

Father Fred's Homily
21st Sun. Ord. Time "C"
August 26, 2007

"A pastoral response to the controversy sparked by the statement of the
Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued on July 10, 2007"

(Reconstructed from an outline form into a text)

Today's Gospel line asking Jesus, "Will few people be saved?" reminds me of the old joke about the man who died and went to heaven and was getting a tour of heaven by St. Peter. The man was escorted to every place in heaven to see groups of people laughing and enjoying the wonders of their eternal reward. Everywhere they walked people were having such a great time. They came to a giant room with a gold door and St. Peter invited the new arrival to very quietly open the door and take a peek. He was told to make no noise and close the door quietly after gazing in. What he saw was more of the same: people laughing and enjoying their eternal reward. He inquired of St. Peter as to why the door and all the secrecy. St. Peter said with a grin, "Those are the Catholics and we don't want to upset them. They think they are the only ones up here."

Actually that punch line could be substituted for the Baptists, the Lutherans or just about any denomination. To me, the most obvious non-Catholic in heaven is my grandmother Parke who was a life long Methodist. She was a very spiritual person who wrote beautiful poems of faith almost right up to her death at age 93.

Now back to my joke: recently, at the direction of our Holy Father Pope Benedict, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a statement on the nature of the church which got lots of negative attention in both the national press, like the NY Times as well as the local press. There were inferences that since the Catholic Church was the only true church that all non-Catholics would never make it to heaven and that the Pope was out to put an end to Ecumenism and the like. Because of that, I decided that I would dedicate this month's Pastor's Preaching Sunday to this important topic.

In the first place, let us define Ecumenism: it is not the merging of denominations as much as it is the working together of the various religious groups to achieve the Lord's work in this world. More importantly, I feel that if by now you believe everything you hear or read about the Catholic Church from the secular media –“hook, line and sinker” you qualify in my book as a “parakeet head”. That is nicer way of saying “bird-brain” but if the shoe fits...or should I say the hat fits.....

When I was in college I first studied journalism. Journalism over the last fifty years has taken a decided downward move. The media used to report just the events as they happened. Over the years, editorial boards and media heads have adopted a mindset which now shades their reporting. It is agenda-driven adaptation of events to fit the politics of the owners. Most of the media, probably ninety five percent, is very liberal or left leaning, the other would be conservative. In either situation, the news is filtered through those agendas. I have often said, even in the middle of the pedophile scandals, if we as a church had approved of divorce, abortion, gay marriage and a few others, the media would have left us alone. Why? Because those are goals and objectives of the media. , (among others). We stand in the way as the largest Christian denomination in the United States, not mention in the world, of those fundamental media goals. If you believe everything you see or read about any topic through the secular media, let alone about the Catholic Church, you fall into that feathery category I already mentioned. In the cinema we don't fare much better. That last time you saw the clergy depicted in a positive light was “Going My Way” with Bing Crosby and most of you never heard of Bing Crosby!

The Congregation did not say what has been widely reported or implied in the media. What was said was not new. It has been stated in the documents of Vatican II. What was said was that the Catholic Church is the one true Church established by Christ. That was not a put-down of other faiths nor is it a new statement. It is simply an expression of reality about our identity as a Church. A quick look at history would bear it out. Our church was founded by Our Blessed Lord somewhere between 30 and 33 AD, depending on how one dates the actual calendar. Jesus said “You are Peter and on this Rock I will build my church.” No other denomination was mentioned. He did not found the Lutherans, that was Martin Luther in 1517. He did not found the Anglican/Episcopal, that was King Henry VIII in 1535. He did not found the Presbyterians, that was John Calvin in 1560 or the

Baptists, that was John Smythe in 1609 or the Methodists, that was John and Charles Wesley in 1729

He did not found the Mormons, that was Joseph Smith in 1830. Today there are between thirty five and thirty eight THOUSAND Christian “religions” – some were founded this past week. Some fellow gets a notion in his head to start one; he gets a storefront and – poof – another one on the list!

The Congregation mentioned that the fullness of Christianity subsists within the Catholic Church BUT “elements of truth and salvation are present in non-Catholic ecclesial communities.” (I guess that means my Methodist Grandmother can keep her place in heaven after all!) That part was not mentioned in the coverage I saw – not to my surprise. The fullness of the Christian experience is found in its original form, but others have various intensities of that experience. An interesting parallel: the priest hood even has “intensities”. Guess what? I am not in the fullness of priesthood! I have a greater intensity than a deacon, but I can not minister all the sacraments. Only the Bishop has the fullness of priesthood, because he can minister all the sacraments. I can not ordain a man to the priesthood-only the bishop can. It is an interesting parallel.

Regarding the presence of truth and salvation in other churches...we as Catholics recognize Baptism in most Christian communities. That is if there is the mention of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and there is water, be it sprinkled, sprayed, poured or dunked! We also recognize marriage as long as both parties are not Catholic and it the first time for both, we assume it is a Sacrament, even if they don't call it that.

