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Third Sunday of Easter (B)
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Every week when I prepare my Sunday homily, I go through a laundry list of resources for ideas, one of which is a podcast put out by Bishop Robert Barron and Word on Fire Catholic Ministries. Bishop Barron makes a point this week which I am going to steal. He tells the story of the former British Prime Minister, David Cameron, who gave an Easter address where he said, “The message of Easter is kindness, compassion, hard work, and responsibility.”— Kindness, compassion, hard work, and responsibility.

These are noble ideas, but the ‘message of Easter’ (?), I think not. Don’t get me wrong, these are good things, but there isn’t anything particularly Christian about any of them. There really isn’t anything that distinguishes Christian ‘kindness’ from the sort of kindness we could expect from a Buddhist, for example.

You know, there’s that old saying: you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar. I had someone recently tell me that we would probably see more converts to Catholicism if we tried to not look as “strange” to the world. You know, if we had more bare-bones church services, with simple music, and not all this ceremonial—more like Baptists or what we would get on television from someone like Joel Osteen.

Here’s the thing, the message that is being churned out by those mega churches—Joel Osteen and all of them—that message isn’t Christian. It might be nice—kindness, compassion, hard work, responsibility, but none of those are particularly Christian concepts at all. The purpose of the Church isn’t to build up nicety in society and make everyone feel happy. So, when churches dumb things down, and try to look more commonplace in an attempt to get more people into the pews, they are really missing the point, because the people they are bringing in to fill the pews aren’t coming because they want to really be a Christian—they are coming because what they are hearing is making them feel happy.

When you really think about the Easter story, it’s not at all commonplace. It’s strange. It’s the sort of thing that your neighbors would gossip about if you claimed happened to you or someone in your household. Jesus comes and appears to His disciples, and they thought they were seeing a ghost. Christ had to *prove* to them that He was real flesh and bones. He had to eat in front of them to prove that the food wouldn’t just fall through His ghostly appearance and land on the ground.

Imagine if your next door neighbor came up to you in a fit of excitement and told you that his long-lost grandfather is raised from the dead, came into his house without using the door—but he wasn't a ghost, and he even ate food in front of him right *before(...)* disappearing before his very eyes. And, all the evidence he has to prove it to you is that he saw it *and(...)* that he knows he's telling the truth. What would you say? You'd probably smile, nod, and then close the door and tell your husband or wife that Mr. so-and-so down the street has lost his mind.

But, that is the entire point of the gospel message. *That* exact story is what launched a 2000 year-old institution which we call the Church and which even to this day pulls you out of your bed on Sunday morning and places you in this pew. It's a strange story. It's strange enough that Saint John tells us the apostles were 'terrified'—who wouldn't be? A dead man has come back to life, and is visiting all his old friends for dinner.

Really, if you go into a church and someone tells you the message of Jesus is that we should all be nice and love each other, you need to get up and walk out the door, because while those are good things—they aren't the message of Jesus. And, the more churches try to look like the world, the less they will look like Jesus.

The message of Christ isn't meant to comfort, it is meant to convict. Think about the Bread of Life discourse in Saint John's gospel. Our Lord tells the crowd that He is the Bread that comes down from heaven, and everyone who eats of His flesh will have eternal life. The Greek word He uses here is φάγω (phago)—which simply means 'to eat'. Well, the crowd all hear this and, realizing how absurd it sounds, they say, "*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*"

Now, Jesus has a chance here to backpedal, to simplify the message, make it something the people can stomach. So, what does He say? He says, "*Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you.*" The Greek is a bit harsher. Instead of saying φάγω (phago) as before, this time He says τρώγω (trogo)—which doesn't just mean 'eat'. It means 'gnaw'. It's an animalistic term, like a dog will gnaw on a bone. And, people are pretty weirded out by this. Saint John tells us that most of the people walk away and stopped following Christ after He said this. I asked a faithful Baptist once how they understood this passage and I couldn't get an answer. It's strange. It doesn't sound like worldly, common thought, because it isn't.

Our Lord sees most the crowd wandering off and so He goes up to Saint Peter and puts him on the spot. "*Are you also going to walk away?*" He says. Peter replies, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*"

Being Catholic in Mississippi, we get looked at as pretty weird by other people. I love riding the bus with the football team to games. People are always offering to drive me, but I love riding the bus, because I love when we pull up to a school in some country town that has never seen a Catholic, to be the the first person off that bus, dressed in my black cassock. I get some crazy faces. Sometimes people feel like they have to say something, and so they say something like "say your prayers, Father". But, I suppose that to them, seeing a priest walk

off a school bus when they are expecting a football team is something a little close to a dead man walking into dinner.

We, as Catholics, should be proud of the things that make us different, because those things are the reason we are Catholic. If there weren't 'those things' we would just be any other run of the mill Christian, or sitting at home watching our favorite televangelist, or reading some Confucius writing. But, we're not. We're Catholic, because we believe, like Peter, that the Church has been entrusted with "the words of eternal life".

Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said, "If I were not a Catholic, and were looking for the true Church in the world today, I would look for the one Church which did not get along well with the world; in other words, I would look for the Church which the world hated." That's really the core of it. The Church is meant to save us, not affirm us. That means, the Church is going to try to change us, because we need to change.

So, if you find that there is something about the Church which makes you feel uncomfortable or unsure—the Mass, something in the Catechism, something about how the Church operates, something about our traditions—my encouragement for you is to wrestle with that. Try to figure out why the Church thinks you need to do this, or believe this, or whatever it is. That sense of distress you may get from something in the Church could very well be an opportunity for you to deepen in the faith. It was okay, for example, that the apostles were terrified of the Resurrection—it was a terrifying experience. But, their fear led them to deeper understanding and belief. It led them to a deep enough understanding and belief that they handed the faith on to you, and that says something.

You are the recipient of a 2000 year tradition of Catholicism which means, despite how strange or different your faith may be, there is something about that strangeness that 2000 years of human history found worth preserving. God didn't suddenly enlighten this generation with the knowledge to discern that all this is strange. No. The Church is timeless, and her message of truth is just as impactful now as it was when it was first received in the upper room. Our duty now, the duty of the Church now, is to hand on that same message unchanged and with greater boldness.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

*Given at the Parish Church of Saint Joseph
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