

## Staying the Course IV

It is not enough to get the forms, the basics of devotion right; making a reverent, prayerful and holy Sign of the Cross, or having the sacramentals at home and on our person. We must get the doctrine of the Church right, if we want to keep our Mass and the Tradition.

The seminary that I attended in Maryland used the historical-critical method of understanding sacred scripture. This method rejected the existence of angels in any real sense – one professor called them theological constructs – real only as a notion or a proposition. So if you accepted that nonsense, then what do you do as a priest when the feast day of the Guardian Angels comes round? How would you preach about it if you believed that the whole thing was make-believe?

The answer is: you would not celebrate their feast in any real way. You certainly would not pray to the angels for help. Forty-two of us were ordained in the class of 1985 from Mt. St. Mary's. Twenty-one left the priesthood in less than ten years. Actually, given the formation we received, it's a wonder that any of us stayed in the priesthood. The studies we took undermined our belief in the inerrancy of scripture, and if you cannot believe in public revelation, your life as a priest would necessarily be a charade, if not a scandal. In short, seminary formation in the 70's and 80's undermined the formation of seminarians.

Thus the crisis of the Church has everything to do with doctrine. That's a Latin word by the way, *doctrina*: it means "teaching." But how can you get scripture right? Few of the laity are able to read Latin, or the koine Greek of the New Testament. Few are able to study the Fathers or Doctors of the Church. There is a solution to this.

In the middle of the 16c our best council was convened. I say the best, not the greatest, because I suppose our greatest council was Nicea. But the best was held in Trent, in northern Italy. We call it the Council of Trent. Now imagine trying to grasp the extent of a mountain range while standing on the highest peak with thick cloud cover in every direction. You see only certain peaks jutting up here and there. To judge the range correctly, you need to see what is underneath the clouds. So to understand the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent, you need to grasp the framework within which the bishops there were working. The enormous though invisible figure presiding at Trent who gave that framework was the Universal Doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas.

Pope Leo XIII had this to say about his role: “One might almost say that Thomas took part and presided over the deliberations and decrees of the Fathers, contending against the errors of the Greeks, of heretics and rationalists, with invisible force and with the happiest results.” The pope pointed out in his encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, that there were three books laid on an altar before which the proceedings of the council took place. They were the Bible, the *Decretals* (from which we now have the Code of Canon Law), and the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas.

Now this does not mean that the fathers of the council thought that Canon Law or the *Summa* were equivalent in authority to Scripture, or that they were to be blindly received as infallible commentary on Scripture. But it does indicate how much respect the bishops of our best council had for the *Summa* as summarizing the Church’s organic tradition through which Scripture was to be understood.

So back to the pitfalls of the historical-critical method – how do we avoid them? Is it necessary to study in depth the works of the Fathers and the Doctors? Yes, this is necessary, but not for the laity, who often neither have the time or the tools – such as Greek and Latin – to do so. But something quite remarkable came out of the Council of Trent, and it was the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, or the *Roman Catechism*, published in 1566.

When you read it, you are receiving the Scriptures, and the commentaries of Church law from antiquity and our best commentary of all on Scripture, which is the *Summa* of St. Thomas. The catechism is a condensed version if you will, of all three. Later on, St. Robert Bellarmine saw the need for something even more concise, along with some additions to better address errors which had cropped up, so he published the *Small Catechism* in 1614.

From this work another catechism was published in our country in 1885, and was called *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine, Prepared and Enjoined by Order of the Third Council of Baltimore*. Americans of course like to shorten things. The French say, *un avion de turboreacteur*, and we say “jet.” So we shortened that long 19c title to *The Baltimore Catechism*. With the Baltimore Catechism, you get the wisdom of Trent, Aquinas, Bellarmine and many others in a concise question and answer form.

Again, getting the forms right is primary, but secondary is getting the doctrine right, and we can trust the Catechism to help us. If you do not know your *Baltimore Catechism*, coupled with the Catechism of the Catholic Church to update it, then you are in bad shape for the ascent to the union with God. You will get stuck.

Consider this example. A Dominican priest, Pere Valee, was teaching at various Carmelite convents various aspects of sacred doctrine, especially using St. Thomas and at one point he was teaching at the Carmelite monastery in Dijon, France. This may seem odd, because we wonder why contemplative nuns need to study doctrine. But for prayer to be fruitful, and free, we must have good, solid doctrine. When we misunderstand what God gives us, this prevents God if you will, from being able to fully achieve all He wants to accomplish inside us. Assent to right doctrine sets God free so to speak, to do His work.

Sacred, orthodox doctrine is most necessary, since Christian, contemplative prayer goes through the Cross. There is no other pathway for union with God. The death of Christ opened this pathway for us. His sacred wounds radiate the presence of God. But you cannot receive the grace of those wounds unless they are *in* Christ. No one else has them. This teaching then, or doctrine, unlocks deep prayer. So the Catechism is far more than just prep for 1st communion. Christ has two natures, but He is one person. And He is one with God. And His passion and death are the only way to God. There is no growth in the interior life unless that doctrine is understood.

Some think that the Holy Trinity is a mystery, and since it is a mystery, this means we can't figure it out so we throw up our hands and walk away from it. But it is not a giant puzzle to be figured out. It is not that kind of mystery. It is a mystery like something which is intensely beautiful is a mystery; something that no matter how long you look at it, you will always see something more, something new. It is inexhaustible in this sense. Ludwig von Beethoven was once asked "Who is the greatest musical composer?" and without hesitation he said, "Handel, by all accounts." I don't know how many times I've heard Handel's *Messiah* in concert, but every time I hear it I'm struck by something new, something deep. It is a mystery.

St. John of the Cross wrote a poem once called the *Spiritual Canticle*, which he wrote while he was in prison. After he got out of prison, he wrote a commentary on every strophe. It is about the progress of the interior life, and the necessity of good doctrine for this progress.

Strophe 12 describes a woman looking into a pool. As she looks into the pool, the water reflects her face back at her. As she looks deeper and deeper into the pool, past her reflection, she notices standing behind her is an image of the one whom she loves. She recognizes the eyes of the One who loves her in the pool. That pool St. John says is the truths of our faith; the propositions we believe. We believe them not just because they are true; not just because the Church proclaims them as true, but we believe them because they actually carry God with them. So like the deeper reflection, you can see the eyes of God looking at you with love as you grasp the doctrines or propositions of the Faith.

Back to Father Valee who was teaching at the Dijon Carmel, a girl of 17 from that town went to him and confided to him about a parish mission going on – which was all fire and brimstone – and she found herself troubled by it all. And Father Valee knew that good doctrine helps you see God, but bad doctrine blinds you to Him.

The bad doctrine she was getting at the mission was what we now call Jansenism. In this doctrine you approach God only through fear. But there is a difference between the fear of the Lord and being afraid of God. Being afraid of Him is thinking that because you made a mistake, He is going to do something to you; something bad. And so your spiritual life, your life of prayer, is one of anxiety and worry. He is not waiting in joy to receive you; He is waiting to pounce on you and punish you terribly. This false notion robs the soul of the peace and rest that should normally come from prayer. We are supposed to rest in the Sacred Heart. "Come to me all you who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." our Lord says.

The young girl was assured by the good Dominican, and learned that she should not be on pins and needles with Someone that loved and cared for her. Thus the girl grew up to be St. Elizabeth of the Trinity.