial critic of things Catholic that **the secular State also trains people, but to live according to worldly norms.** A test of a society's value is the law-abiding nature of its constituency. Training "good" Americans is as important for the State as training "good" Catholics is for the Church. **Citizens must know, or be regularly re-taught to know, what is "good" and trained to be "good."** In the Church's case, holiness and salvation are the goals, and they are achieved by Christians formed to keep the Commandments and (if

**not keeping them) to renew their faith regularly by going to Confession.** Even secular society is dysfunctional when dissent from social objectives is massive, or when disobeying laws is widespread. American society can be so characterized today. A serious problem has arisen for Catholics in that the typical features of a godless secular world have come to be operative in the Church.

The Second Letter of John (v. 9-11) instructed the young Christian community how to attend to those who would undercut the Church's primary mission:

*Anyone who is so "progressive" as not to remain in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever remains in that teaching has the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him in your house or even greet him; for whoever greets him shares in his evil works.*

The American bishops, once the Baltimore Councils got under way in 1829, were especially good at instilling responsibility in pastors and teachers in order to forge a Catholic character among the faithful. Few Catholics were ever excommunicated, interdicted, or suspended from ecclesial office, but everyone learned the pleasure of being a good Catholic, and how to avoid episcopal displeasure. Bishops may not always have been liked, but they were by and large respected, even by those who obstreperously challenged their authority or teaching. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops, as late as 1982, cogently summarized the Catholic tradition on a bishop's role in fashioning the holiness which leads to salvation. At their annual meeting that year in Collegeville, they recapitulated both episcopal obligations and rights: (1) to foster and safeguard the unity of faith; (2) to uphold the special discipline of the Church; (3) to educate the faithful, especially the poor; and (4) to promote the Church's apostolic activity. In an "Explanatory Note," taken from the

Second Synod of Bishops (1969), they stressed two points: (1) “The faithful are bound to accept the teaching which the bishop does in the name of Christ in matters of faith and morals.” (2) “The task of giving authentic interpretation to the Word of God, whether in its written form or the form of tradition, has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone.”

**Today Christ’s “hard sayings” are spoken rather softly in many places. These days Catholic teachings are not often rejected out of hand, but they are often considered ideals and suggestions, not obligations.** One readily finds statements like the following (from a Catholic university’s self-description): “Fordham University is not a place to indoctrinate, proselytize or impose religious tests on faculty or students.” One hears that Catholic hospitals are free to sterilize those who have serious reasons to request the procedure. **What was once taken for granted by even the lukewarm is no longer true for many today who consider themselves practicing Catholics.** Why else would confessional lines be nonexistent in many parishes these days?

Indeed, a newer generation of Catholics sees Catholic norms as narrow or insensitive. Post-Vatican II Catholics who have been so fashioned place a high value on “compassion” for those unable or unwilling to observe restrictions on personal choices, and wish Christianity to be primarily a religion of solace for those who dispense themselves from the Commandments.

**But the Catholic Church is a training ground for saints, not a debating society with no judges of truth, nor a hostelry without remedies for evil.** The Lord said: “You will live in my love if you keep my commandments” (Jn. 15:9-11). He commanded his Apostles to teach the baptized “to observe all that I have commanded you” (Mk. 16:15-20).

A critical point has been reached in Catholic life now, for perhaps **a plurality of Catholics have been taught by authorized teachers, no less, to think more of this life,**

**less of the next.** An alarming number, although baptized members of Christ's flock, **now live comfortably as secularized children of their earthbound culture.** They have become this way courtesy of those clergy who have stereotyped the Church as a prison camp, as another Stalag 17. A case can be made that the actual number of "bad" Catholics has reached alarming proportions. If the majority of the membership is preoccupied with being merry and modern rather than being holy, then pastors whose Catholic priorities are in order have a serious problem. The situation is still graver if the line between "true" and "false" belief, between "good" and "evil" behavior, is now so blurred that the Ecclesia Docens seems almost irrelevant to daily life.

These observations are far from overstated. Richard McBrien has insisted that the modernizing party in the Church dominates all Catholic teaching infrastructures. Rosemary Ruether has traced the ambiguity of contemporary Catholic thought and action to the hierarchy's loss of control over Catholic institutions and to the secular media. Andrew Greeley has opined that those who wish to be selective about their "assent" and "obedience" ought to dialogue with their bishops "because you have as much a handle on God as the magisterium." All three of the above people are antagonists of the Magisterium.

