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THE LINE

Newsletter of the Convocation Of The West
OF THE MISSIONARY DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS



My Life, My Body, My Choice, My Death

By The Very Rev. Canon Michael Penfield

"None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord."
[Romans 14:7-8]

On Sundays I often hear Bishop Barron's Sermons on YouTube. He is a Roman Catholic Bishop now assigned to Minnesota. His sermon on this passage made me stop and think as to how our society and our churches have changed. There was a time when this passage was uncontroversial; now, it may cause a firestorm.

We, as Christians, believe that originally, when this world was created, God gave it to us and charged us with its care. In other words, humans were to be the rulers of this world. When we disobeyed God, we abdicated our seat of authority to the devil, and he ruled this world as prince until Christ's sacrificial death. In His Resurrection and Ascension, Jesus Christ was proclaimed the New Adam and the new King and sovereign of this world. But, for this world to truly be ruled by Christ, He will come again and claim His throne here on earth. In the meantime, the devil continues to play havoc, in part because he knows his time is limited. This is a very cursory review of our history, but it is not all. In order to free us from the curse of sin and the curse

associated with the Law, Jesus had to pay our ransom.

In His Death upon the Cross, Christ paid the ultimate price. He died so that we may be free. In other words, he paid our ransom. Although this image is probably politically incorrect today, it is fair to say that He bought us:

"Christ ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree,' that the blessing of Abraham might be extended to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith." [Galatians 3:13-14]

And,

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been purchased at a price." [1 Corinthians 6:19-20a]

When we became Christians, from that point on, we no longer belonged to ourselves. We belong to Christ. And Saint Paul beautifully described this in Romans:



The Convocation of the West Summary Statement

We are a missionary people living out the historical, Biblical Christian faith in the Anglican tradition.

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[Romans 14:7-8]

This notion of no longer living for ourselves but for Christ is not a new one. Those people martyred for our faith, both in the past and currently in places like China, Burma, the Middle East and yes even Israel, understand that their life and more importantly their death belongs to Christ. It is not their choice; it's His. And they are happy to serve.

We are to live for Christ. We are to die for Christ if He calls us to do so. Our bodies are not our own; it is Christ's. And we have no choice. God will determine how long we will live, and when and how we will die.

There is a wonderful tale from the Middle East that I love to tell. There was a man in Damascus who turned a corner just in

time to be face to face with Death. The man was shocked, and Death was surprised. The man was so frightened, he decided to ride all night to Antioch. There, he figured, he would be safe. So, he saddled up and left. He road and road until he reached Antioch the next morning. As he got off his mount, he felt this tap on his shoulder. It was Death, and he said, "It's time to go." The man signed but turned to Death and said, "Okay, but I have one question. When I saw you in Damascus you looked surprised. Why?" Death replied, "I was told to come for you here in Antioch the next day, and I couldn't think how it was possible that you would be here, so far away, in such a short time." Our lives are not our own; and neither are our deaths.

Yet, we live in a society where we are constantly told that our bodies are our own; our lives are our own. And now advocates for euthanasia say that our deaths are our own. We must resist this siren's call to think of ourselves as belonging to us for it is not true. But how did this come about?

I am a Baby-Boomer, and in the 60s and 70s, we were called the "Me Generation" because we were (and still are) self-obsessed. But was this the start? I think not. I am beginning to think we need to go to the very beginning of the Twentieth Century to figure out what happened. But two words of caution: first, the self-obsessed,

those who think that their lives are totally in their hands – even after they gave it to Jesus – have been with us always. It is not this viewpoint that troubles me as much as the sheer number of people who now agree with this belief. It seems as though this belief has taken over our society and many of our churches. It definitely has taken over the thoughts of many of our intellectuals and some leaders. And that is what I want to explore.

The second word of caution is that this is my theory. If there are others who agree, I am not aware. But I throw this thought out to you as just that, to provoke thought, discussion, and ideas for turning things around. So, here it is.

