

Dear People Whom God Loves,

CHURCH GOOD AND NEEDING REFORM

I

One reason for continuous reform is that our understanding of God and other mysteries changes over time. We formed our doctrines using our understanding of our cosmos (including our world) and our life at that time. I don't think that there was any other way to do it. Our understanding of our cosmos, world and life changes. That can mean that our doctrines are not as helpful as they used to be. I think that this was what Cardinal Newman meant by the development of doctrine.

This means understanding the words differently or perhaps at times changing the wording. This must be done carefully so the words still are good pointers to the mysterious reality that can never be fully comprehended or explained by the words. The new words must be pointing to the same mystery to which the previous words were pointing.

Let us use the word GOD. The word means quite different things to different people. GOD is a word. That word itself is not God. To people who don't believe, that word is pointing to something that doesn't exist. To people who do believe, the word points to something that is real. However, that something or someone that is real will be understood in various ways. When I say that I believe in GOD, it is appropriate for some to ask me "what do you mean by that".

For some, the word God may mean believing this: there is an all-powerful, all-knowing Supreme Being who lives up in heaven. For some others, this Supreme Being made our world in six days and made it essentially the way we know the world today.

When people thought that the earth was flat, that the sky was solid, and heaven was a place beyond the sky, there was no challenge to believing that God was a Supreme Being who lived up in heaven.

Fortunately, we don't have to choose between giving up our belief in God and accepting what science has shown.

The word God still points to Ultimate Reality, but the mystery now reveals more than the idea of a Supreme Being who lives up in heaven. Today, belief in Ultimate Reality does not have to carry the baggage of ancient cosmology.

What works for me is that Ultimate Reality is LOVE. The word God for me points to Ultimate Reality as infinite uncreated LOVE that has no form or shape, nothing material or in any way physical. LOVE is spirit that gives birth to the cosmos and lives within the cosmos in ways that are not describable by scientific experiment.

The birthing (creating) of the cosmos is not the same kind of cause and effect that is done by anyone or anything that is physical.

Our human loves are real; they are spirit and not physical (although they may be expressed physically).

For me, what is of ultimate importance is *love*. We are the created loves. Without love, even valuable things have no lasting value. I wonder if believing that love is what is ultimately important is close to saying I believe in God. For me, saying this LOVE is ultimately important is the same as saying I believe in God as long as we say that LOVE is someone.

This brings us to a second reason why reform needs to be continuous in our church. This is similar to the first reason but comes from a different perspective. Let us reflect on what Jesus said to his disciples shortly before he died. This is from Jn. Ch. 16, V. 7.

“But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate (Holy Spirit) will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.”

These words must have caused much confusion among his disciples. They had learned so much from him. They looked to him for leadership and direction. They

loved him. The words “it is better for you that I go” must have seemed like a knife piercing their hearts which were filled with sorrow and fear.

Perhaps at some time in his ministry Jesus may have had the intention of forming some kind of structure. Confer Mt. Ch 16. 18a. “And so I say to you, you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church.”

By the time he died he had gathered a band of followers who were Jews like himself. Jesus criticized what he saw in Judaism that was contrary to his vision of the reign of God, yet he and they continued to worship as Jews. Jesus lived and died a believing Jew. This was true of his followers for some years after his death.

The reason I mention this is that there was no institution that his followers could cling to. They had no format to follow that could give them direction. They had only the memory of who Jesus was and how he lived and taught.

The thought of Jesus being gone must have been terrifying to them. So Jesus’ words that “it is better that I go” must have made no sense to them. Also Jesus’ saying that if he goes he will send the Holy Spirit must have seemed terribly mysterious.

After Jesus was crucified, many of his disciples scattered - especially the men who felt that they were then in danger. They would naturally have been afraid that if their leader was crucified, they could well be next.

But then something happened to them - the Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The experience of the Resurrection is related in all four gospels. The experience of the Holy Spirit is spoken of in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul, James, and Peter.

The bible describes the Resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit in mysterious language, but what we do know is the effect that they had on the disciples. It changed them from being a frightened scattered group, into people of courage and strength.

They went out and preached that this Jesus you crucified has risen from the dead. This put them in mortal danger - and indeed martyrdom was the fate of some. But their experience of the Resurrection and the Holy Spirit gave them faith and courage that was greater than their fear.

This brings us back to Jesus leaving and the sending of the Holy Spirit. This little group of followers named the Jesus movement had to set out - with the help of the Holy Spirit - to slowly and painfully set up some type of form and structure that eventually became the church.

From the earliest times they would gather to share a meal together as they had done with Jesus. This is where our Eucharist comes from.

We will now look at the consequences of the Holy Spirit working through human beings. This can help us see why church is both good and in need of reform. Why is the church good? I believe it is because the Holy Spirit lives and works in the people of God that we call church. (Please remember that the Holy Spirit lives and works in everyone and indeed all of creation. The Spirit was active before there were religions and churches. I am sure that the Spirit lives and works through the various kinds of creation in ways that are appropriate to the creatures. I don't try to explain that.)

