

Our Personal Exiles in Babylon

In the role I play within the Office of the Bishop, I frequently receive complaints or concerns about priests. These are among the most frustrating issues with which I deal in my ministry. I am, almost always, confronted with plausible but conflicting stories which are beyond my ability to “adjudicate.”

There are groups of people out there who are deeply dissatisfied with their current pastors. In some cases, they don't like the pastor's personality, while in other cases, they don't feel that he is a good spiritual leader or administrator. And, of course, there are a whole host of reasons why such might be the case; some of which are more valid than others.

It is more than a little frustrating that I cannot resolve so many problems as those described above. In some cases, I would like to grab the priest by the collar and shake some sense into him. In other cases, it is not so clear that the pastor is the problem or that other dynamics may not be involved.

Lord knows, I don't want to see people alienated from their parishes or the Church. But what can one say to those who are utterly “turned-off” by their pastors or parish priests? What happens when people report that these leaders are obstacles to their prayer and spiritual life?

Spirituality of Exile: Through my powerlessness to adequately respond to such situations, I have come to consider one possible spirituality which might help a person pass through such a period of dissatisfaction; it could be called a “*spirituality of exile.*” I suggest this as something to be attempted before packing up and leaving.

“Exile” is a major motif in the Bible. The major prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel all strive to cultivate a spirituality in the Israelites who are captive in Babylon. And, even in the New Testament, the Apostles seize on this motif with respect to Roman oppression and domination, (see 1&2 Peter for example). The Book of Revelation is a very sharp and defiant example of this sort of message; exhorting true believers to endure and to resist any participation in whatever is truly evil. The counsel of such shepherds always seems to include the elements of remembering, holding fast to the covenant, maintaining observance of the Sabbath, (worship), and persevering in hope that the

Lord will bring deliverance, (See, for example, Isaiah 56:4).

Periods of dissatisfaction with human systems are inevitable in this life. It is as true in the Church as it is in the political, social and business realms. But, from the standpoint of faith, we ought to be open to the possibility that new sources of strength and new insights are possible when we “pass through” rather than “go around” challenging circumstances.

Consider that the Exile of Israel from Judah and Jerusalem into Babylon was a complete dismantling of their religious and social life. The devout of the people were subject to unconscionable additions and omissions to and from their lives! But, with the aid of the prophets, new life and new strengths came with the reorganization of life around the Torah and the Synagogue.



While poor spiritual leadership in a parish is disheartening and discouraging, it is possible to see in such a circumstance an invitation to “dig in” and “dig deeper,” with respect to the best aspects of our spiritual tradition. Turn to the Bible and start reading it. Find good spiritual reading materials and read the Catechism. Look for good speakers and teachers on YouTube and Catholic websites, (Bishop Robert Barron, Fr. John Riccardo, Fr. Mike Schmitz, et al).

Certainly, it is incumbent on the bishop to provide parishes with competent and good priests . . . men attuned to the spiritual and theological values of Christ's Church. Sometimes, however, personalities or other factors strain the relationship with individuals or groups. Along with engaging the values like charity and forbearance, the suggestion in this article is to seek new ways toward personal growth despite the less-than-perfect environment of worship and spirituality. All the while, one holds out hope for “deliverance” and the benefits accrued from having exercised patient endurance.