

Cleansed and conformed to God's will

"Father, We Thank Thee, Who Hast Planted" has long been one of my favorite hymns. Its tune, taken from the 16th century *Genevan Psalter*, is eminently singable. The hymn text — when not corrupted by that politically-correct scoundrel, "alt.," — is even better. For Francis Bland Tucker's lyrics put 21st-century congregations in touch with the second generation of Christians, and perhaps even the first, by combining various phrases from an ancient Christian prayer book and catechism, the *Didache*.

Scholars continue to debate whether the *Didache*, more formally known as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, comes to us from the second or first Christian centuries, but the weight of academic opinion now favors the earlier date. Thus, the *Teaching* ("Didache" in Greek) links us to what biblical scholar Raymond Brown called "the churches the apostles left behind:" the Christians who were taught by those who were taught by the Lord himself. Singing "Father, We Thank Thee, Who Hast Planted," we are praying as second-generation Christians, formed by those who had known the Lord Jesus and were witnesses to his resurrection, prayed.

That should be both a consolation and a challenge as the Church prepares to begin a new liturgical year in this season of Catholic grief and anger. Why? Because the primitive Eucharistic Prayer found in the *Didache*, and the hymn that Father Tucker wrote from it, remind us that the Church is always in need of purification: "Watch o'er Thy Church, O Lord, in mercy/save it from evil, guard it still/Perfect it in Thy Love, unite it/cleansed and conformed unto Thy will."

That the Church needs cleansing is not much in doubt as Advent 2018 dawns. And that cleansing will necessarily involve everyone in the Church. All of us are called to live chastity as the integrity of love. All of us are called to support each other in meeting that lifelong challenge — by prayer, counsel, example, and fraternal correction when necessary. No one should doubt that, in this matter of the integrity of love, living "cleansed and conformed" to the divine will can be difficult, especially in today's cultural circumstances. That is all the more reason for intensified prayer

and penance in Advent and throughout the Church year, asking the Lord to watch over his Church in mercy, saving it from evil and guarding it from the Evil One.

Reaching too easily for “Satan” as the explanation of a Church crisis or a historical disaster should be avoided. Ignoring Satan is just as dangerous, however. And the Evil One is surely a factor in sowing the evil with which the Catholic Church is contending today. Sexual predation has as many causes as there are sexual predators, but each act of sexual abuse is a manifestation of evil and of a victory for the Evil One. Malfeasance among bishops — whether it be rooted in cowardice, a false notion of the imperatives of institutional maintenance, or personal corruption — is not just a matter of managerial mistakes; the failures of the shepherds touch the *mysterium iniquitatis*, the “mystery of evil,” and that should be recognized at every level of the Church’s life. The people who wrote the *Didache* knew that, it seems. So should we.

At the end of one liturgical year and the beginning of a new year of grace, the Church reads from the apocalyptic literature of the Old and New Testaments. Whether the seer is Daniel in Babylon or John on Patmos, the message is similar: do not flee from difficult, even horrific, situations, but live responsibly even when things seem to fall apart — perhaps *especially* in those moments when the foundations seem to be crumbling. Here, too, is a lesson for this season, in which so many Catholics are saying, “I have to *do* something.”

That’s true; we all do. We must all intensify prayer and penance. We should all be inviting to church those who have left out of boredom, anger, confusion, or disgust. We should all support the good priests and bishops we know, and we should firmly call clergy who are wayward to a change of heart and a change of life. It may seem as if Jesus is asleep in the storm-tossed boat, and we should call to him for help. But he also expects us to do something, and “something” will always be close at hand.