

It's a Wonderful Church

by Robert Brennan

Imagine a world where it's 2 o'clock in the morning and your baby is running a high fever. You're worried and getting scared. You get the baby into a car and rush to a hospital but the hospital isn't there. ... It hasn't been invented. Imagine a world where you see your child go through 12 years of primary and secondary education and send him off to college, but when he arrives, instead of a university all he finds is a vacant lot because universities haven't been invented. Yes, that would be a strange and very uncomfortable world indeed, and it may have been a world we would have had to deal with if it wasn't for the Catholic Church. We Catholics have been taking a beating for the last couple of years, with the Church in America especially singled out for some richly deserved harsh treatment over the sex abuse scandal. The Church and its most precious and holy personages and symbols are fodder for late-night comedians and objects of general ridicule at the hands of the culture at large.

Being Irish, and having a tendency to see the cloud inside every silver lining, I may tend to exaggerate the feeling that things aren't going well, and that all just might be lost. But then God sends us a message, a spiritual Post-It note to shake us from our doldrums and allow us to see things the way they are. Watching all of the coverage of Pope John Paul II's funeral and the entire election process of Benedict XVI, which included more coverage of the inner workings of this process than human beings outside the College of Cardinals had ever seen, was such a metaphysical moment, at least for me. It filled me with simultaneous feelings of awe, admiration and joy. Somehow, I don't think the passing of the archbishop of Canterbury and the selection of his successor is going to garner the same amount of interest. I'm reminded of it again looking at the feast days this week: St. Cyril of Alexandria (Greece), St. Irenaeus (ancient France), Blessed Junipero Serra (Mexico and southwest America), St. Thomas the Apostle (India), and over all of them, Sts. Peter and Paul, two of the fathers of Western Civilization, on June 29.

Okay, so I may be a little bit of an unreconstructed triumphalist, but that being said, I think it is also safe to suggest that popular culture, especially decadent Western Culture, has seen religion in general and the Catholic Church in particular as some kind of enemy on many fronts. For a long time now, we hear references of how the Church was antagonistic to science, to reason, to tolerance, and a host of other tenets that the secular world holds sacred. But where would that same secular world be without the Church? What if the Catholic Church never existed? Granted, there are not too few intellectuals, college professors and purveyors of public opinion that would see this idea as a concept devoutly to be wished. But would they be here at all if the Catholic Church never existed?

If the Catholic Church never existed, our separated Protestant brethren wouldn't have the Bible they accuse us of not following closely enough. It was the early Church that accumulated the works of the New Testament, protected them from insane Roman emperors, and through divine guidance, discerned which books would stay in the canon of Scripture and which books would not.

If the Catholic Church never existed, we wouldn't have hospitals. It was through the monastic system of the so-called Dark Ages where, for the first time in recorded history, the poor actually had a place to go for medical help. When Henry VIII decimated the monasteries in Britain after his break with Rome, it took the English hospital system decades to recover.

The Church has been taking the rap for most of the 20th century that it was anathema to science and, discovery. This would have been strange news indeed for the multitudes in history that were protected by the Church, sponsored by the Church and blessed by the Church for furthering mankind's understanding of the natural world. Science itself didn't flourish until the Catholic Church's creed flourished. Without a rock-solid, unalterable belief that God ordered the universe, it was impossible to explore that order. Zeus and his cohort didn't give the same assurance that the laws of the universe would work the same tomorrow as they did today. (And if Galileo gives you pause, don't let him. Contrary to popular myth, the Church did not censor Galileo because he came up with a heliocentric [sun-centered] view of the solar system. It was only after Galileo began insisting that the Church alter Scripture that he found himself under house arrest in his well-appointed villa.)

One would be hard-pressed to find a more natural subject matter than the very genetic essence of life, and it was the Church once again that paved the path, through the humble efforts of an unassuming Augustinian monk named

Gregor Mendel. The scientific research on genetics and heredity done by Mendel remains the wellspring from which all genetic research comes.

The university was a Catholic concept, and much of what Western Civilization discovered and revealed to the rest of the world was done so under the auspices of the Church. Without the scholarship, science and study of the natural world that the Catholic Church supported throughout two millennia, the world we inhabit would be such a poorer place. People wouldn't know as much as they know about astronomy, physics and moral philosophy, and they'd be walking around thinking *The Da Vinci Code* is history. While universities stimulated intellectual inquiry, monks preserved the treasures of Western thought. Later, teaching orders brought education to the masses for the first time.

And it's not just Truth. Look at each of the transcendentals and find what the Church has done for the world:

Goodness - in addition to the thousands of saints, the Church has always been populated by highly motivated do-gooders. Catholics didn't just create charitable organizations, they invented the concept with feed-the-hungry programs, shelters, orphanages and the like. And Catholic character formation has given the West such a good conscience that we have a basis to complain about all the Catholics whose goodness has failed. George Washington himself formed himself by following *Rules of Civility* written by French Jesuits.

Beauty - the greatest works of art have been either expressions of the faith, projects funded by the Church, or by artists motivated by love for the Church. Michelangelo, Raphael, Cervantes, Chaucer, Beethoven, Mozart and on and on with a list that includes Shakespeare either directly (some say he was Catholic) or indirectly (it's obvious the Church inspired him).

Unity - If you ever wished that there was a diverse, worldwide organization dedicated to love, peace and brotherhood, wish no longer. The Catholic Church unites people of all races, income levels, ages and interests in one common mission. If you want to see rich guys side by side with poor guys, Koreans side by side with Chaldeans, Mexicans, Nigerians and old French ladies, all sharing a single purpose and engaged in single common effort, go to Mass in any major American metropolitan area. They may not like each other, and they may not get together later in the day, but they'll know they are bonded together at their core.

Calendars, both secular and liturgical, exist because of the Church. If the Catholic Church never existed, none of our separated Protestant brothers and sisters would know when to celebrate Christmas and when to celebrate Holy Week and Easter. And those separated brethren who have lived these past 500-odd years as if the Church had not indeed existed have experienced a myriad of doctrinal somersaults and 180 degree theological back flips that have rendered many flocks on the verge of extinction.

The discovery of the New World by the Old may be a mixed bag of blessings and curses, and there is no doubt the indigenous people who found themselves in the way of Spanish technology and desires of conquest suffered unfairly. But as imperfect as their methods may have been, the missionaries who followed the conquistadors did see these same people as children of God, and multitudes were brought to Christ through the actions and sacrifices of those very same missionaries. It is an accomplishment of immeasurable value that would not have occurred if it were not for the existence of the Catholic Church.

The Roman Catholic Church is like every human institution on earth because it is populated with human beings who are prone to sin and attracted to folly. It is unlike any human institution that has ever existed or that will ever exist because it remains the only Church commissioned by Christ Himself and divinely protected from doctrinal error. For that alone, all Christians should say ... It truly is a wonderful Church.

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