

Why Stay Affiliated With A Global Institution?
Intentional Eucharistic Communities Conference (IEC)
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Back in early February I tuned into a conversation between Richard Rohr and Oprah Winfrey in which I think it was Rohr who began by saying “religion is the best thing in the world and the worst.” I think that remark can serve to introduce our topic, “why be Roman Catholic”?

When you push that further it leads to thoughts on the relation between religion and spirituality, spirituality being about one’s personal relationship with God and religion about the formal organization of that religious impulse, the primary example of which for our discussion is the Roman Catholic church. In that regard we typically say that formal religion serves personal spirituality.

What good purpose does the institutionalization of religion serve? Does the size of that institution make any difference? Can it serve to enrich our spiritual lives?

Another, more classical way theology talks about this issue is to discuss the relationship between the Kingdom or reign of God and the church, a topic much discussed in the second half of the 20th century. As one theologian remarked, “Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God and what we got was the church!” That is a valid commentary on what happened to our understanding over the centuries of what Jesus said and did.

The truth is that at the heart of Jesus’s preaching and life is his announcement of the arrival of the kingdom of God, the reign of God. And God’s reign is that we should follow God’s way of being human together. Jesus showed us that way. He did not come talking about a church. The church came into existence to serve the reign of God. Thus, the church is the creature of God’s Word and of the Holy Spirit. It belongs to God, is God’s gift. [World Council of Churches, “The Nature and Mission of the Church”, n. 9; see R. Haight, Ecclesial Existence, vol. 3, p.80].

To return to our earlier point, the institution of the church exists to serve the spiritual lives of Jesus’ followers which is to embrace and extend the reign of God in this world. To say this is to pose the question that is at the heart of this particular session of the conference, what is the value of the Roman Catholic Church? a global church? what can or does membership in this global church and its organization contribute to the bringing about of the reign of God in the world which is what Jesus came to do?

What does a global Roman Catholic Church with its central leader, the bishop of Rome who bears the title of Pope, contribute to this? The bishop of Rome is the symbol of the universality of gospel outreach, of not letting us forget what God is doing in the entire world. His ministry, also called the Petrine ministry, is in memory of Jesus' words to Peter, "upon this rock I will build my church". Apparently in the mind of Jesus and the early church, this Petrine ministry was important. It heads up the ministry of all followers of Jesus going together into the world to announce the arrival of the reign of God and to call for its full happening.

By this outreach ministry, the Roman Catholic church becomes a symbol of the entire human race on the journey. It becomes the symbol of unity, of going forward together to announce and manifest the reign of God on earth. Unity, not uniformity. And the bishop of Rome is the central symbol of this universal outreach.

A little over a week ago Pope Francis published his new encyclical on the environment. I was listening to public radio that morning and the host was interviewing two people, one a woman from St. Catherine University theology faculty in St. Paul, the other the head of a national evangelical youth organization, on the impact of the papal encyclical. It was a call-in program and almost all of the callers I heard in the time I was listening were leaders of non-Roman Catholic religious bodies, all of them praising the Pope's teaching and saying how important it is. The bishop of Rome, the Pope, the spiritual leader of the Roman Catholic church, had published a teaching that the whole world is receiving in a positive, thankful way. I asked myself, what other religious leader commands that kind of attention and respect? Why would it be a plus to ignore this office or break up the organization that commands that kind of attention and respect, that does not let us forget others in this world?

And is this "not forgetting others" what we celebrate each Sunday at Eucharist? When Jesus says to his disciples at the last supper, "Do this in memory of me", he is saying "I have become food for you so that you may feed the world; you be my body broken and you be my blood poured out for the many, for the world." (The recent translation "for the many" we know means "for all, for the world." Too bad they changed that; it caused needless confusion). The point here is that at the heart of our religious and spiritual lives, namely the eucharist, there is this universal outreach that binds us together. And helping us not to forget is one of the duties of the bishop of Rome.

The “catholicity” of the church is one of its essential marks, a special feature. The word “Catholic” means universal. It says inclusivity. As such it becomes a symbol for the whole world of the unity of the world’s people. (Perhaps the world’s only effective symbol? I think of the shortcomings of the United Nations, as great as it is).

