

Urodivoi – Holy Fools¹

Homily on 1 Corinthians 1:17-25 – Friday of the Twenty-first Week in Ordinary Time

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I want you to travel back with me about 100 years. The time is the beginning of the 20th century. It was the time when Mundelein seminary was being built. It was also a time of some turmoil in these United States.

The turmoil was related to certain global currents. Much of it derive from the change to the modern capitalist economy which paralleled the industrial revolution, from about 1790-1840. There were many effects: increase in population, increase in the standard of living, increase in consumption and rapid urbanization. This resulted in the concentration of labor into mills, factories and mines. One of the big concerns on everyone's mind was the plight of the working class. It was a time of great political tension as well, spurred by high immigration, especially to the United States of America.

A new ideology was on the scene known as socialism. Hard as it is to believe there was a real fear in this country that the socialist ideology would gain political power. But the Russian Revolution in 1917 took the world by surprise. And this fear

¹ *Urodivoi* is a Russian term for the holy fool, the wandering ascetic or beggar saint. The basic insight of this sermon is drawn from the book by Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *Urodivoi – Holy Fools: The Prophetic Call from a Modern Fool for Christ*, 3rd edition (Combermere, Ontario: Madonna House Publications, 2001). Catherine, of course, draws her insight from Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which was read at Mass on this date.

was real because of the economic troubles the vision of life portrayed by the socialists had attractive power.

At the same time however an alternative vision was being offered to the world. It was a Christian vision offered by the bishops of Rome, beginning with Pope Leo XIII and Pope Pius XI. It represented the application of scripture and tradition to circumstances that had never before occurred in history. It proved that the value of a living magisterium to continue, develop, and apply the apostolic teaching to new circumstances. This vision of Catholic social thought was also compelling, because it reached back to the central insights of the ancient church, exemplified in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. When laid alongside the crushing circumstances of some of the post-industrial revolution economics, the teaching found in the Book of Acts created an attractive alternative to the promises of socialism.

Some of the names associated with Catholic social thought in American history are well known. People such as Dorothy Day, Peter Marin, Reynold Hillenbrand, and Thomas Merton are among the most famous. Less well-known but to me more interesting is another woman. She was an immigrant to the United States from Russia and Poland after the communist takeover. With that background, she had no illusions about the negative effects which socialism brought on a society. If you have any questions about this I would encourage you to talk to our brothers in the community who are from Poland. They will be able to share something of their family memories of the communist period.

The Holy Spirit raises up certain individuals in every age to call us back to the heart of the gospel. One such individual was this interesting woman, Catherine de Hueck Doherty. Part of the minor aristocracy in Europe, she lost everything because of the revolution. She came to these shores penniless, but because of her upbringing and intelligence, was able to eventually develop a career as a lecturer. She quickly became wealthy again.

A devout Christian, she reflected on her life and became aware that her spiritual union with the Lord had been a much deeper and more immediate during the period when she was poor. This led her to a profound conversion experience in which she realized that the Lord was calling her to become voluntarily poor.

Catherine described the content of this call from God in what she would later refer to as "the Little Mandate."

Arise – go! Sell all you possess.

Give it directly, personally to the poor.

Take up My cross (their cross) and follow Me,

going to the poor, being poor,

being one with them, one with Me.

Little – be always little! Be simple, poor, childlike.

Preach the Gospel with your life – without compromise!

Listen to the Spirit. He will lead you.

Do little things exceedingly well for love of Me.

Love...love...love, never counting the cost.

Go into the marketplace and stay with Me.

Pray, fast. Pray always, fast.

Be hidden. Be a light to your neighbour's feet.

Go without fears into the depths of men's hearts. I shall be with you.

Pray always. I will be your rest.²

This became the personal rule for her life. As a result, other lay apostles were attracted to her. Together, they would begin several different ministries, beginning with Friendship House here in Chicago, then a second friendship house in Harlem, and finally the Madonna House Apostolate in Ontario, Canada.

The epistle today touches on the heart of Catherine's personal spirituality. When she voluntarily gave away her wealth, people said she was a fool. She realized,

² Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *Fragments of My Life: A Memior*, 3rd edition (Combermere, Ontario: Madonna House Publications, 2007).

however, as Saint Paul tells us, there are *fools for Christ*. Although they seem foolish in the eyes of the world, yet their foolishness contains a witness to profound truth. This truth leads us to the root and goal of discipleship, which is configuring ourselves to Christ.

The heart of the Little Mandate is the humility of Christ. Anyone who wishes to live the gospel without compromise must, in the eyes of the world, behave like a fool.

Not everyone is called to voluntary poverty the way Catherine was. Not everyone is called to voluntary celibacy, or to a promise of obedience to a diocesan Bishop and his successors, as our new deacon recently were. Nor is everyone called to make the profession of faith and take the oath of fidelity, so that they can teach in the name of the Church, as our new seminary faculty did on Wednesday. But those individuals who are called in these ways must have a radical trust in the Holy Spirit. Humility and trust, in their radical form, exemplify the gospel without compromise.

Today, in the midst of all of the travail the Catholic Church in the United States of America is suffering, I have heard some people, "You'd have to be a fool to become a cleric in the Catholic Church." My only response is "Right you are! And I hope it's always that way." Why? Because what we need in the priesthood are fools for Christ. What we need are men who embrace the radical demand of humility as the organizing principle of their life.

My sister's pastor, Fr. Patrick Dolan, played out this insight in his sermon this past Sunday. Father Dolan said: "We need to change our understanding of priesthood

from a sacrament of status, to a ministry of the gospel.”³ His point was that the sign of priesthood must be service, not status. This approach will attract fewer men, but with a spirituality of service, they will not be as likely to betray the priestly office.

Embrace the radical demand of humility as the organizing principle of your life.

³ The Reverend Patrick Dolan is a priest of the Archdiocese of Denver and pastor of Most Precious Blood Parish, Denver, Colorado. He delivered this sermon on Sunday, August 26, 2018 at Most Precious Blood Parish.