What would happen to a government official who told the press that the incoming president is an idiot? Or a columnist for The New York Times who wrote that his publisher ran the newspaper like Stalag 17? Or a professor at the U.S. Army's War College who insisted that he was not bound by the directives of the Joint Chiefs of Staff? Or a governor who refused to desegregate the public schools? Or a candidate for office who refused to pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States, or claimed that he was not bound by the country's Constitution? Such behavior would likely be punished, one way or another. But for over 30 years, analogous insubordination has been

perpetrated against the Catholic hierarchy — the office, the teaching, the directives — often by priests and religious, without effective correction by Church authority.

John Paul II has said several times, “We must begin all over again,” and Cardinal Ratzinger recently told bishops to be particularly vigilant, because the Church “means less” to the faithful these days. But what good does it do to say things at the highest levels, over and over again, when hardly anything effective is done to restore “obedience of faith” (Rom. 1:5) to the Church, which the theological establishment, most religious orders, and many Catholic college presidents no longer think is a virtue?

Between 1940 and 1960 the American Church doubled her practicing Catholics, doubled her parish priests, tripled her teaching nuns. The leading custodians of the Faith during this period were archbishops like Dennis Dougherty, William O’Connell, and Francis Spellman on the East Coast, Robert Lucey and Joseph Rummel in the Southern Tier, James F. McIntyre and John Mitty on the West Coast, Edward Mooney, John McNicholas, and Samuel Stritch in the country’s Midland. Those prelates were formidable in the presence of their suffragans, their religious provincials, their most renowned educators, and most of all their parish priests. They may not always have been lovable, but they were respected, even by malcontents. The rich patrimony they bequeathed has been significantly dissipated, with little evidence yet of recovery on the way.

## **Five Steps to Recovery**

The **first** step is for bishops to be one with the Holy See in recognizing deformation when it stares them in the face. Without unity with the Pope at the level of Successors to the Apostles, a contradictory Catholicity will perdure, and a spotty practice of the faith will be the inevitable result for generations to come.



The **second** is to realize that the core issues dividing Catholics are the content of the faith itself and the authority of hierarchy to define the faith.

The **third** is to recognize “the enemy” as any body of organized dissenting activists who claim squatter’s rights over Catholic institutions with a view to redefining Catholicity in alien terms.

The **fourth** is to do something positive and Catholic about the contemporary divisions — or at least to surrender the notion that pluralism of belief is tolerable.

The **fifth** is to acknowledge with conviction that the cure for the Catholic malaise is primarily the responsibility of Shepherds of the flock — notably, the bishops. The Curé of Ars (1796-1859) might have been a whale of a confessor during the post-French Revolutionary period, but he could not reform his nation’s Catholicity as long as his bishops were more Gallican than Roman.

Without a Good Shepherd in charge of every diocese, and thus good shepherds heading every parish, Catholic reform will not go very far. What can a good bishop accomplish? Consider: When Pope Pius IX appointed Paul Cullen to be Apostolic Delegate to Ireland in 1850, with the mission of cleaning up the Irish Church, Archbishop (and soon Cardinal Cullen was given full command of the Irish Church. He directed his attention to the illiteracy, the drunkenness, the broken families, the bad priests, the squabbling bishops (often in conflict with Rome), and the Irish Church’s general lack of discipline. When Cullen was sent from Rome to his own people, only 25 percent of them attended Sunday Mass, but when he went to God 30 years later he was comforted in knowing that 90 percent of the Irish worshiped his Christ and theirs every week.

It is not by good will alone that a father raises a family, a teacher guides a class, a general wins a war, or a shepherd tends a flock. The ruler must rule, and, if he faces disorder, he must be

competent enough to find his way through the chaos successfully. No one in authority looks forward with pleasure to conflict, or lives comfortably with those who hold him in contempt. Sinful creatures do fight, do dissent, do mistake their own way for the Way and their own notions for the Faith. Bishops must deal with those of God's undisciplined children who become more than ecclesial gadflies. Bishops, however good they may be in conversation or in preaching, are remembered mostly for what they do. **The episcopal role, after all, is to make good decisions for Christ's sake. Gaining disciples, converting sinners against faith as well as morals, and creating a Catholic community whose quality makes Christ credible are the goals of their vocation.** Indulgence toward unbelief or evil had little support from their forebears and exemplars, the Church leaders of New Testament days.

