

Church and Community... A Prophecy

By BISHOP FULTON J. SHEEN



(Bishop Sheen, preaching last Sunday at the centennial ceremonies of St. Patrick's Church in Prattsburg, discussed the relationship of a parish to its community and the use of church property for neighborhood welfare.)

Age is a very touchy subject. It is considered impolite even to ask a person's age. Children like to seem older—hence they will say, "I am 5½ years old" as if impatient for the maturity of six. Later on in life, age is hidden or limited to 39, except when one is very old, such as 91. Then age becomes a subject of boasting.

What then shall we say of a parish like Prattsburg which is 100 years old? Is it old or is it young? Shall we compare it to an old woman or to a bride? It is both.

It is an old woman because of its relation to the past.

Suppose now that you could have lived at the end of the first century, say about the year 90 A.D., only 80 years after the Resurrection and twenty three years after the martyrdom of Peter and Paul. What would you have called the Church in her infancy? A

Baby? Well, one of the brilliant writers of these times, Erasmus, writing in Rome described the Church as a "venerable old lady." He asked an elderly man, "Why is the Church so elderly?" The angel answered: "She was created the first of all things. For this reason she is an old woman. And for her sake was the world established."

But the Church is also a Bride—not a Bride at the altar, but a future Bride, one in the engagement stage—fair, young, beautiful and promising. Who is the Bridegroom?

It is Christ. John called himself the friend of the Bridegroom, and our Lord called Himself the Bridegroom. When will the nuptials take place? At the end of time, "Come and I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."

This parish, because it is the Church, is both old and young: it dreams dreams of the past like the old and sees visions of the future like the young; it is tied to the elect people of the Old Testament and has a memory stretching from Adam to Paul VI; but it is also romantically young,

waiting like the bride for the day of espousals with the King of Kings.

The Church in the World
If you broke a large mirror into a thousand pieces, each piece would still reflect the light. So the Church is also divided into parishes each of which reflects, or is a miniature of, what the Church is to the world. A beautiful summary of the Church is given by the Vatican Council.

"Sacramentum Salutis Totius Mundi—The Church is sign of salvation to the world." The Church is not the exclusive society of those who are saved, but the visible sign of salvation to everyone in the world, even though they may not know it. An infant does not know all the benefits of the sun, nor its origin, nor the fissures of its atoms, but he lives by its light and heat.

So it is with the Church, the continuation of the redemptive life of Christ, though not all are conscious of its redemptive truth and love, and the proclamation and the promise of salvation to the world.

In a plague, some may refuse the antidote which would bring healing, but the laboratory remains there—as the sign of health.

The promise of Christ is not that the whole world will accept the sign of salvation, for there must always be wolves among sheep. But Christ will still be the visible, historical and audible "yes" of consent which is spoken even in the midst of the howling "no" of some in the world. This allows us to think hopefully of all men, even those outside the Church, who at present unconsciously or anonymously belong to it.

The Church has a dynamic relation to three groups outside it, namely:

1. To Christian communities;
2. To Missions such as Africa, Asia and other areas yet to be evangelized;
3. Finally, to the secular order in which we live.

The Church in Prattsburg

1. You are related to every Christian and every Christian is related to you. Many of the differences which exist between you are really only lovers' quarrels. As husband and wife quarrel about petty things, but not about their deep love for one another, so the Christian Churches quarrel not about their deep love of Christ and the Bible, but about the understanding of truths and practices which flow from them. We are more one than we know.

2. As the Church universal is related to the missions, so the parish here is related to all who may have no outward sign of faith, or may declare themselves to be unbelievers. But even they are influenced and bettered by the parish which is a sign of their salvation, the visible outreach of God to the world.

Scripture states that a believing wife sanctifies her unbelieving husband, and a believing husband sanctifies his unbelieving wife. If the merit and grace passes from one to the other, shall not the parish sanctify the town, and the town be unconsciously bettered by the parish?

3. Finally, the parish is related to the community, its business, its city government, its sports, its social problems,

Prattsburg Parish Marks 100 Years

Hammondsport—Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, on his first visit to the area, helped celebrate the 100th anniversary of St. Patrick's Church, Prattsburg, last Sunday, June 30.

The prelate offered the centennial Mass at 5 p.m.

St. Patrick's traces its history back to the Irish immigrants

who settled in the rural Steuben County hamlet of Prattsburg in the early 1850s. The land on which the present church building is located on North Main St. was purchased in 1860. The frame building which has undergone many improvements and additions over the years, is the original structure erected for worship in 1868.

its poverty and its prosperity. This relationship is not identification with the secular, for the Church must never be so much one with the secular that the secular cannot see it, nor so far away that the secular world cannot hear it.

The Church is not the Secular City in a Cox-eyed sort of way but the Church is in the Secular City as the soul is in the body, and this in three ways:

- a) by recognizing the intrinsic goodness of society which is struggling to freedom, prosperity and order;
- b) by seeking to relieve poverty, want and crime as Christ did;
- c) by binding her own members into closer unity through the Eucharist, the parish binds prayerfully all citizens into closer fellowship.