Reading the documents of Vatican II, in particular the Constitution on the Church (LG), reminds us of the universal, world-wide role and ministry the church has. Although Catholic Christians live in families, small groups, neighborhoods, parishes and dioceses their complete identity is to be world citizens, a world church, sharing God’s concern for this world. The danger of provincialism or selective concern is real. To be spiritually fed individually is not an adequate goal for being a follower of Jesus. We have broader responsibilities.

The voice of the bishop of Rome, speaking to the world wide concerns of being disciples of Jesus, as he did most recently in his encyclical on the environment, is a necessary and welcome voice for us because the catholicity of the church is a gift we embrace.

We know that the Roman Catholic church is comprised of multiple churches throughout the world, all in communion with each other, each working to manifest and bring about the reign of God. Each church is led by a bishop and this college of world bishops, symbolizing the unity of world Catholics, directs the effort to effect the reign of God world-wide. The world’s bishops are not vicars or vice presidents of the Roman pontiff (LG, 27) They are a distinct college. The bishop of Rome is the symbol of these bishops’ and their local churches’ communion with each other. Together they assure that God’s salvation ministry reaches all people, that nobody or no place is forgotten, and that Christians in every part of the world know they are connected to one another, brothers and sisters of Jesus with all that connotes. Hence, Catholics’ connection with their local bishop is important.

Which brings me to a penultimate point, our relation to our local church. I say “our” meaning the laity’s place in this local archdiocese. We are a lay group, the Catholic Coalition for Church Reform and its sister organization the Council of the Baptized. These two organizations are our way of answering Vatican II’s call for the laity to take ownership of their role in the church. We try to be governed by the teachings and spirit of Vatican Council II while recognizing the limitations of that Council. Our starting point is the adage associated with that council, “ecclesia semper reformanda”, the “church must always be reformed”. The mind of the thinkers at Vatican II is that church

renewal comes through church reform. And so we press unapologetically for reform.

A second guiding principal is that “we are the church” and as such we have a part in articulating the “sense of the faithful” (the *sensus fidelium*), the faithful being the laity and the ordained leaders together. It is not the Catholic tradition for laity to reform without the participation of our ordained leaders. Nor is the reverse true, although it must be said finding a way to include the lay voice meaningfully in church life has been eclipsed for many centuries. I recommend the recent article in America magazine by Jeffrey von Arx (June 22-29, 2015), “A Post-traumatic Church: Vatican I and the Long 19th c.” in which he describes the political situation in Europe which forced the church, in order to survive, to become highly centralized and papal dominated in the 19th and 20th c, which is the church we live in, the backdrop for the current world-wide reform movements to strike a better balance.

Our vision here in St. Paul and Minneapolis and our motivation as the CCCR is to become what we laity should be as church. That is why we have chosen not to be an outsider reform group but to work for reform from within the organization of this local church, living as faithful practicing Catholics the best we can.

And lastly, we do this reform work quite conscious of our own failings, sins, shortcomings and weaknesses no less than those of our ordained leaders. I have described above in positive if not glowing terms the role of the bishop of Rome, the Pope. I could have just as easily spent a much longer time describing all of the sins in the long story of the papacy. And the same is true for our local church.

Unless you have been living under a basket these last few years you know of all the terrible sins and crimes of sexual abuse against children that have been committed by our local ordained church leaders. Thankfully, earlier this month our local church has been given hope by the resignation of our Archbishop whose administration had become a lightning rod for the mishandling of crimes of sexual abuse of children.

We do not know what the future holds. But this sad story has given energy to our local reform movement, named appropriately we think, the Catholic Coalition for Church Reform. This is our church. It is not “theirs”. The church, starting with the apostolic band and its leader, Peter, has been a sinful group. “Religion is the best thing in the world and the worst.” We need to be a better church, locally and universally, from the archbishop of St. Paul and

Minneapolis to the bishop of Rome, and to every lay person in between. “Ecclesia semper reformanda”.