

MAGNIFICENT SELFLESSNESS

May 23, 2010

Texts – Genesis 11: 1 - 9

John 14: 8 - 17, 25 - 27

These are tough times to talk about celebrating the birth of the Church. The scandal of clergy sexual abuse plagues our sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic Church. Accusations of a cover-up orchestrated at the highest levels of the Vatican regularly appear in the media. Predators masquerading as ministers and priests of the Protestant persuasion add fuel to the fire of anti-religious sentiment which is sweeping our nation.

“The challenge to Christianity in the U.S.,” Newsweek magazine declared last year, “does not come from other religions but rather from a rejection of all forms of organized religion.”¹ Here in Vermont, the fastest growing segment of our population is neither Catholic or Protestant, Jewish or Muslim; it is “None of the Above.” One out of every three of our neighbors self-identifies with that label today; twenty years ago, just one in ten did so.²

I’ve spent forty years devoting myself to the cause of Christ and His Church. Statistics such as these are disheartening, to say the least. I came of age, as many of you did, in a time when Christianity in America was on the upswing. The most damning label which our critics could apply to Mainline Protestantism in those years was to call us “a sleeping giant.” We were suspicious of and, truth to tell, deeply prejudiced against Roman Catholicism. We were also supremely confident that our enlightenment orientation was the way of the future not just here at home but around the world. We were wrong on all counts. So what are we celebrating on this

¹ “The End of Christian America” by John Meacham, Newsweek, April 13, 2009.

² American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS 2008), Summary Report, March 2009, by Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar; Trinity College, Hartford, CT.

Pentecost Sunday, this birthday of the Church?

Nicholas Kristof suggested an answer last month that resonates deeply with me. In a New York Times op ed article he spoke explicitly about the Roman Catholic Church, but his words apply just as clearly to our United Church of Christ and to every organization which calls itself a church. “In my travels around the world,” he says,

“I encounter two Catholic Churches. One is the rigid all-male Vatican hierarchy that seems out of touch To me at least, this church – obsessed with dogma and rules and distracted from social justice – is a modern echo of the Pharisees whom Jesus criticized. Yet there’s another Catholic Church as well, one I admire intensely. This is the grass-roots Catholic Church that does far more good in the world than it ever gets credit for. . . . This is the church of the nuns and priests in (the) Congo, toiling in obscurity to feed and educate children. This is the church of the Brazilian priest (who is) fighting AIDS ... This is the church of the Maryknoll Sisters in Central America and the Cabrini Sisters in Africa. . . . So when you read about the scandals,”

Kristof concludes,

“remember that the Vatican is not the same as the Catholic Church. Ordinary lepers, prostitutes and slum-dwellers may never see a cardinal, but they daily encounter a truly noble Catholic Church in the form of priests, nuns and lay workers toiling to make a difference. . . . (Their) magnificence lies not in their vestments, but in their

selflessness.”³

There are two entities called “the Church,” Kristof says in effect. One is visible, the other invisible. One has a corporate physical body, while the other is a spiritual being embodied here and there in the lives of women and men offering themselves in selfless love. “*Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do,*” Jesus said; “*and greater works than these will he or she do, because I go to the Father.*” [John 14: 12] Pentecost is the fulfillment of that promise. God’s Spirit, poured out like “*tongues of fire,*” distributed and resting not just on one or two special or chosen people but on many, inspiring and renewing them for the works of the Risen Christ. What does that look like today?

One answer will come later this morning, when we show slides and tell stories about our trip to Guatemala last February. Eighteen of us spent a week in the small village of Santa Apolonia, working at Los Hogares Santa Maria de Guadalupe, an orphanage which is home to 87 children. The person who is responsible for that amazing place is a woman named Argèlina Marroquin. We know her simply as Sister Argè. She is one of those that inspires Nicholas Kristof.

A member of the School Sisters of Saint Francis, Argè has spent the last fifteen years of her life pouring herself out for the poor and vulnerable Mayan people of the Guatemalan highlands. Most of our group came home from our trip tired and exhausted after just a week at Los Hogares; Argè spends every day of every week of every year caring for those children. She is a magnificent inspiration, one born on the day of Pentecost, but she does not work alone.

Four other women from the School Sisters of Saint Francis work beside her, as do a number of other men and women from Santa Apolonia. They grow much of their own food. They make almost all of their own clothing, and shoes, and furniture. Money to support their

³ “A Church Mary Can Love” by Nicholas D. Kristof, The New York Times, April 18, 2010.

work comes from all over the world; so do volunteers who offer their time and talents in partnership with them.

Los Hogares has its own water supply and sewage treatment system. It was designed by a young man from Germany who came to spend a month after his high school graduation as a volunteer; he ended up staying for four years. Church groups (both Catholic and Protestant) in Germany and Norway and Great Britain provided the funds to finance the project; youth groups from Canada and the United States provided the labor.

“Whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do,” Jesus said; *“and greater works than these will he or she do, because I go to the Father.”* Eighteen of us were part of that last February, but of course we could not have been so without you and countless others supporting us and providing the funds which made it possible. We left a donation of \$4,000 of your money with Sister Argè so that the work of the Risen Christ could continue.

“Will you be loyal to the Church Universal, as it is the life and work of Christ in the world, supporting it with your time, your talent, and your imagination, as you are able?” That’s the question we were all asked when we became members of this congregation. It is a Pentecost question. Argèlina Marroquin answers it affirmatively every day in Santa Apolonia; so do you and I.

As we gather on this Pentecost Sunday, we do so in partnership with a great “cloud of witnesses” who work selflessly around the world. It is impossible to name all of them. Sister Argè is certainly one of them. So is Father Jean Marie, a priest of the Roman Catholic church in South Kivu, Congo. His is the home parish of our friends, who were forced by the war in the eastern Kivu Provinces of the Congo to flee for their lives fourteen years ago. The carnage continues unabated today. The armed forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are unable to protect their family; the same must be said of the armed peacekeepers of the United Nations

who have been deployed there for five years. Virtually no one is safe.

When our friends want to communicate with their family . . . if there is a letter to be sent or pictures to be shared or money to be gifted . . . Father Jean Marie is the only person they can turn to. He can be trusted, in the words of Nicholas Kristof, because his “magnificence lies not in (his) vestments, but in (his) selflessness.”

Sister Argè and Father Jean Marie are members of the Roman Catholic Church. I have intentionally focused on them today because the attack in our culture on organized religion is focused on that community. By language, custom, liturgy and tradition they are as different from us as different can be, but we are one with them on this Pentecost Sunday as members of the Church Universal, the community of women and men devoted to continuing the life and work of Christ in the world. What a blessing it is to know them. What a privilege it is to witness their magnificent selflessness. Let us recommit ourselves to be their partners wherever Christ leads. Amen.