Conclusions

There will be many changes in the next hundred years, and there are many changes needed now which are difficult to initiate. In our larger cities I would like to see the Church dispose herself of some of her real property, by giving some church property to the poor for housing. I would also like to see something done to the almost empty Christian churches in an area. (I know of one city ward where there are 17 churches and the total attendance on Sunday is minimal.)

Some of these Churches could be turned into depots for food and clothing, supplied personally by the "haves." Instead of bringing bread and wine to the altar at the offertory, the more affluent people could bring clothing and food for Christ's poor.

Other churches could be turned into dispensaries to which hospitals could supply free medicines and personnel, and where the indigent who cannot afford to be sick would be touched by Christ's healing hand.

Other churches could be converted into cinemas during the week, where, with free science films and entertaining pictures, there would also be shown religious films, thus providing better food for the minds of the young, than that which they gather on the streets.

Property is like hair on the head: No matter how many hairs we have, it hurts to have one pulled out. We soon begin to talk of "mine" and "yours" in relationship to what is really God's for the Church is God's house.

Such social services as we have mentioned, would, except only in rare instances, unfit the church for Sunday worship. The fact that for the first two hundred years the Church was in a house, did not despoil the house for living and dining. In fact, if the poor saw their churches used for their sakes, they might come to understand that they exist for the sake of Christ.

The Church then would be more a sign of salvation to the Inner City than it is now with their colossal bulk—unused for the multiplication of leaves and fishes to feed the hungry.

Some of our schools too, which are almost empty, could be converted into centers for teaching Christian formation, cooking, sewing, homemaking, budgeting, all of which would give self-respect to persons, so precious in the sight of God. The basements of our schools we already offered to unions of the bricklayers, carpenters, masons, electricians and plumbers to teach our unemployed youths how to turn their houses into homes and their rat-runs into human dwellings.

Too often in the need for renewal and change some want merely to change the truth of Christ or else substitute a plastic cross for a Crucifix. Though truth must be adapted to changing circumstances, nevertheless it must never be forgotten that what we need today is not only a Church that is right when the world is right, but also a Church that is right when the world is wrong.

The basic renewal then must rather impinge on our attitude to property and its use. The right we have to anything material is limited by its use. He who has a right to a wine-cellar may not use it as he pleases such as to sell wine to school children to get them in a state of amiable incandescence.

So too, our right to what we have and namely, our mul-

tiplied churches, schools, recortories, must be re-examined in the light of social pressures, ignorance, sickness, crowded tenements, and children who are retarded because of tensions created by quarreling parents.

At no time would a church building used for service of the neighborhood preclude it from being the house of God. The Blessed Sacrament would always be preserved there for we need Christ's eucharistic presence to animate our service and to keep delicate our faith. On Sundays and feast days the churches would be used for divine service whenever necessary. Here the problem is not the nature of these churches but how to use our multiple buildings.

These reflections, born of retrospect on the changes in a hundred years, make us hope that the Church will be the "sign of salvation," spiritual, political, physical and economic to all people.

May the Holy Spirit move among us as we realize that there has been too great a change from the day when there was "no room in the inn" for Christ, to this day when we have too much room.

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AROUND THE WORLD

Merger of Ten Amsterdam Parishes Proposed

Amsterdam, The Netherlands — (NC) — The diocese of Haarlem is studying a plan to merge 10 parishes in central Amsterdam into one unit headed by a layman, and to sell seven church buildings.

A special diocesan committee established last year has sent the proposal to Bishop Theodore Zwartkruis of Haarlem for consideration.

The plan includes the sale of the famous St. Nicolas church. It was suggested that St. Nicolas, which was started in 1300, be used as a museum. Five churches would be used as centers offering special programs to the 21,000 Catholics in the area.

The new consolidated parish would have teams of priests, psychologists, physicians and welfare workers.

Unselfish Cooperation Urged On Uruguayans

Montevideo — (RNS) — The Catholic hierarchy of Uruguay has exhorted all citizens to cooperate "without personal or group selfishness" in a search for rapid, effective solutions to national problems.

Widespread unemployment, poverty and rapidly increasing living costs, have been of increasing concern to Church leaders.

"When we think of the common problems of the Latin American countries," the collective pastoral said, "we see that one of the most serious reasons is the fact that so many people are preoccupied only with their own interest and well-being, to the detriment of the common good."

The letter warned, "we must do everything possible to avoid any uncontrollable acts that would aggravate and not resolve the situation. Let us throw hatred out of our thoughts and our behavior."

U.S. Brother Killed In Nigerian War

Dayton, Ohio — (NC) — Mariarist Brother Roman Wicinski, a native of Cleveland, Ohio, was killed (April 16) during a battle in the Nigerian civil war. The Society of Mary provincialate here was notified by the U.S. State Department.

Brother Roman was killed in a clash between Nigerian federal troops and those of secessionist Biafra at Aaba, where he had been assigned in January of this year to serve as principal of a school the Mariarists are trying to open.

NCC Official to Join Syracuse U. Faculty

Syracuse — (RNS) — Dr. Burton W. Marvin, associate general secretary for communications of the National Council of Churches, will join the faculty of the School of Journalism of Syracuse University.

Dean W. C. Clark of the Syracuse School of Journalism said that in addition to becoming a professor of journalism, it is expected that Dr. Marvin will also direct the school's mental health information training program.

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