

Traveling Companion: What is becoming of our Church?

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Today, June 14th 2000, I celebrate thirty years as a priest, a gift of my life and gifts to God and to the people of Mississippi. It is a milestone, a threshold, a time to stand back and take a deeper look at what is becoming of our Church.

Some may be challenged by my reflections. Some may be saddened. Some may be angry. Some may find them too painful. Some may be heartened by them and their honesty. Some may want them to go away as well as me. Some may question my authority to raise such questions and some may not even bother to care. So why do I share such reflections. Simple! I care! I have invested thirty years and I will invest some more. I'm not an authority on anything, just a work in progress who loves the Lord's work and Church and cares about the progress of both.

In the morning, I present my body with breakfast nourishment and the newspaper presents my heart with another report of the latest sexual or other scandal in the church. I read it and face the day, knowing I am part of a battered, crisis-ridden, sexual scandal church. Still, I embrace the day, carrying those wounds, wondering if I too, am viewed with suspicion or sympathy; with pointed fingers or parched lips. Somehow, I muster the courage and determination to be a person of "good news" to the people who will pass through my life that day, as they look for healing, hope and peace.

Thirty years ago, filled with youthful enthusiasm, missionary zeal and fresh oiled hands, we hoped to make a difference. We carried a message of hope, peace, love, justice, healing, all wrapped up in "good news" to people. Imbued with the spirit of Vatican II and its promises, we set out for the promised lands to build the Kingdom of God. We still struggle to do it with more realistic expectations; less enthusiasm; greater diocesan demands; increased parishioner expectations; a growing societal apathy; a shrinking support system; an aging fraternity; a stifling bureaucracy and centralization as well as an ever-increasing paranoia.

Marginalized Catholics cross our office thresholds looking for healing from broken marriages, yearning for the Bread of Life and we tell them to fill out some papers. Others, with broken hearts, broken lives, broken faith plead for inclusion, healing, love. Others bring their sexual identity crisis to our doorsteps and we flounder for words that might show a loving Church in action. Still, others expect simple answers to complex questions. Others expect a magician, competent in theology, psychology, administration, financial acumen, fund raising, collaboration, an expert in all issues, ages and life's sub-specialties. Rival camps, conservatives and progressives, traditionalists and Vatican III proponents clamor for our attention, often accusing us of insensitivity, dogmatism, rigidity, pampering, indifference, even heresy. Religious pluralism becomes a pipe dream; official legislation becomes the norm; fear becomes a beacon of panic; dreams become shifting mirages in a wasteland of shattered possibilities; speaking out merits punishment rather than listening ears; paperwork mounts while people pass us by; agendas of the obstinate become suspicious fodder that need sterilization; the thin veil between obedience and control becomes threadbare; the human becomes a functionary; the burden, a curse; working in the trenches often brings more tears than trust; more heartaches, than healings; more burden laying than burden relieving.

Still, the "good news" remains a realistic possibility. Still, the bread we break and the cup of blessing we share, continue to nourish our hungry souls, and our prayer becomes a plea and a possibility; our harvesting, a fruitful endeavor; our life, a question mark to many, including ourselves; the love of parishioners lightening burdened hearts.

Yes! We are all flawed, but redeemed; human but divinely inspired; struggling but hopeful; beaten down but rising again from the ashes of new life; overwhelmed but not defeated; sad but not depressed; discouraged but not overpowered; inadequate but gifted with good news.

So, what is becoming of our Church? What is becoming of us who minister in it? I wish I knew, but, then again, if I did, I wouldn't need faith or trust. I have only one choice!