

Frederick County Red Mass of the Holy Spirit

We Do It Because We Are Catholic

Years ago, when I assisted Cardinal Hickey, then the Archbishop of Washington, he was asked many times why he tried so hard to keep the inner-city schools open, since most of the students who attended these schools weren't Catholic. (It's a question with which I am also familiar)!

His answer was this: "We don't keep them open because the students are Catholic but because we are Catholic." I don't know if Cardinal Hickey invented that phrase or not but it was very much associated with his ministry, especially his emphasis on caring for the poor and educating the young. "We don't do it because they're Catholic, but because we are."

When I first heard his reply, I thought it was a nice catch phrase. Now, with a few more miles on my odometer, I realize it was much more. It has to do with the witness we are called to give as Catholics and the witness are Catholic institutions of education and service are called to give to Christ, and to the Gospel, and to the Church. This morning, with the help of the Holy Spirit, let us unpack the phrase, "...because we're Catholic!" What is distinctive about our lives, including our professional lives, and what is distinctive about our church institutions of service and charity, "...because we're Catholic?"

The Light of Scripture

In his beautiful exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel," Pope Francis has urged every one of us to be followers of Christ and witnesses to Jesus Christ in our daily work. "In all the baptized," he writes, "from the first to the last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelization." Because of the presence of the Holy Spirit given to us in Baptism & Confirmation, we have in our hearts, even if we don't avert to it or tap into it, an affinity for what the Lord taught us and did for us, all of which is communicated to us in and through the Church. Indeed, Jesus prayed for us to his heavenly Father: "Consecrate them in the truth." Through the Holy Spirit we are called not only to possess information about Jesus - about what he said

and what he did – no, we’re called to encounter Christ, to know him personally, and to enter into his eternal relationship of love with his Father in heaven.

Once we do so, we begin to share in Jesus mission to bear witness to the truth. St. Paul takes this up in our second reading taken from his letter to the Romans. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ by which we are saved is not automatic. It is not simply in the air we breathe or the food we eat. For us to come to the point of truly believing, we need witnesses. And for those around us to come in from the cold of unbelief and from living as if God did not really exist, they need us to be the witnesses, those who bring good news of salvation, both by what we say and how we conduct our personal and professional lives. To use Pope Francis’ terminology, we are called to be “missionary disciples”.

And once the light and joy of the Gospel take root in our own lives, then its radiance shines through us onto those around us & onto the culture at large. The prophet Isaiah this morning tells us: “Rise up in splendor...your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you!” And further, “nations shall walk by your light, & kings by your shining radiance.” The radiance, the glory, of which the prophet speaks, is not earthly sparkle but rather it is the radiance the saints who opened their hearts to Christ and allowed his love and his teaching to shape their every decision. In a word, they lived the commandments in the spirit of the Beatitudes.

Our Professional Lives

All this brings into focus the phrase, “...because we are Catholic.” Being Catholic has nothing to do with being smug (as if to say, we do good things because we’re better than others).... No, it has to do with our being missionary disciples... with being men and women of daily prayer, whose inner selves are nurtured each Sunday by the Eucharist and regularly by the reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Each morning, when we leave the house to go to work (or to school), we have the conviction that Christ loves us, that he died to save us, and that he will walk with us through the challenges of the day, and that his Holy Spirit will give us the integrity to do what is right, and the wisdom that to see what is truly coherent, good, true, and beautiful, whether in the complexities of the law or in the complexities of our personal lives.

Such a witness does not go unnoticed. Not everyone likes it and some may actively oppose or ridicule it. But I assure you, many people in the world are looking for something more than a deadening routine or the empty pleasures our culture so often offers. When we leave the house each morning, aware that Christ is walking with us, despite our weakness, we should ask for the grace to be his witnesses... to lead someone closer to him and closer to the faith by the example of our lives.

Our Institutions

It is also the case that our witness as individual Christians must be reflected in the Church's schools and institutions of charity and service. These institutions must not simply be private alternatives to public schools and government run social services but rather must also have the distinctive character of the Gospel. Our schools, charities, and health care institutions serve all people – people who are Catholic and those who belong to other faiths & none – but these institutions, very much like our individual lives, must have a faith-core, which animates everything that these institutions do and the way they are done. In other words, because our institutions are Catholic, they should be distinctive.

From time to time, Pope Francis has warned that the church's institutions of service must not become merely "NGO's" – non-governmental organizations – that is to say, mere private sector extensions of government services. He calls for all church institutions to be renewed so as to bear witness to the Gospel. When you step into a school or a charities operation that is run by the Church, you have to sense immediately – something is different here! There is respect for human life, especially for vulnerable human life. There is love which comes not from just doing a job but from embracing a mission. And there are people of faith who drive that mission day in and day out.

In defending religious liberty against intrusive government policies, the Church is not looking for special treatment nor is it trying to evade legitimate standards of education and healthcare – most all our institutions exceed those standards. No, we are seeking to protect the ability of these institutions to bear witness to the faith upon which they were founded by serving generously the needs of all and the common good of society.

Conclusion

During this Red Mass, let us call upon the Holy Spirit so that both as individual disciples and as the Body of Christ, we may have the wisdom, the love, and the virtues that we need to bear witness to Christ in our daily work. May it be said of us – they do these things not because the people they serve are Catholic, but because they are Catholic!

May God bless us and keep us always in His love.