

Crisis in the Church and the virtue of hope

Author: William B. Neenan

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Crisis in the Church and the Virtue of Hope

Synopsis The author explores the constancy of change in the experience of the Church and suggests reasons for hope as the Church enters the twenty-first century.

About the Author **William B. Neenan, SJ** is Vice President and Special Assistant to the president at Boston College. Previously, he served as the university's Academic Vice President, as Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and held the Gasson Chair while teaching Economics. Fr. Neenan's remarks were delivered on the occasion of receiving the *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* award.

I am honored to accept the Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam Award on behalf of the hundreds of Jesuits who have served at the great educational institutions of the New England Province that stretch from Maine to the far reaches of southern Connecticut. On behalf of these Jesuits, past and present, thank you. And to all of you here tonight I thank you on behalf of these fellow Jesuits for your marvelous generosity.

I am reminded of a story—A woman driving from Fairfield, taking back roads to Holy Cross, shot over the crest of a hill to come upon a state trooper in his cruiser,—gumball flashes and siren wails. The trooper ambles up to her car flipping open his ticket book—“Mam, I’ve been waiting for you all morning.” “Oh, I’m sorry, officer, I got here as fast I could.” Since joining the Jesuits over a half century ago I too have been going as fast as I could and I’ve just come over the crest of a hill and I find myself standing in front of all of you here in the Copley Marriott as surprised as that woman.

Much unanticipated happened— to me personally and to our world--over the past half century. But one thing has been constant—my pride in my Jesuit vocation. That is as firm today as it was on that hot and humid August morning in the novitiate chapel at Florissant, Missouri when I professed my first vows in the Society of Jesus. But surprises there have been—many of them. Kneeling in that chapel on vow day I certainly had no inkling that I would ever be teaching economics at the University of Michigan for fourteen years; and certainly no idea that I would be privileged to serve Boston College for twenty-four years. And now I stand here a pundit (Actually I did imagine that I *would* be a pundit. The qualifications for punditry are simple: live long, pause dramatically from time-to- time in conversation and indicate you wish to make three points.)

My three points for this evening are: to identify problems facing our Church, all of which involve change—either past change or some anticipated or feared change in the future; to offer two examples of how Church life has changed since my Florissant vow day; and finally to propose an authentically Catholic response to change.

First, to problems. The events of the past two years have yielded a litany of concerns including increased alienation of young people from the Church; dissatisfaction with implementation of Vatican II reforms; a decline in the number of priests, brothers and sisters; growing dissatisfaction with CCD programs and closings of parochial schools; the perceived drift of Catholic universities from their traditional roots and a drift toward political correctness; a perception that Church structures are impervious to change; the slow change of the role of women in the Church as a prime example of this; and, on the other hand, a fear that Church discipline, as reflected in teaching and practice, drifts away from tradition and towards a cafeteria approach where the individual's choice is sovereign. All of the items in this abbreviated list reflect, as I noted, fear of change past, underway or imminent. But is fear the appropriate attitude?

I turn to my second point, which begins with a personal reflection on change. I have been a Jesuit for over fifty years and a priest for over forty years. In my era Jesuits continued for a fourth year of theology after their ordination to the priesthood. For me that meant another year at St Mary's in Kansas, the school of theology for Midwest Jesuits. That Christmas, my first as a priest, I was assigned to celebrate the midnight Mass at the parish church in Flush, Kansas some few miles from St. Mary's. I had a very moving experience that evening as a young priest that involved a ceremony of placing the Baby Jesus in a small crèche while the congregation sang all the verse of *Adeste Fideles*.

Between that Christmas Eve forty years ago and this evening much has changed. That Jesuit school of theology at St. Mary's is closed. The Holy Child Chapel is closed. The parish at Flush, Kansas is closed. Now Catholics in that part of Kansas must travel some thirty miles to the nearest church in Wamego, Kansas to attend Christmas midnight Mass or any Mass—because of the declining number of priests in the Kansas City, Kansas Archdiocese.