How easy it is to forget Christ's unpopularity! He was concerned for His listeners and for their conversion certainly, yet always He challenged them: "If you are not with me, you are against me" (Lk. 11:13). Tireless pursuer of unbelievers, He nonetheless told his disciples to shake from their feet the dust of any town that did not want them (Mt. 10:14). Christ always made His authority the basis of the faith He expected to earn from disciples. He taught them, too, that belief grew as much from their respect for His person as from the good will He manifested toward their needs.

**Disdain for authority has now found its way into the American Church, on matters of faith, morals, and discipline.** Catholic dissidents disrespect not only the Church's teaching office, but also the very words of the New Testament and Church documents whenever these interfere with their freedom of choice. John Paul II recently excommunicated an Asian theologian for his denial of basic Catholic truths, only to be told by the man's Provincial (of all people!) that the papal action was out of tune with "the spirit of the gospel" and with "the age after

Vatican II.” For 10 years (1971-81) Jesuit Robert Drinan held political office in Congress against the direct order of his Father General in Rome, and against the Canon Law of the Church, which forbids clerics to hold political office. The refusal of Catholic college presidents to subscribe to the requirements of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and Canon Law is also illustrative of the anti-authority postures now widespread in the Church. Without “obedience of faith” prevailing, it is difficult to see how the Church can be a credible witness to Christ.

During perilous times the role of bishop is difficult to exercise. Still, by vocation bishops are called upon to respond to disobedience. In some circumstances, simple words of exhortation are not enough. Teaching is easy; “teaching them to observe” is somewhat more difficult (Mt. 28:20). Consequently, to rule their dioceses effectively, **bishops must develop proper strategies, determine priorities, search for the weaknesses of their enemies, and choose and train new leaders competent to deal with disobedience and mutilation of the faith. They must also resist the temptation to treat their enemies as co-equals, or to think that unending talk itself reconciles irreconcilable positions.**

## **Seven Keys of the Kingdom**

There are things that only the bishops and the Pope can do.

(1) The Holy See must insist, once universal policy or law is established, that the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, as well as diocesan bishops, apply the policy or law without equivocation, ambiguity, or “benign neglect” of enforcement.

The Holy See must also oversee Roman institutes of learning and seminary training, so they become models for bishops and major superiors everywhere of how the Church’s universal norms are implemented, and how Catholic institutions should be

managed. Religious orders in particular, especially those with pontifical accreditation, must once more become exemplars of the Church's holiness and obedience, and administer the institutions in their care according to Church law.

**(2) Bishops once again ought to instruct the faithful personally about the meaning of the articles of the Creeds, and their relations to the Catholic way of life.**

American bishops of the 19th century were learned and vocal about dogmatic questions. New York's Bishop John Hughes, as early as the 1840s, was preaching in public halls about Christ's divinity, Mary's virginity, the Eucharist, and papal infallibility. A generation later Bishop James Gibbons, while still in Richmond (1876), published *The Faith of Our Fathers*, which by the time of his death in 1921 had gone through 110 editions. But in our day, Catholics who want the Church to legitimize a second spouse or an abortion or their hatred of different classes or races are likely to be comfortable with their ill-chosen way of life, for they have only the vaguest idea of what Catholicism is.

(3) In the present trying circumstances, bishops are more likely to initiate recovery by the proper but practical use of their legislative, judicial, and executive authority. *Lumen Gentium* (#27) reaffirmed these episcopal rights and responsibilities. The hierarchy must clarify disputed issues without undue delay, lest dissenting opinions over time gain wider acceptance than they already have.

The number of countries once Catholic but now lost to the Church by timid or incompetent leadership is not small. **Today's bishops must be prepared to dispute and refute, publicly as necessary, those who lead the faithful astray on matters of doctrine or threaten the Church's well-being by their disobedience.** Texts used in Catholic classrooms for religious and theological studies should have explicit ecclesial approval. Publishers of such books should be closely monitored. Reports of scandalous behavior should be dealt with

appropriately, and in timely fashion, according to law. Directives from the Holy See should be vigorously enforced. Religious superiors should be directed to follow a similar course within their jurisdictions.

(4) Bishops should not reward dissenters.