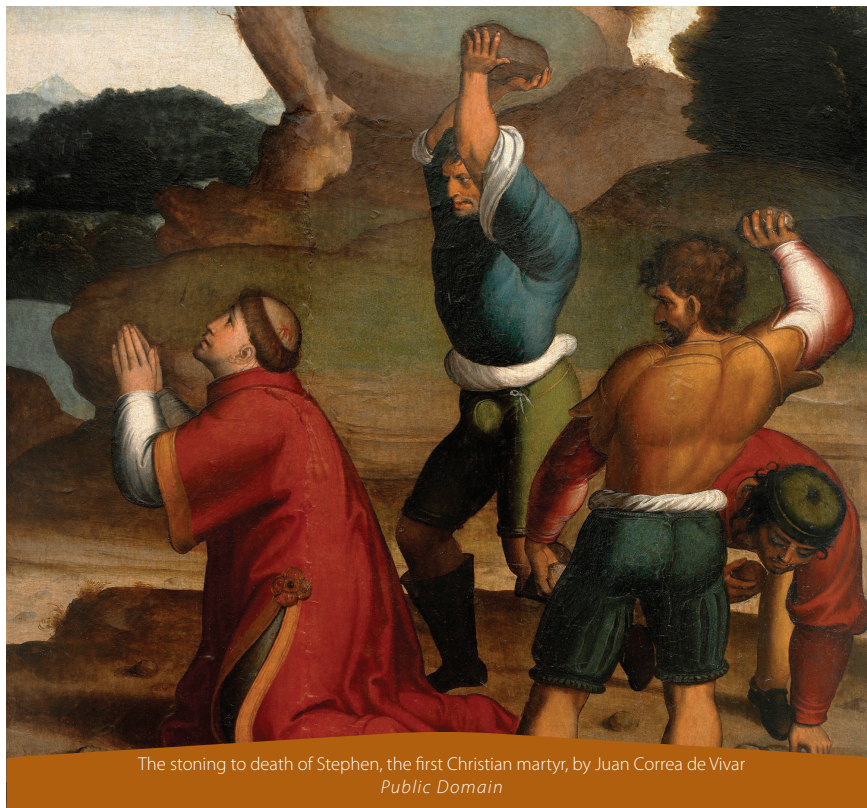
It is my belief that society and not just individuals started to change after World War I. This war was a huge, sacrificial war where duty and honor trumped self-preservation. Many young men threw themselves out over the trenches in huge numbers

just to be slaughtered. In the Battle of the Somme, soldiers from all sides were dying at a rate of 50,000 men a day in total. The total casualties by the end of this battle were close to one million, including the French, British and Germans. Just to put it in perspective: the United States lost 58,220 soldiers in the Viet Nam war – the first being 1956 and the last being 2006. In one day the same number of men died in the Somme that died over a 50-year period in the Viet Nam conflict. It is my contention that this war was the death-nell for the idea that duty, honor, God, country and king

were more important than one's own life.

People often forget that the Roaring Twenties were a time of great hedonism. It was a self-indulgent time that went into great excesses. The Great Depression helped sober society up a bit, and World War II called us back to the importance of self-sacrifice, especially in the face of the evil that was the Third Reich. But after this, and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the slide continued into thinking of oneself as being the center of the universe.

Psychologist specializing in child-development say there comes a time when a child no longer thinks that the whole universe encompasses only everything happening to them. Up until that moment, they have no concept that people have lives



The stoning to death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, by Juan Correa de Vivar
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once they leave their presence. One day, they realize that it is not all contained in what happens to them. And I remember exactly when this happened to me. I was riding in our car, looking out of the window. I saw a woman driving her car in the opposite direction and I thought, "This woman has a life after me! She will go home to a house I don't even know and live her life outside of me." It was an eye-opener. In a way, our society as a whole is losing that perspective.

Now, there is no one outside of ourselves. We are our own center of the universe, and the clearest indication that someone is living within themselves only is when they say that they are "living their own truth," as if truth is a matter of opinion.

So, what does all this mean for us as Christians? Well, first, it helps us in understanding our own sanctification. We live for Christ, who is in us. We belong to Him. Therefore, it behooves us to grow in our faith, our devotion and our prayer. It helps us to develop a Christ-centered life. And it helps us to understand what is and what is not acceptable. And all this, in turn, should help us to reach out.

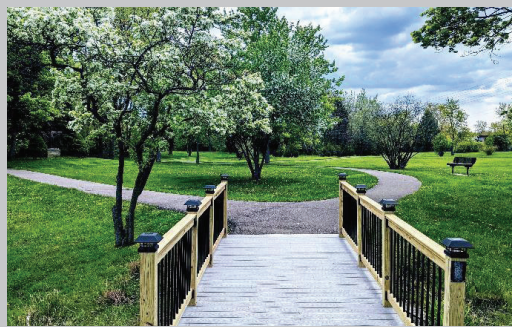
When we speak with those caught up in this attitude, knowing all this should help us to be more sympathetic, not less. A lot of people have been taught that this self-centered attitude is not only acceptable, it is morally and legally right. After a while, many follow this lead because it is the "norm". This means, in order to

tell the world about Christ, we have to breach that bubble they have constructed around themselves. We need to be able to understand what they are saying and more importantly, for what they are hungry. Also, I believe the more we understand the more we can move away from being judgmental, which may be ironic given how easily this observation as to the change in our society can make us MORE, not less, judgmental.

