

## Saturday, April 28, 2007

"feeling like I was in heaven... and wondering why, if Catholics got everything else wrong, as I had been taught, they got beauty so right. How could falsehood and evil be so beautiful?"

(Peter Kreeft at 12 years old on his visit to St Patrick's Cathedral.)

Catholics and Protestants have many things in common but one of the most important areas of disagreement is how we view The Church. Several months ago, one of my commenters on Cross the Tiber suggested that it was audacious for Catholics to say the Church is divine.

It has taken me three years now to just start to glimpse the Catholic vision of what the Church is. I still don't fully comprehend it, but now understand that that our vision of the Church informs the rest of our theology and practice. My blog title suggests "I found Jesus but lost his Church" and now I am in the process of recovering a vision of what the Church is and what I believe it was meant to be. My personal relationship with Christ will always be the central focus of my life but I did not believe that Jesus had given us a Church to nourish and enhance this relationship. I viewed the Church as "man-made" whereas Catholics view it as "God-made." Jesus said "**I will build my Church**" and Catholics view their relationship with Christ inextricably bound to this Church Christ started and continues to build. [Particularly because the sacraments are in the Church](#) and without the Church, we would be without the sacraments. Catholics don't have a problem with that because of their belief that Christ instituted the sacraments within the structure and safety of the Church. The writings of the early Church fathers support this.

In the first centuries of the early Church, there was no such thing as "lone ranger Christians" and the "Just Me and Jesus" paradigm so commonly seen now a days was not existent then. To be a Christian was to a part of the church that consisted of bishops, presbyters in a hierarchical visible organization with one common creed. Augustine said: "[T]here are many other things which most properly can keep me in [the Catholic Church's] bosom. The unanimity of peoples and nations keeps me here. Her authority, inaugurated in miracles, nourished by hope, augmented by love, and confirmed by her age, keeps me here. The succession of priests, from the very see of the apostle Peter, to whom the Lord, after his resurrection, gave the charge of feeding his sheep [John 21:15–17], up to the present episcopate, keeps me here. And last, the very name Catholic, which, not without reason, belongs to this Church alone, in the face of so many heretics, so much so that, although all heretics want to be called 'Catholic,' when a stranger inquires where the Catholic Church meets, none of the heretics would dare to point out his own basilica or house" (*Against the Letter of Mani Called "The Foundation" 4:5 [A.D. 397]*).

**Peter Kreeft, a convert to Catholicism, writes about how Catholics view the Church:**

"To Catholics, the Church is "the mystical Body of Christ." The Church is a "mystery." Fundamentalists don't understand this category. "Mystery" sounds suspiciously pagan to them. They want their religion to be clear and simple (as Moslems do). They'll admit, of course, that God's ways are not our ways and often appear mysterious to us. But they don't want their Church to be mysterious, like God, because they don't think of it as an extension of God but as an extension of man.

In other words, they think of "mystery" as mere darkness or puzzlement. But in Catholic theology it's a positive thing: hidden light, hidden wisdom.

Fundamentalists say that they emphasize "the Church invisible" more than "the Church visible" and accuse Catholics of overemphasizing the latter. Fundamentalists draw a sharp distinction between these two dimensions of the Church so that they can explain Scripture's strong statements about the Church as applying only to "the Church invisible" (the number of saved souls, known to God) and not to the visible Church on earth.

Why? Because if they referred such statements to the visible Church, the claims of the Catholic Church to be that single, worldwide, visible Church stretching back in history to Christ, still forgiving sins and exercising teaching authority in His name — well, these claims would surely seem more likely to be true of the Catholic Church than of any other visible Church.

Fundamentalists also have a very individualistic notion of the Church. The Catholic sense of a single great worldwide organism, a real thing, is not there. The Eastern Orthodox Church usually has an even more powerful sense of the mystery and splendor of the Church than most modern Western Catholics do. They're east of Rome spiritually as well as geographically — i.e., more mystical. Fundamentalists are west of Rome — much too American.