**Appointment of dissenters as advisers to bishops, or as lecturers in episcopal assemblies, workshops, clergy conferences, seminaries, or as drafters of Church documents creates the impression that there is a counter-Magisterium** (John Paul II's term). The basic principle of the natural law is, "Do good and avoid evil." In Christian language this axiom may be rephrased to say, "Reward the good, punish the evil." The Roman Missal celebrates 200 saints on the altars of the Western Church, most of whom were confessors or just holy people, a third of them shedding their blood for the Faith. It is difficult to reconcile the daily prayer of the Church with a great deal of what goes on within many of her institutions.

(5) **Bishops ought to provide well-advertised support for Catholic colleges and universities that have kept their Catholic identity in the fullest sense**, and ought to exhort and assist all others to preserve, enhance, or recover their commitment to the Catholic Church and her faith. Institutions that have abandoned their Catholic commitment should be identified.

Moreover, the Catholic University of America must be a paradigm for truly Catholic higher education. Bishops should consider the creation of a Pontifical Faculty of Catholic Theology, Philosophy, and Canon Law. Teaching in all seminaries should be conducted in full accord with Church doctrine and norms. No theories should be presented for possible acceptance at Catholic colleges and universities that are manifestly in conflict with binding Church doctrine and norms.

**(6) Only those persons who have a significant record of active fidelity to the Church's teaching office should be appointed to Church office, especially at the episcopal level.** All practices that tend to demean or weaken Church authority should be reviewed, and altered as necessary. The requirement of religious garb for priests and religious, when "on duty," would be a fitting beginning of reform.

**(7) Since the state of the Church is no better than the state of her parishes, diocesan Ordinaries must review all policies and practices already in place to ensure that they enhance the sacred status of pastors and of parish priests in general. Any custom that secularizes their divinely conferred status and role should be reversed.**

Pastors must be held to account for their stewardship in a consistent manner. Priests must be trained to live an exemplary life, and be corrected summarily whenever the situation requires. **Bishops should be friendly with their priests, but they cannot shift away the heavier burden of being "father" to those who share their diocesan pastorate.**

A man or woman of authority is, beyond being a technical superior, also a person of substance, of presence. Great leaders and grandes dames exude presence. No one underestimates who they are, and good bishops will share to some degree that notable characteristic of Jesus, that He taught with authority.

At the end of the 19th century, G.K. Chesterton, still not a Catholic, was stunned one rainy Sunday by the dignity of Westminster's Henry Edward Manning as the Cardinal stepped out of his carriage to enter a church. After World War I the British Prime Minister so respected Melbourne's Archbishop Daniel Mannix's authority on the Irish Question that he sent two destroyers to remove the prelate from a Cunard liner on his way home to his dying mother in Ireland, lest he cause more trouble than the Empire cared to face. In the 1930s, when Patrick Cardinal Hayes walked down the middle aisle of his cathedral, the

churchgoers automatically fell to their knees to receive his blessing. During the 1940s the publisher of the Philadelphia Inquirer and other journalists treated Dennis Dougherty with the utmost respect because that Cardinal's way of defending his flock made him a bishop not to be taken lightly.

These men were equal to the demands of their authoritative office, and were held in awe, even by those who did not like them. In the exercise of their office, religious superiors and college presidents bowed in their direction, not the other way around. These prelates knew what they were supposed to do, hence became who they were supposed to be. A bishop unclear about what his office demands has little hope of growing into the role, any gifts of personality notwithstanding.

The role of bishop in times of upheaval is never easy. At the end of the sixth century, Pope St. Gregory the Great laid out the choices facing bishops in that moment of crisis over the holiness of the Church:

*A spiritual guide should be silent when discretion requires, and speak when words are of service.... And an imprudent silence may leave in error those who could have been taught. Pastors who lack foresight hesitate to say openly what is right because they fear losing the favor of men. As the voice of truth tells us, such leaders are not zealous pastors who protect their flocks; rather they are like mercenaries who flee by taking refuge in silence when the wolf appears.*

St. Gregory ruled the city of Rome as well as the Church. He knew, better than most, that when the wolf appears at the door you do not assuage him with a bone or a hand, or with friendly chats.

While the crisis in the Church continues, those who have confidence in the "faith of our fathers" will continue to witness to, and suffer for, their faith, as St. Athanasius did in the fourth century at the hands of the Arians, as St. Thomas More and St. John Fisher did under England's headhunting King Henry VIII,

and as the Curé of Ars did in post-French Revolution days when bishops were more nationalistic than Catholic. But believing Catholics must reject pessimism. The battle to keep the American Church fully and faithfully a part of the Church Universal is far from lost, and we must work through the present difficulties less in anger than in hope.