Opinion
Spirituality



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by Sr. Joan Chittister

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January 16, 2019

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Sinking ships are not difficult to identify. You can watch their long, slow, laborious decline as the stern begins to slip away and the bow, the head of the ship, becomes useless. You can see that it is no longer making any kind of real progress into the wind. You know that it has lost control of itself.

The interesting thing is that governments and churches decline in exactly the same way: first the people, the body of the institution, begin to cast off, to disappear; then little of importance is heard from the leadership.

Collapse is obvious and immanent. What is difficult to figure out is why once great institutions suddenly begin to sink. Even more disconcerting is the notion that nothing could have been done to stop the implosion in the first place.

The probable causes of such decline are also many, of course — the environment maybe; systemic breakdown, perhaps; and surely the internal strain that comes eventually to all systems and structures that have been allowed to become arthritic over time, taken for granted over time, become lethargic over time.

But whatever the cause of the shipwreck, it's essential to remember that its not only institutions that disappear. The people who depended on them go down with the ship, too — their trust in it misplaced, their unconsciousness of the danger ships just naturally embody overlooked, their sense of eternal security shattered. Until the impossible happens and the fragility of life reasserts itself. Over and over and over again. From century to century.

Governments go down. Churches, too, sinning as much as they save, lose their bearings. So how is it that we stand by while our institutions shrivel and our courage shrinks? It's not our fault, we argue. The cause is outside ourselves — in the institution itself, we say. Not in us.

Wrong. The truth is that very great social debacle starts with us, with the people who look away while it happens, who allow the attitudes that feed it to prevail.

Today, in an era of government upheaval, I want to explore this question of institutional breakdown but from a perspective formed over 20 centuries ago and the vision of the man who set out to restore the heart of the human enterprise.

In the 6th century, Rome — the invincible — began to crumble from the inside out. Its Roman legions, the ground of the empire's political power, had sucked the resources out of the colonies and, no longer earning their keep, were now draining Rome itself instead. The rich had become dissolute. The poor were destitute and desperate. The immigrants on the border — foreigners — were beginning to stream into Rome, not to destroy it but to share in its bounty.

They had emperors who were intent on enlarging the empire and popes whose major concern was establishing papal preeminence. So, who was there to reverse this race to the bottom of one of the greatest empires the world had ever known?

The answer was as unlikely as the problem. A young student, Benedict from Norcia, disillusioned by the low moral condition of the much-heralded Rome, turned his back on the system. He dropped out. He left school rather than commit himself to the goals and desiccant values of a place that had squandered its wealth and its purpose on itself. Rather than pursue the priorities of the then society, he began to teach another way to live.

Benedict developed small communities and, in a world where power and bullying, egregious greed and pathological individualism, authoritarianism and narcissism left a sense of community behind, taught that pride is the basic flaw in the human system. Humility, the cornerstone of society, of civilization, of the social order, he taught, is its corrective.

He based his rule of life on 12 principles of humility that, historians say to this day, saved Western Civilization.

It's those principles of life that need to be revisited in our own time if either church or state can possibly lead the world through the self-centeredness of society in our own time.

From where I stand, it is those 12 principles of life — recognition of my place in the universe, the need for wisdom rather than power, self-revelation rather than self-aggrandizement, and right relationships — that are badly needed now. If we are ever to recover from the twisted and contorted systems that pass for church and state at the present time, we must begin to examine the assumptions and attitudes that we are allowing to creep into our institutions and, worse, into our own souls.

It's those principles that I will begin to examine, one at a time these next weeks, in what has become a highly polarized — and sinking world — around us. Maybe if we can discover what is undermining our best efforts we might at least arrest our present plunge to the depths.

[Joan Chittister is a Benedictine sister of Erie, Pennsylvania.]

Editor's note: *We can send you an email alert every time Joan Chittister's column, From Where I Stand, is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up.*

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A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 8-21, 2019** print issue under the headline: How to save Western civilization — again.