A third difference concerns the authority of the Church. This follows from the previous point: Fundamentalists lack the Catholic vision of the Church as a great mystical entity, an invisible divine society present simultaneously in heaven and on earth, linking heaven and earth as closely as man's soul and body are linked. And lacking this vision, authority can only mean power, especially political power. Thus, fundamentalists sometimes sound like their archenemies, the modernists, when it comes to criticizing the "authoritarianism" and political power of Rome. For both fundamentalists and modernists lack the Catholic understanding of the Church and its authority as much more than "political."

Yet fundamentalists tend to be quite authoritarian themselves on a personal level — e.g., in their families. They are more willing than most people to both command and to obey authority, if it's biblical. The issue that divides us is not authority as such but where it is to be found: Church or Bible only?

The structure of the Christian community also divides us. Fundamentalists usually criticize the “hierarchical” Church. This is often more a matter of politics than of religion, sometimes stemming from American egalitarianism rather than religious conviction. But when it is a matter of religious conviction, such criticism usually takes one of these three forms:

**First**, fundamentalists charge that Catholics worship the Church and the hierarchy, especially the Pope. There’s a fear of idolatry coupled with a fear of the papacy mixed up here, a confusion between sound principle (anti-idolatry) and a gross misunderstanding of facts. While I’ve met many Catholics who love the Pope and (unfortunately) some who hate him, I’ve never met or heard of anyone who worships him!

**Second**, the hierarchy is suspected of corruption just because it’s a hierarchy: It is structurally, culturally, un-American. (So is the hierarchy of angels “un-American.” But that doesn’t mean it’s corrupt.) Of course, 500 years ago there was some truth to this charge, but fundamentalists are still fighting Luther’s battle.

**Third**, there’s often an unadmitted racial prejudice against Italian Popes. Some people, when they hear “Italian,” immediately think “mafia” and “Machiavelli.” This element is rarely admitted, but it definitely plays a part in anti-papal prejudice.

Beyond these irrational criticisms, I’ve never come across any solid theological argument against the papacy. The current Pope has done much to temper fundamentalist fears by his holy personality, wise words and strong opposition to abortion and to the excesses of some contemporary theologians.

**Finally**, fundamentalists and Catholics have different visions of the end or task of the Church. For fundamentalists, that task is only two things: edification of the saved and evangelization of the unsaved. For the Catholic, these two ends are essential, but there are also two others.

**First**, Catholics also emphasize the Church’s this-worldly tasks — social justice and the corporal works of mercy such as building hospitals and feeding the poor. Fundamentalists say the Church “shouldn’t get involved in politics” (though many of them are thoroughly politicized on the far right). And when did you last see a fundamentalist hospital.

**Second**, there’s a still more ultimate goal. Evangelization, edification and social service are ultimately only means to this greater end in the Catholic vision. The Church is there for the world, yes (the first three ends), but in a more ultimate sense the world is there for the Church, for her eternal glory and perfection.

The Church’s ultimate task is to glorify God, to be the Bride of Christ. The world is, in the long run, only the raw material out of which God makes the Church. In fact, the universe was created for the sake of the Church! God’s aim from Day One was to perfect His Bride, to share His glory eternally.

When we speak of this eternal glory we have in mind first of all the Church as invisible, as “mystical”; but there’s a substantial unity between the Church invisible and the Church visible, between the Church as inner organism and the Church as outer organization, between its soul and body, as there is between man’s soul and body.

You can see this mystical thing, as you can see a man. The most holy thing you can see on earth has its seat in Rome, its heart in bread and wine on the altar and its fingers as close as your neighbor.

It isn’t that fundamentalists explicitly deny this Catholic vision of the Church; they just don’t comprehend it. They may have things to teach us about being on fire with religious zeal, but we have much to teach them about the fireplace.

A fireplace without a fire is cold and gloomy. But a fire without a fireplace is catastrophic."