

A True Scandal in the Church

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 29, 2010 | Distinctly Catholic

Last night, I met with a couple planning their wedding. They are both Catholics and wish to be married in the Catholic Church. They visited and called several parishes in Florida where they grew up and where their families live. They met with nothing but obstruction. They could only have the wedding at certain inconvenient times they were told. No one suggested that, while the pastor might not be available after 2 p.m. on a Saturday, if they provided their own priest, they could have a later service as they desire. They considered turning to a local Methodist church where they were welcomed and encouraged.

This is shameful. We all complain about people leaving the Church, but then when we have a couple who wants to get married in the Church, we make it difficult for them. And, where was the catechesis for these young Catholics to instruct them in the fact that having a nuptial Mass in the Catholic Church is not simply a canonical requirement, it is a guarantee of the presence of the Holy Spirit through the administration of the sacrament. I have a Mass to mark my birthday every year because Mass is not something we Catholics do, it is who we are.

Marriage in the Catholic Church is still governed by rules laid down at the Council of Trent. Much of the theology that flows from Trent is exceedingly beautiful. As I explained to the couple, the reason to include God in one's marriage is this: They will pledge themselves to each other in sickness and in health, in times of plenty and times of want, and they have had experiences of sickness, health, plenty and want. But, they will also pledge themselves to each other forever, and the only experience any of us humans has of forever is the Mass. That is where the eternal sacrifice of Christ is made present. How can someone say "forever" except by the power of the Holy Spirit? And, when this couple says "I do," that "I" is a baptized "I," and "I" that has been forever made new in the waters of baptism. How can anyone start something genuinely new, like making a family, unless we wed that newness to the new birth we experienced in baptism? Alas, nowhere in their Catholic upbringing had such issues been discussed and the priests at the churches they contacted about hosting their wedding did not give them the time of day let alone the eternity of the Church's proclamation.

Additionally, this young couple started attending a church in Northern Virginia where they now live. They signed up for several ministries at the church, wanting to get involved. No one called them back. They called again and were told that they needed to find out which desk their request landed on. They get their envelopes for contributions every month, but no one has called them back about participating in the life of the Church "for which they volunteered" and it has been several months. This is a scandal.

I have no sympathy with those activists who want to turn the Church into some kind of a democracy in which the laity are in charge. The reason to have lay people handling the finances and the business-side of a parish, the upkeep of buildings and the such, is not about control. It is about making sure that priests have the time to administer the sacraments, have weddings when the couple wants them, build-up the life of the parish so that volunteers are not ignored. There was no reason "no reason" this young couple should be feeling such frustration at the hands of the Church. I was scandalized last night, not by them, but by the horrific performance of the Church in their circumstance. Why are people leaving the Church? Because we sometimes make it well nigh impossible to stay. The millstone is around our necks, not theirs.

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