

“Good” Catholics Can Make a Difference

“All that is necessary for evil to succeed is that good men do nothing.”

This quote, attributed to the 18th-century British philosopher Edmund Burke, is often used as a rallying cry when it comes to attacks against the Catholic Church. Perhaps we can fine-tune the quote this way for our purposes: “All that is necessary for anti-Catholicism to succeed is that good Catholics do nothing.”

This quote appropriately exhorts all of us to fight against the vices of laziness and cowardice and do our part in standing up for the Church. However, there is another implied exhortation embedded in this quote: We can’t take for granted that any of us, let alone the majority of Catholics, are “good.” While we might disagree as to what precisely constitutes a “good” Catholic, we can say that ordinarily a “good” Catholic would not sit by idly while the Church is attacked. And even if he or she did so temporarily, that person should easily be stirred to action when confronted with the reality of anti-Catholicism. But, given the inroads anti-Catholicism has made in our culture with relatively little resistance, it’s fair to ask, are the “good” Catholics doing nothing, or are many Catholics not as “good” as we’re called to be? At the end of the day, what is a “good” Catholic?

A theology professor once asked his class, “What’s the biggest problem in the Church today, ignorance or apathy?” One student flippantly responded, “I don’t know, and I don’t care.”

The student’s answer, upon further examination, is very close to the mark. Ignorance refers to a defect in the virtue of faith, and apathy refers to a defect in the virtue of charity.

With the virtue of hope, these three theological virtues are the necessary building blocks of a thriving Catholic life and culture. I suggest that we need to renew this foundation, in ourselves and collectively as the Church, as the necessary prerequisite for effectively addressing anti-Catholic forces in society.

We are approaching the 40th anniversary of the publication of Pope Paul VI's *Credo of the People of God* (1968), issued at the conclusion of the "year of faith." The Holy Father recognized the crisis of faith in the Church, and he issued his *Credo* to articulate orthodox Catholic teaching to counteract the rise of ignorance and confusion regarding our faith.

Forty years later, while we see some promising signs of renewal, we have also witnessed the devastating effects of the "crisis of faith" that has ravaged two, going on three, generations of Catholics in our midst.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes that "'ignorance of God' is the principle and explanation of all moral deviations" (no. 2087), and it further describes several sins against the faith, including heresy, which are routinely ignored today. We are all too familiar with widespread rejection of key Church teachings, from the papacy and Real Presence to the hot button morality issues that challenge men and women to turn away from deviant, immoral behaviors.

We can never lose sight of the fact that our faith is not merely a moral code or abstract body of teachings, but rather a dynamic relationship with the living God. Even so, our faith in the person of Jesus Christ necessarily implies a content of faith. For example, when Our Lord sent out His apostles to make disciples of all nations, He told them to teach all men and women "to observe all that He has commanded" (Mt. 28:20). Similarly, Our Lord also said, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do what I tell you?" (Lk. 6:46). Our Lord

denies knowing those who claim to be His followers yet do not accept and put into practice His teachings, communicated through His Church (see also Mt. 7:21-24; Lk. 10:16).

Organizations that are serious about their principles will not tolerate views within their own ranks that undermine their efforts. Imagine the NAACP allowing members to push for “separate but equal” facilities, or Planned Parenthood allowing its representatives to publicize the harmful effects of abortion on women and to admit that it’s a form of homicide. It’s not going to happen.

Yet, we have to admit that our Catholic faith has not been adequately taught and embraced in recent decades, such that outright dissent is simply considered an alternative opinion. The deposit of apostolic faith is one of the central bonds of unity that unites Catholics (cf. Catechism, no. 815), but today many people see the Church as a vague cultural reality, not demanding more than loyalty to Notre Dame football and wearing green on St. Patrick’s Day. That’s why abortion-rights advocates such as Frances Kissling or Ted Kennedy can get away with holding themselves out as Catholics in good standing. If we’re not serious about what we believe, how can we expect the “world”—which is the sworn enemy of the Gospel anyway—to treat our beliefs with respect?

In response, we must pray for the grace to live this passage from the Catechism: “The disciple of Christ must not only keep the faith and live on it, but also profess it, confidently bear witness to it, and spread it” (no. 1816).

Meanwhile, the virtue of hope is all about putting our trust in the Lord and His promises, especially when the going gets tough. In the midst of attacks from without and scandals from within, many Catholics might be tempted to despair. They may well conclude that the Church is going to hell in a hand basket, and they wring their hands of any responsibility for setting things aright. Or, in the midst of their despair, they

may conclude that the project of Christianity is no match for the relentless secularism of our culture. The best that we can hope for is to get in a good kick to the shins here or a minor victory there, but the war is lost. Clearly such a mindset betrays a lack of trust in the living God.

As significant of a problem as despair is, the alternate failure of hope—presumption—can be just as deadly. Presumption denies the need to seek God's grace—either because we think we can save ourselves or because God will give us His grace no matter how we conduct our lives. We commonly see this latter mindset in funerals today, which often seem to be “mini-canonizations.”

An objective observer could easily conclude that it really doesn't matter how one lives, because everyone seems to end up in a “better place.” Many poorly formed Catholics embrace just such an implicit universalism. There are probably many reasons why people think that way, including the natural desire that our loved ones make it to heaven. Yet, when we give in to such presumption, then we are not really serious about the claims our faith makes on us. And if we're not willing to go to the mat for our faith, if we're not willing to admit the practical reality and consequences of mortal sin, then we're not going to get worked up about attacks on the Catholic Church. A mushy, uncommitted Catholicism is no match for the anti-Catholic forces that have been unleashed against the Church.

The Catechism identifies two of the principal sins against charity as being indifference and lukewarmness (no. 2094). These sins reveal a lack a passion and zeal in our commitment to God and neighbor. How we respond to attacks against the ones we love can vary greatly, but a failure to respond at all is unacceptable. When we encounter a bully we need to have sufficient self-esteem to defend ourselves the best we can. And what husband would not go ballistic if someone attempted to harm his wife or children? That's why it's so scandalous when some Church leaders have failed to show sufficient

outrage when their spiritual children have been abused.

In today's culture, many people want Christ without His Church. They want "spirituality" without the demands and perceived corruption of "organized religion." (Some might respond that the Catholic Church is not all that organized!) Clearly the work of the new evangelization is to help men and women rediscover the intimate, saving connection between Christ the King and His Kingdom, the Church. We must rekindle love for the Church among her members—manifested not as a spineless tolerance, but as a Christ-centered desire for the good of all.

Christ Himself teaches us about this intimate connection. When Saul of Tarsus encountered Our Lord on the road to Damascus, He said, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?" (Acts 9:4). Christ had already ascended to the Father at that time. Saul had never even met Our Lord. Rather, he was persecuting His followers. Yet Our Lord took this very personally. Indeed, Christ from the earliest days identified Himself with His Church, His beloved bride. Attack the Church, and you attack Christ Himself.

Do we experience attacks against the Church as attacks against Our Lord? If more of us did, anti-Catholicism would meet the decisive, unified resistance that has been lacking in our time.

The Catechism says that in every age "saints have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult moments in the Church's history" (Catechism, no. 828). Everyday saints like you and me are called to be the difference-makers. For Catholicism to succeed, we need "good" Catholics to live with God's grace the virtues of faith, hope, and charity, thus radiating the light of Christ in an otherwise dark, hostile world.

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