

A CHURCH RENEWED – WHAT SHOULD IT LOOK LIKE?

Condensed from a talk by Fr. Bob Bedard, CC
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The Church *renewed*. Renewal means restoring the Church to the full intentions and specifications and blueprints of the One who founded it: Jesus Himself. Jesus founded the Church according to the blueprint that was in His Father's mind. You and I are involved in renewing it, getting it back to that perfect plan that Jesus had, based on what His Father gave Him. Renewing the Church is not something that you and I do, really, but it's something that *God* does through us if we will let Him do it. It is the power of the Holy Spirit that is the key factor in the renewal of the Church. It's not our efforts. It's rather our surrender and our willingness to be ready to be used by the Lord. But He is the one who does it. It's His power.

God wants His people to live a fullness of life *here* and *now*. God does not want to be marching at the head of a defeated people! He wants to march at the head of His people (cf. Ps 68:7-8), but He doesn't want to be leading a people that is defeated, a people that has to justify its existence, a people that is confused and hesitant and doubtful. And much of the Church is today. God doesn't want that. He wants a fullness of life for His people. He doesn't want you and I as believers, as members of the Church, to feel that we have to apologize to the world for who we are, or to apologize to critics or enemies or to the media or anybody else. But God wants us to move ahead in the victory that He has called us to live in. Renewal is God's idea, not ours.

The Church is *always* in the state of requiring renewal. But the Lord wants instruments in His hand to renew it. We need to ask ourselves, "How do we know we're getting anywhere? How do we know it's happening? How are we going to recognize the renewed Church as it begins to emerge from what we are now? What would a rather thoroughly renewed Church look like, in fact? What are the signs that it's happening?" In prayer in the last few weeks, I felt that the Lord was highlighting nine different signs. It's an incomplete list, but these are the ones I thought the Lord was placing on my mind and in my heart.

1. Knowing the Lord will be a standard experience

A renewed Church is going to be one in which it will be a standard experience for the people in the pews to know the Lord. God wants His people to know Him and it is possible for us to know Him. The Lord says through His prophet Jeremiah, "And no longer shall each man teach his neighbour... saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer 31:34). They will know Me, all of them. That's supposed to be standard. Jesus says Himself, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (Jn 14:23).

We have to be ready to explain to people that it is extremely Catholic to know the Lord. You can't read the history of the Church or any of the great Saints without realizing immediately that they knew the Lord very, very intimately. The very first page of the Butler's and Baltimore Catechism says, "Why did God make us? He made us to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and be happy with Him in the next."

The standard experience of people will be to know the Lord, to know that He is close and available, that He is anxious to intervene, that He is busting to be consulted, that He loves to get in on things if we'd let Him, that He is powerful, He can do anything.

A couple of months ago, I heard a radio show host ask his listeners, “What have you ever seen God do?” And the time I was listening to the program for about 20 minutes or so, not one person had an answer to that question. The renewed Church will be one in which all of the people, all of the members, have answers to that question. They will know the Lord and they will have seen Him operate in their lives and around them. That will be standard. That, I believe, is going to be one of the prime signs that the Church is taking seriously the call of God to be renewed: to know the Lord.

2. Regular usage of all the gifts of the Spirit

Secondly, I believe a renewed Church is one in which all of the gifts of the Spirit will be restored to regular and common usage. There will be no hesitation or fear because the Church will be able and ready to trust and rely on its own gift of discernment, which is so important, which rests in the Church. The Church will be able to distinguish and discern the authentic from that which is not. But all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit will be restored. It will be common in our assemblies to hear words spoken from the assembly in prophecy. It will be common for people to use their gift of prayer language. It will be common to pray for healing. And this, of course, is beginning to happen. It’s happening outside charismatic renewal in many ways and many places.

3. Increased prominence of the Sacrament of Confirmation

The renewed Church will be one in which, I believe, the Sacrament of Confirmation will have a much more prominent place. Its obvious historical and biblical relationship with the Pentecost event will be much better understood. And the sacrament will have a pronounced, transforming effect on those who receive it as we prepare candidates to understand and to expect what the Lord can do for them. It will then be the occasion for the significant release of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit within the baptized person. The sacrament of Confirmation will be much more prominent in the Church as it becomes more and more renewed.