So why the document now? I feel it is addressed to Catholics who are grossly misinformed and think one religion is the same as another. Like the folks who are visiting friends in Ohio and are invited to go with their Lutheran friends on Sunday instead of Mass. “What's the difference? The fellow up front dresses like our priest and it is almost like our Mass.”

Wrong!

Catholics can not substitute a non-Catholic service for Mass. Even worse, I have been told that Catholics will go to communion in those churches. That is wrong and is never permitted; I don't care what the minister says or worse if a Catholic priest said it was OK. You can go with your Protestant friends to church, but you also have to go to Mass that same day.

Let me give you an example: Your cheap pastor goes on a free cruise every year with the Apostleship of the Seas. There are cruise lines who will never sail without a Catholic Priest on board because Catholics want daily and Sunday Mass. We priests minister to the passengers and crew and get a beautiful free room and all the benefits of the passengers. The ship I was on last year had a priest-only cabin, just like the passengers, except the closet had a full set of beautiful vestments, chalices, altar books, a priest's log – even a computer on the desk. One Sunday the cruise director said that a number of Protestants asked for an ecumenical service and I am the chaplain. So, what I did was follow the first part of our missalette, the readings, same sermon I give to the Catholics, followed by prayers of the faithful, the Our Father, closing prayer and “thank you for sailing with us, have a nice Sunday.” That was easy. I had never done it before, but all went well. After my service, a Protestant Minister and his wife introduced themselves. He asked me pointedly why he could not be the ship's chaplain and get a free ride with his wife. I told him he would have to take that up with the cruise line. Of course the short answer (which I didn't say) was “I can do what you do, but you can't do what I do.” And why is that?

Because the fellow who laid his hands upon me at ordination, Bishop David F. Cunningham, Lord rest him, could trace his Holy Orders and the imposition of hands back to one of the original Apostles. With all due respect to that minister, he does not have Holy Orders. You could dress him up in the vestments, give the book to him and have him read it cover to cover, but you won't have Eucharist. True, he is a fellow worker for the Lord and can lead others to Christ but he can not do what I can do because that direct connection is not there. It is sad that so many have broken away but that reality can not be ignored. It is like this: Grandma Parke, in addition to being a spiritual person, was a great baker.

We still have her recipe for apple pie. You had to make the crust from scratch and all that. I have it written down. Let's say somebody decided to bake Grandma Parke's apple pie –only they don't like apples, so will make it with bananas. “Oh, and instead of white sugar, I think I will use brown sugar”.

When you are finished, you can call it Grandma Parke's apple pie but it is not. Call it what you like, but if you add or subtract to fit you own liking you have YOUR version of apple pie-bananas and all!

We Catholics are the original Christians. That is not to say that the thirty five or thirty eight thousand other sects will not lead to salvation. I

once had a nun in school who said that people of other faiths can make it to heaven, but we Catholics have no excuse for not making it to heaven, because we have the Sacraments to guide us along our pilgrim way. Founded by Christ, we are the religion of the apostles, Peter, James and John and Paul. We are the church of St. Ignatius of Antioch (AD 69), St. Clement of Alexandria (AD 150), St. Irenaeus (AD 178), Cyprian (248). We are the church of the Council of Nicea in 325. (Guess what? That gave us the Creed we will say in this Mass in a while!) We are the faith of St. Jerome in 342 and St. Nicholas. And Augustine in 354. We are the church of the Council of Hippo in 393 which formulated the list of the New Testament. Many people think the NT fell out of the sky like it is. It is the Church which gave it to us. We are the church of the Council of Ephesus in 431 We are the church of St. Patrick (432), St. Benedict 529, St. Gregory the Great in 596, St. Cyril and Methodius in 862, St. Thomas Becket in 1162. We are the church of St. Francis of Assisi in 1182 and of St. Clare in 1212 and St. Dominick in 1216 and St. Anthony of Padua in 1231 and St. Thomas Aquinas in 1265 and St. Bonaventure in 1274. We are the faith of St. Catherine of Sienna in 1347 and St. Joan of Arc in 1412 and Ignatius of Loyola in 1534 and St. Francis Xavier in 1551 and St. Charles Borromeo in 1578 and St. Rose of Lima in 1617 and St. Vincent DePaul in 1620. We are the church of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton of this nation in 1821 and St. Therese of Lisieux in 1897. And in the last century of Fulton Sheen and Dorothy Day and Mother Theresa of Calcutta and John the XXIII and John Paul II.

A church founded by Christ. We are the only faith which worships its founder. Even the Buddhists do not worship Buda or the Islamists do not worship Mohammed. We are a church founded over two thousand years ago – both Holy and human. It is made up of saints and sinners, but its soul is the Holy Spirit and it will be around long after the thirty five or thirty eight thousand other sects have long disappeared. The one Church is indeed unique – not because Pope Benedict said so or the sacred congregation for the Faith said so or Vatican II said so, but because its founder, Jesus, said that the gates of hell – though they are powerful and at times we will wonder who is winning – will NOT prevail against it.

(Dates of Saints are various: birth, life-events or death)