Here are some examples of goodness through our long history.

- In the early centuries the people of God found it contradictory to be a follower of Jesus and to engage in war.
- Through the centuries helping the poor, the sick and societal rejects were seen as part of the church's mission.

- Throughout the centuries (more at some times than others) the church has fostered the quiet prayer that allows the Holy Spirit to transform us into more compassionate, merciful and loving people.
- The people of God have preserved the message of Jesus who taught that God is a loving Father (Mother means the same thing)... Who makes his sun rise on the bad and good... And causes rain to fall on the just and unjust... Who seeks the sheep that was lost... Who welcomes home the son who was a wastrel and sinned deeply... Who searches for the lost coin that was needed to feed the family...

The church has imitated the memory of Jesus who welcomed and drew into wholeness the dishonest tax collectors, the prostitutes, the sinners, the adulterers and the rejects of his society.

To see the people of God accurately we must recognize the good that the Holy Spirit has done through the people.

At the same time to see the people of God accurately, we must recognize that the people of God are *people*. To be people means to be imperfect, to be prone to mistakes and sin. It means to be drawn – and sometimes strongly – to bolster ones ego by seeking power, money, and prestige for their own sake and thus be more or less blind to how we hurt people in the process. It is so easy for us to use religion as a cover to hide – even from ourselves – what we are doing.

This is why we – the people of God – must be aware of our frailty and to be willing and open to reform all of the time. The Holy Spirit is working through imperfect creatures we call people. The presence of the Holy Spirit does not prevent all of our mistakes and sins, but it can help us to acknowledge our mistakes and sins and help us to reform and repair the harm and pain that we have caused.

We must always be open to reform. Our long history shows that mistakes, sin and reform are a reality.

Some examples from our history:

- We changed from a minority persecuted by the civil powers to becoming interwoven with the civil powers and with many church leaders becoming civil authorities themselves.
- We changed from being pacifists to at times leading military actions ourselves.
- We had periods where we turned people over to the civil authorities to be burned at the stake because their beliefs were deemed to be heresy.
- We had a period where the papacy was corrupt. It was power and money that ruled.
- We have today the sexual abuse scandal. Not only those who did the abuse, but also those who looked away. Those who did not hear the cries of pain from those who were abused and their families because protecting the good name of the church became more important...

Our history makes clear to me that reform of the people of God is always necessary and we must be alert to that. The goodness of the people of God must not blind us to the mistakes and sins. The mistakes and sins of the people of God, however, must not blind us to the good.

There is a story about the Emperor Napoleon and a powerful Cardinal of the church. One day Napoleon said to the Cardinal "I could destroy this Catholic Church of yours with a single powerful blow of my fist." The Cardinal responded "what makes you think that you could do this when we church leaders could not do it with our centuries of mistakes and sins."

II

A final note that helps me to better work through the confusing journey of goodness and reform without being caught too badly into anger and self-righteousness. That is the question of judgment.

Sometimes we see people in what appears to be bad behavior. Is it better to judge or not to judge? I see this as a question that is not helpful. I see it as a wrong question. I see it this way:

We can often make reasonable judgments about whether actions and behaviors are good or bad by determining whether they are causing harm. When we judge that someone is causing harm, then it is right and necessary that the person be restrained from doing this behavior that hurts people. I see this as a correct judgment.

Can we judge that the person acting with bad behaviors is a bad person? My belief is that we are not in a position to judge. Why would I say this? Do we really know what is behind the behavior? How much freedom of choice is present? Do we know deeply what is in the person's background? Do we know how much trauma and brain damage that they suffered when they were little? Perhaps even in the womb. Do we know what damage they suffered later in life? Do we know what their brain was telling them when they did the bad action?

Some soldiers coming back from war will engage in bad and even killing actions that they would never have done before they were traumatized in battle. How can we judge them as bad people when it appears that war caused the brain damage that creates the bad behaviors? Obviously, the behavior needs to be managed but until the person is healed from the trauma, the impulses are affected by previous trauma.

I remember reading about a young girl who was about 12 or 13. She had the disease of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Her bad behavior was driving her parents wild. They took her to a doctor who gave her medicine that didn't work for her form of ADHD. She got worse. Her behavior became even more destructive than before. Bad behavior became worse behavior. They later found a doctor who understood how to treat her trauma. Through this treatment her behavior changed dramatically. She became a sweet loving girl.

My point is this. Her behavior was bad, then worse - and finally good. Was she a bad person, then a worse person and finally a good person? I suggest that she was the same valuable person through it all. That doesn't mean that her parents and she didn't suffer a lot.

There is something deeper in us than the way our brain is functioning. This is why I think that it is mistake to judge a person as bad just because their behavior is

bad. I find this judging and not judging helpful. We are then able to restrain bad behavior and still see the person as a valuable human being.

There is a saying on the street. Some people are born on third base and think that they hit a triple. Some of us are born on second base, some on first and some at home plate with two strikes on them.

Smile, God Loves You,
Father Clay