

Parish Priests Are the Cure to the Crisis: Part 1 An Honest Look at Catholics Today

by Tate Hilgefert

And he was withdrawn away from them a stone's cast; and kneeling down, he prayed, Saying: Father, if thou wilt, remove this chalice from me: but yet not my will, but thine be done. And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony, he prayed the longer. And his sweat became as drops of blood, trickling down upon the ground. (Lk 22:41-44)

In this prayer Christ offered, on his part, to the eternal Father his torments, his precious blood and his Death for all men as an abundant price for all mortals... He presented also the loss which He was to sustain from those who would not profit by his clemency and condemn themselves to eternal woe. Though to die for his friends and for the predestined was pleasing to Him and longingly desired by our Savior; yet to die for the reprobate was indeed bitter and painful. (The Mystical City of God - Blessed Mary of Agreda)

Due to the current crisis in the Church and the world, millions of souls have left Christ and His Church, abandoning the clemency offered by our Lord. Many more souls, who call themselves Catholic—including many Mass-going Catholics—refuse to fully embrace the faith. How many souls are sitting in the pews on Sunday not in a state of grace and at risk of *eternal woe*? They are not true friends of Christ. They are the reprobate, and *to die for the reprobate was indeed bitter and painful*.

Out of a deep love for our Lord we must stop the exodus of Catholics from the Church. We must help Catholics fully embrace the faith to become true friends of Christ. This starts with parish priests. They have been ordained by God through His Church for this very task of leading the souls of their parishes to heaven. They are called to be the saints to lead us out of this crisis.

Many young priests have begun this hard work. They have been improving catechesis and liturgy, emphasizing Confession, and building devotion to the Eucharist and the Blessed Virgin Mary. In many of these parishes, the exodus appears to have stopped. Parishioner numbers are beginning to stabilize and, in some select cases, even grow.

This a good sign, but even in these parishes there tends to be a lukewarmness. For many parishioners the faith tends to take a backseat to the things of the world. The Catholic faith is not at the heart of their lives influencing all that they do. Why is it so difficult in today's culture to get Mass-attending Catholics to fully embrace the faith?

This is a very important question and one of the keys to stopping the exodus and fighting the crisis. If parishes are giving better catechesis and liturgy, emphasizing Confession, and building devotion to the Eucharist and the Blessed Virgin Mary, shouldn't we be seeing more fruit? Shouldn't these parishes be filled with fervent souls? So why aren't they?

The hearts of many parishioners are hardened. Parishes have succumbed to our modern-day culture and, in particular, its view of happiness, religion, and freedom. These ways of thinking are at odds with the Catholic faith and yet the Church is mostly silent. In order for these

Mass-going Catholics to embrace their faith and all that is being offered them, their view of happiness, religion, and freedom must change. While preaching against the culture is never easy, these topics are necessary, and because of their relevance to everyday life, they are a great opportunity for priests to grab parishioners attention and begin to lead them to fully embrace and live their Catholic faith.

In today's culture, the Catholic Church has a reputation of being an impediment to happiness in large part because of all her rules. This view presents a truth and a lie. The truth is that the Church and the world are at odds: we cannot love both God and the world. This is a truth that Catholics have shied away from in my lifetime; but it is a truth to which we must return. The lie is that happiness is found in the world. While pleasures and comforts are found in the world, true happiness comes from God and is delivered to us through the Catholic Church. The rules of the Church are designed for our happiness here on earth and eternity in heaven.

Where does the world look for happiness? Satan has fooled those in the world into thinking happiness can be attained through possessions, worldly pleasures, and power. Having the newest and greatest things, constantly entertaining ourselves through electronics, and possessing the power to do whatever one pleases seems necessary for happiness. The notion that one can have both God and the world has infected many parishes and Mass-going Catholics.

Reading St. Matthew's Gospel we know this to be false. *No man can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one, and love the other: or he will sustain the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.* (Mt 6:24) In fact possessions, pleasure, and power are the exact opposites to the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience taken upon entering religious life. God and the Church know that the true path to happiness is to minimize one's love and attachment to the things of the world in order to maximize our love of God and ability to serve Him.

This search of the world for happiness has led to a consumerist mentality in which we are always looking for what something can do for me. Many now view religion in the same way. Ever hear someone say, "I don't get anything out of Mass." In fact, too often the Catholic Church herself falls prey to this way of thinking. There is a tendency to tell parishioners they should come to Mass to receive Jesus or Confession to receive healing. True, they will receive these things and more, but notice how the motive is selfish.

The Catholic faith is not meant to be selfish but selfless. God is love. Jesus calls us to imitate Him, *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. And the second is like to this: Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.* (Mt 22:37-39) Rather than ask one to act out of selfish reasons, we need to challenge them to a higher calling, to live for God. As we were not created to be consumers, we will never find happiness in that lifestyle. We are meant to offer our lives for something much greater. We are meant to offer our lives to God. *If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life, shall lose it; for he that shall lose his life for my sake, shall save it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, and cast away himself?* (Lk 9:23-25)

Inevitably, these two ways of thinking lead to the desire to be free to chase after worldly happiness. Freedom has become the greatest good in our country. Freedom to be or do whatever one pleases. Freedom from authority.

It's my life: Why shouldn't I be able to do whatever I want? Have as many kids as I want? The music at Mass I want? Follow the teachings of the Church I want? Who are you to tell me what I can and can't do? Prideful disobedience is tearing us apart and weakening the Church.

For example, one feels the need to be free from children, or too many children, to live the life he desires. In order to have this freedom many disobey the Church's teaching on contraception, while others are unwilling to give their fertility to God. They place God at their disposal to give them the kids they desire rather than placing themselves at God's disposal to give them the children He desires. The big family has vanished from many parishes and along with it priestly vocations. Less children equates to less vocations, but the way of thinking that 'my life is my own' may also have a role to play in the unwillingness of men to give their life to God and enter the priesthood.

There is beauty and simplicity in humble obedience. Christ came into the world through Mary's humble obedience: *behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to thy word.* (Lk 1:38) and saved us through His own: *not my will, but thine be done.* (Lk 22:42) Rather than the call for freedom these humble words of Mary and our Lord should always be in the hearts and on the lips of every Catholic.

So how do priests change this infectious way of thinking that stunts the growth of their parish and prevents those in it from becoming true friends of Christ? How do they lead their parishes out of the crisis? These are the questions we will tackle in the next part of this series.