Here's a second example of change. This year I have been privileged to officiate at eight Boston College weddings—in venues including Los Angeles, Denver, St. Louis, Baltimore and places in between. I enjoy this ministry immensely, especially the Saturday morning of the wedding when I have pancakes in the hotel coffee shop and hang out with younger family members. It is a time when I as a priest get to see people up close on a joyous occasion and people get to see a priest up close with maple syrup on his shirt. June, forty years ago I was one of 120 Jesuits ordained in the United States. This June, 20 Jesuits were ordained. We all have heard such numbers before. But now the impact of this change is close upon us. Very shortly fewer Jesuits will be available to travel coast-to-coast celebrating weddings with graduates of Jesuit institutions, and spending rich, informal time with their families.

What is to be done? How do we Catholics deal with the major changes facing our Church? There are two questions here: First, what actions should be taken in response to the challenges facing the Church in the 21st Century? Second, as we Catholics watch events unfold, what should be the attitude of a believing and concerned Catholic?

I have opinions, many of them strong opinions, on what the Church should be doing to address its challenges, as I am certain all of you do. But I do not intend to offer these opinions tonight. But what I do want to do is outline the appropriate response—my third point—of a believing American Catholic in the face of uncertainty and a bit fearful for the future.

We should, first, take heart from our predecessors. We are not the first Catholics in the past two thousand years to face a future freighted with fear. Cardinal Newman is helpful here. “In a higher world it is otherwise,” he wrote, “but here below to live is to change; and to be perfect is to have changed often.” Cardinal Newman wrote a century and a half ago when the Church was buffeted on all sides and fear for the very future of the Church was rampant.

Is there an authentically Catholic response to change? I believe there is and it is found in the great Catholic virtue of hope.

In the liturgy just before communion, the Church gives us this prayer: “...protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior Jesus Christ.” “Protect us from all anxiety as we wait in joyful hope.” Hope is what the Catholic community needs at the beginning of the 21st century. I say it is the distinctive Catholic virtue because it is the virtue of those who believe that the Holy Spirit sent by the Risen Lord, works in and through history. It is through the events of history that Jesus’ promise “to be with us all days even unto the end of the world” is fulfilled. I do not know how the challenges the Church faces today will be resolved—no more than St. Paul knew that his understanding regarding slavery was inconsistent with the Gospel of Christ and would be reversed nineteen centuries later; no more than centuries of theologians knew that developing economic circumstances would lead the Church to reverse its ban on usury, the taking of interest on loans, which in turn has allowed the creation of the modern financial services industry; no more than Popes Pius IX and Leo XIII, fearful over their loss of temporal power, knew that it was precisely this loss that would enable Pope John Paul II to be free to stand today as the sole world prophetic voice.

The commitment of Jesuits to education since the time of Ignatius Loyola is rooted in a sense of history and grounded in the virtue of hope. The apostolate of educating young men and women is future-oriented—results are not instantaneous and are often realized only years later. The great Jesuit educational institutions of the New England Province have become such powerful instruments of the Kingdom of God only after many decades due to the efforts of thousands of men and women, lay and Jesuit, who have held an abiding sense of hope that the future can be made better than the present by an intelligent and faith-filled commitment to the work. This evening as I once again thank you for the honor I receive on behalf of these multiple individuals I am

confident in my hope that decades hence these institutions will continue to be recognized, as they are today, by their Jesuit motto *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*.

Let me close with a prayer. Father, your Son once gathered with a small group of his closest friends in circumstances of great fear—in fact it was a Last Supper. Your Son in solemn and measured voice took some bread and said this is my body which in a short time is to be broken. And he then blessed a glass of wine and said this is my blood which in a few short hours will be poured out in love. And when you gather next year in Jerusalem or Rome—when you gather a thousand years from now in Chartres or two thousand years from now in the South End, Worcester, in Fairfield, in Chestnut Hill—you should remember what I am doing this evening—and as you remember you should know that I am with you always—fear not—be filled with hope. Amen.