

FR JUSTIN FORD, HOMILY, 16TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, 19TH JULY 2020

I was reading a book a while back called ‘The Bad Popes’. Not an attack on the Church, but a scholarly look at seven or eight of the popes in history who seem to stand out as being a bit worse sinners than others.

I’ve known since reading apologetics books as a teenager that not every one of the 265 popes in history has exactly been a saint, but it was interesting to learn about some more of the details. When we study the whole history of the Church over two thousand years – well, we see all the great things that have happened, all the saints and all the things the Church has achieved for human well-being; but at the same time, all the sins and scandals and mistakes.

The parable in today’s gospel of the darnel – that means, the weeds – sown amongst the good wheat of the kingdom, throws some light on how to understand all this in the light of our faith. So to the servants in the parable who want to weed out the darnel, the owner of the field – who we later learn is Jesus, the Son of Man – replies, ‘When you weed out the darnel you might pull up the wheat with it. Let them both grow till the harvest...’

Now, each of us knows by experience that to one degree or another we’re all sinners. So I think it’s a relief to know that there’s still room for us. Every person is really a mixture of the good and the bad, the wheat and the darnel, so we’re thankful that God gives us until ‘the final harvest’ to let him nurture us into being true wheat for the kingdom. But it also maybe makes us stop and think, before we judge other Catholics too easily.

One of the saddest things is when you hear of someone who walks away from the Church because they’ve been offended by a fellow Catholic – maybe by a priest, or a fellow parishioner; or maybe by a whole group; perhaps with the scandals of recent times. Now, sometimes the person offending them might not be at fault at all; or sometimes, there might be real sin involved. But whichever, the person who’s offended decides they’re going to punish the person who offended them by not coming to Mass anymore, or maybe by not even believing anymore.

And one of the silly things – probably the person they think they’re punishing forgets all about it after a little while, if they ever knew in the first place. Whereas the person who’s been offended, and who walks away, misses out on a lifetime of graces they would otherwise have had within the Church.

It does remind us how important it is never to give offence if it can at all be avoided. But it also makes us remember that in the end, we’re not in the Church because of our fellow Catholics. We’re not there to please them. We don’t hold the faith to please them. We don’t come to Mass to please the priests. We remain united to the Church by our faith and practice because we’re convinced that this is the Church that God himself placed on this earth to lead us to salvation. We’re at Mass each Sunday (at least in normal times) because we believe that this is what God himself has commanded us to do to offer him perfect praise and worship.

Now when we say ‘the Church’, it’s a bit confusing. Because there are two different levels of meaning. We might simply mean all the different people, popes, bishops, priests, religious, laypeople, who make up the Church. Or we might mean the Church, to the extent that it’s something that comes from Jesus himself – her teachings, her sacraments, and so on. So there’s the *human* aspect; and the *divine* aspect, the aspect that comes from God.

Now if we're talking about the individuals in the Church (and that includes her various leaders) – well, sometimes it might be quite legitimate to be angry at this or that person, because they might actually have done something wrong. So to a certain extent, anger might be a legitimate response.

But if we're talking about the aspects of the Church that come from Jesus himself, then there's no justification for anger. And being angry with the Church in those aspects of teachings or sacraments is more like being angry with Jesus himself (though we probably don't like to admit it to ourselves). So what happens when someone walks away from the Church because of what various individuals have done – they're taking out their rightful anger against those *individuals*, they're taking that out on the things that come from, and are guaranteed by, Jesus himself. They've confused the divine and human sides of the Church.

Here's an imaginary scenario. Imagine we lived in Britain in those very dark days early in World War Two, when it was under massive air attack by the Nazis – the Battle of Britain. But just imagine: suppose it was discovered that a whole group of the British military and political leaders were secretly working for the other side. The forces of evil had infiltrated. So, you could say – 'How terrible, how evil! I'm not going to fight for this country anymore. I'm deserting the army.' But that'd be pretty irrational. Because surely: the courageous thing, the patriotic thing, the right thing to do, in that time of desperate need, would be to fight all the harder, to make sure the traitors didn't win.

It's a bit the same with the Church, when you think about it. When you look at the sins of some of the Catholics, some of the Catholic leaders, through history, and in the present day – well, it is like the enemy forces have sometimes infiltrated. Because when we commit sin, when we go against the teachings of Jesus and the Church, especially in a major way – well at that moment, we're really working for the other side. So when we hear that *other* people in the Church have been spending a *lot* of their time basically working for the other side: well, we don't desert – we stand and fight.

The life of the Church isn't a tea party. Jesus promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church he was founding on St Peter, the Rock, the first Pope. But that implies that until the end of time, the gates of hell, the forces of evil, would be *trying* to prevail, would be trying to tear down, above all, this One Church that Christ established and guaranteed.

So: we're fighting the biggest battle in the universe, the real battle. Because remember: we're not *consumers* in the Church, deciding whether we want to buy something or not. We're soldiers: by Baptism, and especially Confirmation, we're made soldiers of Christ, to fight the battle of good versus evil.

In our Mass today, we recommit ourselves to this battle: to remain at our posts, to stand and fight, to keep the Faith. And to let Christ remove the weeds of sin in our own hearts, so that on the Day of Judgement, we will be harvested as good wheat for the kingdom.