But this attitude of belonging only to oneself also makes clear how important it is to be a witness to what we believe. That means living our life with the knowledge that our life is no longer our own. It means understanding why we chose a certain way to live, and even to die, based on our faith and beliefs. It also means becoming more in tune as to what God is calling us to do.

If our lives and our deaths are not our own, if we freely give them to Christ, then we need to know what God is calling us to do. And this means developing our listening skills – our listening-to-God skills. And if we do learn how to listen to God, if we truly listen and do God's will, we will, in turn, be a witness for Christ. We will be able to show the world a better way of living than just for oneself. And maybe we will help move our society from being self-obsessed to a society that cares for God and cares for each other.

Amen and God bless.



Save the Dates!

The Missionary Diocese of All Saints

General Synod

April 2-5, 2024



St. Paul of the Cross Passionist Retreat Center

www.stpaulretreat.org

23333 Schoolcraft

Detroit, Michigan 48223

located 14 miles from airport (DTW)

Check-in Tuesday between 3-6 p.m. & depart Friday before noon



“From lightning and tempest; from earthquake, fire and flood..., Good Lord, deliver us” prays the Great Litany in our Prayerbook. In last month’s column, we talked of the Litany’s plea to deliver us from battle and murder, which are clearly human activities. In contrast, lightning, tempest and such are generally identified as “acts of God.”

An Australian sued the Roman Catholic Church several years ago, as the authentic agent of God on earth, and therefore responsible for the acts of God and liable to compensate for the resulting damages. The dilemma for the Church was: if they are the one true Church, representing God on earth, does that not make them liable? If they deny that (despite many statements in the past affirming they are), they are not liable, but neither are they religiously credible anymore. The dilemma may be sophomoric. Nevertheless, the question of responsibility for the so-called “acts of God” is indeed an interesting one.

Perhaps there is help for the Roman Church. Suppose the alleged “acts of God” are not caused by God after all. God’s defense team might well ask, “Are there not other suspects? Who seems to cause most of the trouble on earth?” The scientific community has also spoken up unwittingly in God’s defense, asserting that mankind is the guilty party. Climate change is causing the damage from floods, fires and the like, or at least greatly exacerbating it. And climate change is caused by human activity, or at least, greatly increased by it.

So, mankind is put on the defensive. Some refute the scientists, saying there have always been climate cycles in nature. Clearly climate change is going on, with a mass of data to show it. The

real question is whether human activity is the main cause. The scientific case is that it is the speed and intensity of the cycle which is different, and combined with what is known about the chemical interactions of the stuff we toss into the air and water, makes humans the likely culprits.

Many churches stay out of the argument. We have inherited a worldview which assigns the Church to the spiritual realm, away from science, politics and all manner of earthly concerns. When churches have strayed into the world of politics and science, the results have been quite muddled. Whether on the right, as in Pro-Life, Prohibition, anti-evolution, or on the left, as in a plethora of social and political issues, often with a dubious connection to the Gospel, the world is left wondering what the real message of the Church is.

Yet that message itself is clear. It starts with that God created the earth and he created mankind to run it according to his will. The problem is that neither the churches that, forsaking material matters, only busy themselves with the “spiritual” realm, nor the churches that dive in headfirst into one side or another of current issues, seem to be starting with that basic truth, that the earth, in all its spiritual and material manifestations, has been created by God, and it is our job to make that work.

St. Francis of Assisi, whose feast day is October 4, is an unusual prophet for his times, when western church theology was deep into disdain for the material world, seeing it as greatly inferior to the spiritual world. The Church was in the grip of Aristotelian thought, with its dualistic worldview. Francis was also a deacon at a time when the diaconate was at an historical low point, and

the “permanent” diaconate had almost disappeared.

Ironically, the dualism meant churchmen ended up entangled in very unspiritual ways in a multitude of national and political issues, often with corrupt or at least very self-serving motivations. Rulers often used “spiritual” rhetoric to mask their power plays and avaricious manipulations, as in the case of the Crusades. And the servant mentality represented by the diaconate was long gone.

