

# Our Church, Our Future

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## Introduction

During the recent Ken Burns PBS series on our National Parks, it was interesting to note that, in almost every case along the way to setting apart land as community owned treasures of nature, there was battle with entrepreneurial efforts to make personal profit from the attractions. The series portrayed the long and arduous effort to secure protection for those lands. This reminds us that in the path toward good, it's never without struggle.

In the journey toward good, we discover many errors which required correction: in the nation, in the Church, in any long standing institution. The long history of the Church gives us 20/20 hindsight on the Church's story.

## **Taking Our Temperature**

Look over the following words.

When has your experience of the church made you feel

- Proud
- Ashamed
- Hurt
- Healed
- Scared
- Confident

At any given time, if we are paying attention, we can have multiple feelings about the Church.

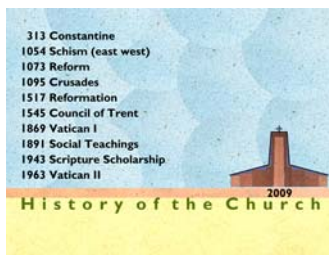
Briefly, I will describe some moments in my membership in the Church.

- I was very proud when Pope Benedict XVI in an unscripted interview on a plane as he traveled to the U.S., spoke pastorally and with compassion about the victims of the clerical sexual abuse.
- I was ashamed of the lack of leadership of bishops when they engaged in cover-up of the abuse.

- I was and have been repeatedly hurt by the Church's disregard of the competence and experience of women.
- I have been healed by the persistent hope of those who both love the Church and call it to its full potential.
- I am scared and angry at this time because of the Church's investigation of sisters in religious orders in the United States, to the exclusion of any similar investigation of brothers, priests, cloistered sisters, or bishops.
- I am confident that, in time, the Church will reform the practices that have hurt the faithful.

### **Claiming our Story**

Looking at our history convinces us that abuses have been corrected and reforms eventually found their way into our identity as Roman Catholics. If we don't know where we've been, we won't know where we should go.



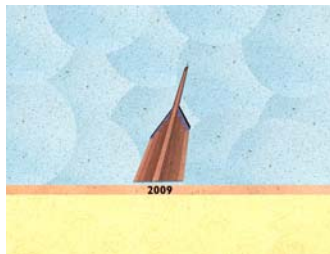
Our history shows us how we have become what we are today. A few major developments stand out:

- 313 Constantine incorporates the Church into the empire for the purposes of uniformity and control. Outcome: it was mainstream and profitable to be a Christian. -
- 1054 Theological and institutional conflict with the eastern churches separates the “orthodox” Catholics from Rome. -
- 1073 Pope Gregory VII extricates the Church from the politics of the empire. (Up to that time, Bishops appointed emperors and emperors assigned bishops.) This led to parallel hierarchical governments of church and state. +
- 1095 – 1291 The Crusades -
- 1517 The Protestant Reformation-
- 1545 The Council of Trent defends the Church's teaching - / +

- 1869 Vatican Council I defends the Church against modernism, evolutionism, rationalism, etc. - / +
- 1891 Pope Leo XIII launches the church's social teachings for justice. +
- 1943 Pope Pius XII approves modern Scripture scholarship. +
- 1963 Vatican Council II recasts the church as the People of God situated in the modern world. +

Even in this cursory list, one can see that the Church is always in process, always studying, always reforming, and it still is. We, however, rarely can see the long view. It's only in hindsight that we can say with certainty what was a mistake and what brought lasting life.

We have found a parish that brings forth the best in us, one that invites us into ministry, one that respects individual differences, one that is engaged in critical study. In this comfortable space, it is easy to lose sight of the big picture, both our past and our future.



How do we keep ourselves conscious of some of the best the Church has to offer? How do we cherish the very things that have helped the Church enter into its own ongoing reforms? How can we remain mindful of these gifts as we live into a preferred future? How do we keep hope alive, knowing that we may not survive to see the reforms that we are trying to live here and now? What are the causes for hope, the treasures in our tradition, which will surely lead us to truth and renewal?

### **Some Causes for Hope**

- Our history of naming, confronting, and correcting errors and abuses points with certainty to the reality that reform will be ongoing. We've all heard that incomplete quote, "My country right or wrong," to which GK Chesterton said, " 'My country, right or

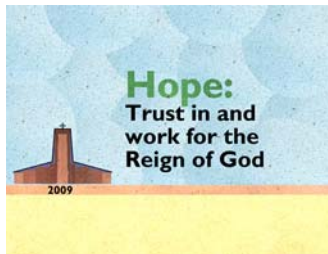
wrong,' is a thing that no patriot would think of saying except in a desperate case. It is like saying, 'My mother, drunk or sober.' " The full quote, attributed to Senator Carl Schurz in 1872 was, "My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right."

We are not loyal to the church when we stubbornly defend its every move without knowing the background or seeing its errors. So, to paraphrase Carl Schurz, may we say, "My Church, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong to be set right." Ongoing study and conversion bend the arc of history toward the Christian community inaugurated by the Gospel.

- Sacramentality in our tradition has taught us that God's revelation is ongoing and that we are called to expect to see God at work in every aspect of our lives. It is like a corrective lens through which we find clarity. ***Believing is seeing!*** There is no separation between the holy and the secular. We bring our belief into what we see. This means that the Word of God is not limited to the Bible, that this created world of flesh, blood, and nature is where we meet God and celebrate God's presence. The issue of ecology, for example, is a natural application of sacramentality. Science has revealed God's presence in nature. Consequently, our tradition does not make categorical judgments which foreclose on God's activity *and* it expects to learn more about God in everyday events. We practice our sacramentality every time our ritual (word, gesture, wine, bread, oil, incense, art, music , etc.) draws us into an experience of God.
- Sense of the Faithful is the Church's acknowledgment that within the believing community, God's Spirit is at work, wisdom resides, and progress in church teaching often takes root in the community *before* it is ever officially taught by the Church. One example might be that the community of the faithful has long ago resolved a

conscience issue (like contraception) – even though formal teaching has not articulated it.

### **A Future to Believe In**



When we look to our future, we need to bring forward all the treasures of the past, the wisdom we have accrued, mistakes from which we have learned humility, and the confidence that our tradition is rich, our rituals are profound, and we have the tools for renewal.

Some coping mechanisms:

1. Love your enemies; pray for those who persecute you.
2. Study. Think critically. Don't keep comfortable in ignorance or sit pat with half truths.
3. Be patient. Take the long view of history. When you've lived through some bad times and some good times, you learn to realize that God's Spirit will be victorious.
4. Communicate lovingly. Write respectful and caring letters to Church leaders; "speak the truth in love." (Ephesians 4:15)

5. Overcome the NIMBY (not in my back yard) syndrome which simply says, "I'm happy here; I hope my children will be so lucky."
6. Use non-violent language and actions.  
The means are the ends in embryo. If rancor is in the means we use; rancor will be the end.
7. Join coalitions, advocacy and action groups.
8. Do not worry about the mega-churches. Comparisons will burden us.
9. Love the Church into new life.

What can you do?

**You must be the change you wish to see in the world.**

Mohandas Gandhi

***Write the vision; make it plain on tablets,***

***so that a runner may read it.***

***For there is still a vision for the appointed time;***

***it speaks of the end and does not lie.***

***If it seems to tarry, wait for it. It will surely come.***

Habakkuk 2:2