

REFLECTIONS

Lawrence P. Grayson

The Continuing Struggle for Souls

In January 1947, then-Monsignor Fulton J. Sheen, a professor of philosophy at The Catholic University of America, delivered a radio address titled, "Signs of Our Times," in which he issued a warning about the battle for souls and provided advice on how to respond. His commentary, a brief excerpt of which follows, is even more relevant to the highly secularized culture of today than it was to the society of seven decades ago.

"Why is it that so few realize the seriousness of our present crisis? Partly because men do not want to believe their own times are wicked, partly because it involves too much self-accusation and principally because they have no standards outside of themselves by which to measure their times. If there is no fixed concept of justice how shall men know it is violated? Only those who live by faith really know what is happening in the world. The great masses without faith are unconscious of the destructive processes going on..."

The battle lines are already being clearly drawn and the basic issues are no longer in doubt. From now on men will divide themselves into two religions -- understood again as surrender to an absolute. The conflict of the future is between the absolute who is the God-man and the absolute which is the man-God; the God Who became man and the man who makes himself God; brothers in Christ and comrades in anti-Christ.

The anti-Christ will not be so called, otherwise he would have no followers. He will wear no red tights, nor vomit sulphur, nor carry a trident nor wave an arrow tail as the Mephistophiles in Faust. This masquerade has helped the devil convince men that he does not exist, for he knows that he is never so strong as when men believe that he does not exist. When no man recognizes, the more power he exercises. God has defined Himself as "I am Who am" and the Devil as "I am who am not"...

His logic is simple: if there is no heaven there is no hell; if there is no hell, then there is no sin; if there is no sin, then there is no judge, and if there is no judgement then evil is good and good is evil...

How will he come in this new age to win followers to his religion? He will come disguised as the Great Humanitarian; he will talk peace, prosperity and plenty not as means to lead us to God, but as ends in themselves...[H]e will explain Guilt away psychologically as inhibited eroticism, make men shrink in shame if their fellowmen say they are not broadminded and liberal; he will be so broadminded as to identify tolerance with indifference to right and wrong, truth and error; he will spread the lie that men will never be better until they make society better and thus have selfishness to provide fuel for the next revolution; he will foster science but only to have armament makers use one marvel of science to destroy another; he will foster more divorces under the disguise that another partner is "vital"; he will increase love for love and decrease love for person; he will invoke religion to destroy religion; he will ... tell people who they should and should not marry and unmarried ... he will tempt Christians ... to sell freedom for security ... to desert the lofty pinnacles of truth where faith and reason reign, for those lower depths where the masses live on slogans and propaganda... Opinions not truths, commentators not teachers, Gallup polls not principles, nature not grace -- and... to have a new religion without a Cross, a liturgy without a world to come, a city of man without a city of God, a religion to invoke a religion, or a politics which is a religion-one that renders unto Caesar even the things that are God's...

Because the signs of our times point to a struggle between absolutes we may expect the future to be a time of trials for two reasons: Firstly, to stop disintegration. Godlessness would go on and on if there were no catastrophes. ...Moral truth is vindicated by the ruin that follows when it has been repudiated. The chaos of our times is the strongest negative argument that could ever be advanced for Christianity.

The second reason why a crisis must come is in order to prevent a false identification of the Church and the world. Our Lord intended that those who are His followers should be different in spirit from those who were not. ... Mediocrity and compromise characterize the lives of many Christians. Many read the same novels as modern pagans, educate their children in the same godless way, listen to the same commentators who have no other standard than judging today by yesterday, and tomorrow by today, allow pagan practices such as divorce and remarriage to creep into the family...There is no longer the conflict and opposition which is supposed to characterize us. We are influencing the world less than the world influences us...

The Church has survived other great crises in her nineteen centuries of existence and she will live to sing a requiem over the evils of the present. The Church may have its Good Fridays but these are only preludes to its Easter Sundays, for the Divine Promise shall never be made void: ". . . and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." ...

As Christians we must realize that a moment of crisis is not a time of despair, but of opportunity. The more we can anticipate the doom, the more we can avoid it. Once we recognize we are under Divine Wrath, we become eligible for Divine Mercy...

Catholics ought to stir up their faith, hang a crucifix in their homes to remind them that we too have to carry a cross, gather the family together every night to recite the rosary that through corporate prayer there might be intercession for the world; go to daily Mass that the spirit of love and sacrifice might be sprinkled in our business, our social life and our duties. More heroic souls might undertake the Holy Hour daily, particularly in parishes conscious of the needs of prayers of reparation as well as petition, conducting such devotions in their churches...

[I]n the coming age there will be only one way to stop your trembling knees, and that will be to get down on them and pray. The most important problem in the world today is your soul, for that is what the struggle is about."

What would our world be like if every Catholic followed his pastoral advice? It is not too late to do so. And do so we should, for as Msgr. Sheen said, "The time is nearer than you think."

* * * * *

July 2019