Into this milieu came Francis. His worldview was that of the pre-medieval Church, embracing the earth as God’s unified creation, seeing all its components as our brothers and sisters, not as grubby material lowlife, to be conquered and exploited. He speaks of “brother sun” and “sister moon.” His humble servant’s attitude towards “the least of these my [i.e. Jesus’] brethren” is the epitome of the diaconal ideal, and extends beyond our species to encompass all God’s creatures.

In our role as having dominion over the earth, we bless the animals on St. Francis Day, rather than hunting and fishing them to extermination, or destroying their habitat and causing their extinction. According to God’s plan, they all have their place in his order of things. It is not our place to disrupt or destroy that order, but to nurture it, that it might in turn nourish us. As creatures of God, they also are to be respected, as we are each relevant pieces of a grand and beautiful mosaic of life given us by the Creator.

As Christians, we should not be passive in this, but with the boldness of Francis, should proclaim our shared responsibility to care for the earth, and not trash it. The job should not be left to secular environmentalists, who despite good intentions usually do not grasp the larger picture of God’s loving creation. Nor should Christians be passive when corporate plutocrats plunder and savage the creation for their own enrichment, contrary to the stewardship mandated by God. Nor should we leave it to Native Americans to speak out in praise of the Creator and in defense of the earth, when our own message so strongly coincides with theirs.

Francis’ contemporaries had a mixed reaction to his prophecy. For everyone drawn to the calling of servanthood to all in the name of the loving Christ, there were others who saw him as a kook out of step with both the reality of the times and the current Thomistic theology of the Church. It is true, of course, that he was out of step with the times and with its theology. Francis’ followers today have much the same problem. But the question for the Christian to ponder is not “are you out of step with the times and its trendy theology?” It is, “are you out of step with the loving message of Jesus and the will of God for you to care for the planet?”

The acts of God that need to be our focus are the Crucifixion and Resurrection, the saving acts which are the central message of the Gospel. Those acts save us from the mess we have made of our lives, our relationships with both humans and with the particulars of the planet, our failing stewardship, and our inability to love God and neighbor as we ought.

Recently, on Sept. 29, we celebrated the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels. “Angel” in Greek means “messenger,” and their job is to deliver the message of those central acts of God, and follow up in



St. Francis of Assisi, oil on canvas, Philip Fruytiers
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helping us understand and do it. They are good at their job.

In short, you have mail, maybe not in your inbox, but in your own mental intake. God sends you the Gospel to tell the story, the angels to guide you, the Fathers to enlighten you, the community of believers to support you, his own Son to love you, his Spirit to walk with you. We are here on this earth for a reason: to care for it, to love our neighbors of all kinds, to manage the planet as God would, to be good servants and stewards of his people, his creatures, his creation.

Request from Our Bishop Ordinary

During our last Standing Committee meeting, our Bishop Ordinary, Bishop Rich, requested two things from his parishes. The first was to see all parishes in MDAS moving away from individual communion cups and move back to the common cup. The second request is to move away from using grape juice or non-alcoholic wine and only use “real” wine. The reasoning behind these requests is based on our Anglican belief in the Real Presence and the importance of being faithful to Christ’s instructions and actions when He instituted Holy Communion about two thousand years ago. Our tradition holds that, after Jesus said, “This is my blood,” He passed to all a common cup from which all drank. And Jesus used wine at the Last Supper and not grape juice.

Bishop Rich has noted that some priests, when using individual cups, are not disposing of or cleansing their individual cups properly. Some are disposing their paper cups in the trash instead of incinerating them properly and then burying the ashes. Others are just washing their glass cups through the dishwasher without washing them out thoroughly before hand. He reminded us that, in this initial washing, the dish water must go down the piscina or into the ground by some other means.

Remember, we Anglicans believe that Holy Communion does not merely represent Christ’s body and blood. We believe it IS

His Body and Blood. Therefore, we must dispose of it properly, in accordance with any person’s body, and with great reverence because it is Holy.

The second request is to stop using either grape juice or non-alcoholic wine. But this change must be done with sensitivity to the needs of our brothers and sisters who suffer from alcoholism. Bishop Rich reminded us that we Anglicans believe that, in each consecrated element, the Body and Blood of Christ is present. In other words, the consecrated host contains both the Body and the Blood. Likewise, in the consecrated wine is both the Body and the Blood. So, if a person only takes of one, he takes the whole of Christ – Body AND Blood. Therefore, someone who suffers from alcoholism can take of only the host and still receive a complete sacrament.

I know that for some of you, this request may give you some consternation, but I ask you to pray on this, and if you would like to speak with me, please feel free to call me. I am here for you.

God bless,

Fr. Michael Penfield
Vicar General