4. Increased diversity of lay ministries

A renewed Church will be one in which the great diversity of ministry that the Lord gives to His people will begin to be common. All gifts of all people will be recognized. Ministries will begin to flower. Membership in a renewed Church will presuppose that a person is taking part in the ministry of that Church. Membership will not be a passive thing, but will be an active thing. The days of the silent spectators in the pews are coming to an end. A stranger will be able to walk in off the street and say, “Hey, something is happening here in these people’s lives.” Pastors will more and more be able to assume their rightful role as coordinators of ministries. They will identify the gifts, call them forth, prepare the people to minister and send them forth. They will correct them and support them and work with them. That’s the role of pastor, of priest in the Church today.

5. Complete dedication toward service to the poor

The Church renewed will be a Church totally and completely dedicated to service, service to the poor. One of the signs, as Jesus said, that the Good News is being preached and the Kingdom is here is that the poor will have the Good News brought to them. The Church will be totally dedicated to that. As St. John said, let us love by deeds and in truth and not just talk about it (cf. 1 Jn 3:18). A Church renewed will be one that reaches out to the disadvantaged, all those that are sick and elderly and lonely and isolated and prisoners, unemployed and hungry and homeless. The Church will be synonymous with kindness and compassion and concern. When people ask, “Who are the Christians,” the answer will be “They are the people that work with the poor. That’s where you go if you’re in trouble. You go to the Church because they’re the ones who are ready to help you.”

6. Enthusiastic and reverent celebration of the Eucharist

A renewed Church will be one that celebrates God's mighty deeds very, very seriously. A renewed Church will be a Church of rejoicing, celebrating the wonders that the Lord has done. The celebrations of the Eucharist in the renewed Church will be joyful and unhurried, with eager involvement by everybody there. All the participants will be challenged and uplifted, inspired and empowered when they're there. The celebrations will be characterized by vigorous and enthusiastic praise, on the one hand, even to the shaking of the walls as in Acts 4, and a reverent hushed silence, on the other hand. The Word will be listened to with great attention. The preaching will be powerful and will be anointed by God. You don't have to be a great orator or eloquent to preach the word with power. You do need to be yielded to the Spirit of God so that He can do it through you. With expectant faith we will beseech the Lord to intervene, and we will have the evidence that He is intervening in people's lives from the testimonies that are shared.

The Eucharist will become the focal point of the lives of the believers. Only in the Eucharist can we give the Father a gift that is worthy of Him: namely His own Son Jesus who has made Himself available, placed Himself at our disposal under the signs of bread and wine, fully present, Body and Blood, soul and divinity, so that we can present Him to the Father. Mass will become, as it is supposed to be, as Saint Pius X spelled it out at the turn of the century, the source and the center of the true Christian spirit.

7. Multiplication of signs and wonders

A renewed Church will be one in which there will be a multiplication of signs and wonders. We have seen in charismatic renewal a revival of the ministry and gift of healing, which, of course, has never been absent from the Church. As we gather and praise Him, as we celebrate the Eucharist, as we anoint the sick at healing services, as we preach the Good News of the Kingdom with full authority and full authenticity, the Lord will simply heal people. Not that we will be focusing on signs. After all, they're only signs. They're meant to confirm the truth of what we celebrate and proclaim and bring about a turning to God.

Some people need signs. Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are they, Thomas, who believe without seeing." But Jesus did for Thomas what Thomas needed in order to believe: He presented to Him His hands and His side. I taught for many years at high school and said to my students, "The Lord will do for you what you need for you to believe in Him with a lively faith. If you're not sure of that, or if you're not sure of Him, say to Him, 'Lord, if you're real, show me somehow.'" And they would do that and He would show them. Some people don't need signs. Fine! Some people do.

Signs are God's idea, not ours. We don't have to work up a good case and present it to God and ask Him to do more signs and wonders. We have to let Him do them. We have to be authentic and genuine, surrendered and yielded.

