

YEAR OF FAITH 2012-2013

BAPTISM OF THE LORD | JANUARY 12-13, 2013

We have all heard them -- in fact we may have some of our own. I am talking about stories of people who are angry with the Church for some reason. Occasionally it is about the Church's teaching, but more often than not it is because they have had a bad experience with someone connected with the Church. Perhaps the parish secretary was rude to them once. Maybe a priest or nun yelled at them about something. Even worse, as recent history has made clear, maybe they were abused by someone in the Church. I am not attempting to excuse any of these behaviors; they are most regrettable. It would be wonderful if everyone in the Church were saints, but the simple fact remains that we are a Church of sinners and too often people encounter sinners in the Church instead of Christ Jesus. Because of their hurt, disappointment, and anger they carry a grudge against the Church, and some of them use this bad experience as an excuse for not coming to Church. But is that really a fair response?

Once there was a young man who set off for Alaska to make his fortune mining for gold. He spent everything he had to get to Alaska and to get all the supplies he would need to stake his claim. As he was sitting in a bar the night before setting out into the Klondike, an old man sat next to him. Sizing him up, the old man told him that he had been mining in Alaska for 30 years, and he had come upon a vein of gold that was huge. He had mined it for years and had more money than he could ever spend, and he had barely made a dent in the vein of gold. The old miner offered to give his claim to the young man so that he too could make his fortune. He did say that there was one thing about the vein of gold; it was in the middle of a ice cold, muddy river and everyday you had to dig out about six feet of mud that had flowed over the gold during the night. The young man thanked the old miner but said, "No thank you. I do not want to deal with all that mud." Like the old miner, we probably think the young man was being crazy. It just is not reasonable to lost sight of the gold because of the mud. But isn't that what we are doing when we allow the sinfulness of members of the Church to keep us from the gold of Jesus Christ?

Like her Divine Spouse, who has both a human and divine nature, the Church is essentially both human and divine. The Church is the instrument of God's universal call to holiness, while at the same time, she is made up of a sinful people. "Yet despite the personal sinfulness of her members, the Church remains holy by the presence of Jesus and the Holy Spirit who permeates her" (United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, p. 113).

So what are the essential characteristics of the Church that identify the Church before the world? What are the traits of the Church that help us keep focus on the "gold" and not the "mud"? We call these essential features of the Church the four marks of the Church, and we profess them in the Nicene Creed when we identify the Church as "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." These four marks indicate the essential features of the Church and her mission on earth. "Because of the sinfulness of the Church's members, these marks are not always lived out fully, so we need to view them as about a reality and yet a challenge" (USCCA, p. 127).

Reflecting the unity of the Most Holy Trinity, is the Church's mark of oneness. "The Holy Spirit, the bond of love between the Father and the Son, unites all the members of the Church as the one People of God" (USCCA, p. 127). Within the Church there is a diversity of languages, cultures, races, nations and traditions, however, they are all held together in one communion by the gift of love from the Holy Spirit. It is through the mark of oneness that the Church professes one Lord, one Baptism, one Faith and forms one Mystical Body.

Sadly, members of the Church have offended the oneness of the Church, resulting throughout the centuries in the divisions among Christians. The Catholic Church has always been committed to the restoration of unity among all Christians. This effort has been intensified since the Second Vatican Council by the Church's involvement in the ecumenical movement. This unity of all the Christian denominations is willed by God, and can only be attained by the adherence of all to the content of revealed faith in its entirety, and by the communion of the particular churches with the Church of God, under the leadership of the Bishop of Rome.

The Church has her origin in the Trinity, and the Trinity is the source of all holiness. God the Father, in His plan for the salvation of humanity, willed the existence of the Church. Jesus Christ, established the Church in the community of disciples, and merited the forgiveness of the Church's sins by His death on the Cross. The Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit to work within the Church to keep her members faithful to the Gospel. Thus the Church is holy in her Founder, in her saints, and in her means of salvation.

The word "catholic" means "universal." One of the ways that the Church is catholic, is that she has lived and continues to live in a diversity of cultures because the Spirit of Christ leads her to bring the Gospel to all people. The Church knows how to accept what is true and good in all cultures, while at the same time infusing the truth and goodness of her tradition and life into them.

The Church is also catholic because of her universal extension and presence in local communities that are known as diocese or eparchies in the case of the Eastern Churches. These local communities are linked together through their communion with the Church of Rome and her bishop, the Pope.

Finally, the Church is catholic because of her relationship to all people. Through dialogue, as a form of evangelization, the Church makes Christ Jesus and His Gospel known not only to other Christians not in communion with her, but also non-Christians, while always respecting their freedom of conscience and adherence to their own religious tradition.

Jesus chose the twelve Apostles to be the foundation upon which He built His Church, with St. Peter as the head of the Apostles. The entire Christian community received the Apostles' proclamation of the Gospel, and so the Church in her entirety is called "apostolic." Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church as a whole remains and always will remain faithful to the teaching of the Apostles. With His knowledge of human mortality, Christ Jesus willed that the Apostles be succeeded by the bishops in their role of shepherding and teaching the Faithful. Bishops have the fullness of Holy Orders, and therefore are the chief celebrants of the sacraments. The diocesan bishop is also responsible for the compassionate and loving governance of the people entrusted to him, and for the authentic

proclamation of the Gospel. To assist him in these pastoral duties, the Church, through the bishop calls men to the priesthood and diaconate. Like the first Apostles who were united into a college under the headship of St. Peter, bishops today are also united in a college, called the Magisterium, under the headship of the Pope, who is the successor of St. Peter.

By Baptism, every member of the Church participates in Christ's role as priest, prophet, and king. The laity do this in the context of their lives within their families, in their local communities, and in their workplaces. The four marks of the Church should shine forth in the lives of all the members of the Church, attracting all people to Jesus Christ, the one Savior of the world.

So the question for each of us becomes, what to do with the "mud" so that the "gold" of Christ Jesus can be seen? What mud in our lives keeps us from drawing close to Jesus? Do we need the cleansing of God's mercy through the sacrament of Reconciliation to wash away the mud to make the gold glimmer more brightly so that we can live out our common mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the ends of the earth and making disciples of all people?

In order to live out this mission of the Church, we need to be positive and hope-filled; after all we have GOOD NEWS to share with others. We need to meet people in the human situations of their lives. People have four basic fears: failure, rejection, pain, and death. These fears raise questions about our ultimate destiny and the meaning of our lives. The Church, as the Mystical Body of Christ, shows how Jesus understands these fears and offers a salvation that is the best response. He is the gold in the midst of the mud, and the Church is His instrument to make this golden life known to all the world.

All members of the Church have a responsibility for promoting the Church's mission of making disciples of all people. One way we can do this is by witnessing, both in our words and in our actions, the four marks of the Church, which provides a challenge of us.

This is what we mean by evangelization -- the sharing of the Good News. We do this by being positive and hope-filled. When entering into dialogue with a person, we need to begin with the human situation that they find themselves in. We can then build on the person's faith experience. This can be as simple as empathizing with their love of beauty, music and art, which is a manifestation of God's infinite beauty.