

Living the Spirit
Accountability

As promised I offer some thoughts about our responsibility as faithful Catholics who treasure the virtue of fidelity. My hope is that this theme is still worth our reflection.

In the last insert I wrote about fidelity as a necessary ingredient for us to grow spiritually, but also as a way to find solutions to the many present crises within the Church community. Fidelity to the teachings of Christ by individual Catholics will stem the tide of departures from unity with the Church. Fidelity to the laws of the Church could help overcome the challenges found in our culture as well. Fidelity to a good spiritual life will surely bring the individual to a state of hope for the future, a hope to attain eternal life in God's own good time.

A few weeks ago I read an article by Christopher Ruddy, a Catholic theologian, in *Origins*. He addresses issues behind the sexual abuse crisis. He summed up the atmosphere of this crisis with three words: "accountability for bishops, identity for priests and adulthood for the laity." In this insert I would like to share some thoughts that owe their origin to reading this article.

The article called for an emphasis on accountability. While the author focuses on bishops in the specific crisis being examined, I believe that we also need to study accountability in a wider sense. First of all, we should admit at a personal level that we are accountable for our own actions. The degree of this responsibility may vary due to many circumstances. There are some who lack mental abilities and so are deemed not imputable for their moral actions. Some are immature, young and lack understanding. Some may be led astray by passions of the moment and responsibility can be diminished – or intensified.

As Catholics we have a right to expect accountability from our leaders in the Church. While their primary accountability is to God, they do have accountability to the people. They have been chosen to serve, not to be served. It is an awesome responsibility. The many laws of the Church that govern the role of the bishops are taken quite seriously. Today, however, bishops need to balance this accountability with that demanded from other sources. In a special way, they must observe civil laws that are becoming ever more intrusive.

Speaking of these laws in our own country, it is curious that in our civil legislatures most of the action is being taken to firm up the rights of law suits against the Catholic Church. Much of the same illegal activity, when engaged in, for example, by clergy of other churches or by government employees in our public schools, is protected from law suits. The germ of this inequity lies in our universal Church law that places civil ownership of all church property in the control of the diocesan bishop.

In his article the author admitted that being a bishop is far from easy. He must be present to his people, especially his clergy. He must trust many lay advisers in areas where he -- and clergy -- are not expert. I refer here especially to financial transparency. If he is able to bring his administration to treat the laity as adults, all goes well. Yet, it is difficult, because as a people we tend to be contentious. I cannot think of many decisions that will not find some opposition, no matter how reasonable and good they may be. [It will be interesting to see how adult will be the reaction to the necessary parish consolidations in our Diocese.]

I liked what the article said in this paragraph. “Another practical problem is the daily schedule of the contemporary bishop. There are few fates more trying for a good priest today than becoming a bishop. The average ordinary spends enormous amounts of time with paper and administrative meetings, which are often necessary but which leave little room for substantial pastoral engagement.” There truly is a large area in which bishops face varying kinds of accountability. They must also never forget that like all of us there is a final accountability to be made to the Lord. Like us, they hope to hear the Lord say: “*Well done, good and faithful servant.*”

What does this have to do with our own accountability? I believe that we have a strong spiritual obligation to live **as a part of the Church**. This applies to laity as well as to clergy. Our personal responsibility at a spiritual level is to contribute what we can of ourselves to the entire church community. If we live with even a small degree of holiness of life, then we are building up the treasure of grace available to the Church. It is this grace that will actually overcome the evils that are found in and out of the Church itself.

It helps to recall that Jesus once said that to those to whom much is given, from them much will be required. What Catholic can deny that he has been given much? We have been called and chosen by our baptismal election. We are able to draw from the fullness of faith and truth. We have been given sacramental aids in all the ways of our spiritual journey from God to God. We should also realize that we can take a legitimate and sinless pride in being a part of that Church which has given the world outstanding saints.

Let us not become spiritually depressed. We do not lack unity with a wider community than our local parishes. Who does not rejoice that the Holy Spirit has been guiding our Church? He has given us outstanding Popes, for example. They have listened to God’s People. They have tried to present to the world messages of peace and hope. I think here of how the outstanding biography of Pope John Paul II is called: *Witness of Hope*.

If you find crises in both the wider world of the Church and your individual world, I would recommend that you find yourself answering this question: *How accountable am I?* If your conscience judges rightly, balancing reality with emotion, guided by a true spiritual compass – then there will be a joy that hope will bring to your spiritual journey. We are all stewards of the graces God gives us. If we serve the Master well, faith tells us it will be worth the effort. Many more than bishops need to live in the hope of hearing those words of the Gospel: “*Well done, good and faithful servant.*”

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This insert and the previous one will require careful reading to lead you to a greater understanding and confidence that all of us can grow continually through the spiritual graces available to us. Of course, I still think that we are likely to become only as holy as the Holy Spirit wants us to be. With that degree of holiness, we can find the joy that can make life so beautiful. Let us pray to find it! Let us pray to keep it!

God love you always!
Monsignor David Morrison