We're going to need greater signs and we're going to see them, because God is not going to let His people perish. He's not going to let the people that don't know Him, that are hurting so terribly, have no meaning in life. He's not going to stand by and see suicide rates climbing and see mental depression and psychological turmoil multiply and multiply. He's going to multiply the signs and wonders because that's what our troubled, beleaguered and battered world needs.

8. Total commitment to the priority of evangelization

The renewed Church will be one that will embrace fully the Lord's priorities. The Church will know that its number one mission is to evangelize, to bring the Good News to the nations, to

proclaim that the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe. Pope Paul VI, a prophet in his day, said in *On the Evangelization of the Modern World* that what we have today is a Church of people who are very thoroughly sacramentalized, and that's good, but they're not at all thoroughly evangelized, and they must be! John Paul II, again a prophet in our day, said that the number one priority in the Church today is the evangelization of the baptized Christians. The renewed Church will understand that people are not fully evangelized until they know the Lord, until they are able to call the Father 'Abba', call Jesus 'Lord' and live that out, and yield fully to the Holy Spirit who enables them to do both of those things.

Evangelization is not getting people to go to church or to receive the sacraments. That's wonderful, but that's not evangelization. Evangelization is bringing people to know the Lord. The Church renewed is one that will be totally and utterly committed to the Lord's number one priority: evangelization. The Church, of course, will embrace the Lord's other causes: the right-to-life movement, justice for the nations and the poor, peace. But the renewed Church will be able to tell us that all these movements will be much better undertaken by people that are thoroughly evangelized in the first place, who will operate in the power of God and not just in our own power and our own ideas, people who know the Lord, who are listening to Him, who will move only when He says to move, who are completely committed to His priorities. Sin is the problem. Repentance is the answer. Evangelization is the strategy. A renewed Church will recognize that, call all of us to evangelize, and that will be number one priority in the Church.

9. The healing of divisions in the Church to become one flock

The final sign of a renewed Church is that we will see one flock and one Shepherd. Jesus prayed in John 17 that we would all be one in the way the Father and He are one, so that the world will know that You have sent Me. That's the sign. The fact that we're divided means the world just doesn't know and evangelization is not powerful. But as the Churches are being renewed, they will automatically come together because the Lord has only one blueprint. If we are working for renewal and faithful to what the Lord's blueprint is, we are going to see one flock and one Shepherd.

We need pray and work for renewal. But I don't think we should rush into some sort of unity, any kind of unity, so that we can be seen to be one. No, it has to be real! I believe that the Lord wants to deal with each of the Churches and as He brings them forward on the path to renewal, they will automatically become one. I believe that's the Lord's sneaky strategy to do something that we consider impossible, namely putting all the Churches together. We think it's impossible! But with God, nothing is impossible.

Conclusion

The call to the renewal is the Lord's own call. This was made clear by John XXIII when he called the Second Vatican Council and said we need to open the windows and let the fresh air of the Holy Spirit in. He led the bishops of the Church in a prayer that the Lord would renew His power among us as in a New Pentecost. Renewal is not your idea or my priority or somebody else's hobby. It is the Lord's call spoken to us by the highest authority in the Church today. And this call has been continued by Paul VI and John Paul II whom I have already called prophets in our day.

Now, we don't always see renewal happening and sometimes it is easy for us to get discouraged and opt out. I'm here tonight to tell you that the Lord has spoken a word to His people that He means to fulfill. And he doesn't want *anybody* opting out! Don't stop praying and working for the renewal of the Church! This is God's call. Don't let discouraging things (the decline in your prayer group, the bust up of some relationship in your life, something that somebody says to you, or some

petty squabbles that happen within the Church) stop you from praying and working for renewal in the Church! Because the Lord is on the move! And He wants us to move with Him.

“For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it” (Is 55:11-12).

That’s the call to renewal. The word has been spoken from the mouth of the Lord: Renew and rebuild my Church! So don’t quit! Don’t stop! Stay with it! In the name of the Lord, stay with it. It’s His call and it’s our responsibility to respond and stay with it. That’s what God is saying to us.