

The Voice of the Faithful

ANNE M. BURKE SPEECH - SEPTEMBER 14, 2012

As Thomas Edison, the man who changed the world for millions with his application of electricity and inventions, lay dying in 1931, at his bedside was Henry Ford, the man who revolutionized how Americans moved. As Edison died, Ford captured his last breath in a bottle. He was certain that Edison's genius would be part of what he seized. He sensed the energy of Edison's reason even in his dying gasp.

Perhaps there really was something there to capture, but as we all know Edison's genius was more expansive than his breath. Edison used to say, that genius was one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration. Genius was hard work, but it did permeate every aspect of his colossal imagination and sense of creativity.

I am here today, to salute you and your sense of imagination and creativity - two critically important components of Christian discipleship. I sense the energy of reason in all you do. Your imagination and creativity are what give you your "voice." And now, after ten years, we realize that without your voice, here in the United States, everyone's freedom as a Catholic would be more threatened. Everyone's liberty as a disciple would be more contained. We never needed you more. You do not need me to give you a list of the ways in

which the liberty of disciples is being threatened. I think I gave up cataloguing things when they arrested the Pope's butler for leaking information. The Vatican's assault on American religious women also pushed me to the very edge. That's why I need to hear your voice - the Voice of the Faithful.

What affect your voice has made. Just when we thought no one was listening, you opened your mouth and the faithful found a fresh opportunity to shatter the sinister machinations of leaders who do not listen. Just when it looked like no one would confront the poor leadership and tattered wagon circling of the bishops a decade ago - you spoke and a voice of faithfulness uttered words of love for the church, and challenge for its leadership. In the process, Boston received a new archbishop. The formation of the Voice of the Faithful established a new American vocabulary for the truth. What you have done reminds me of something St. Catherine of Siena said - *Be who God meant you to be and you will set the world on fire.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the American poet, said - *Speech is power; speech is to persuade, to convert, to compel. It is to bring another out of his bad sense and into your good sense.*

Your voice is uniquely American, and it is uniquely Catholic. Treasure those twin gifts. They are from God. Your voice is crisp and

palliative. It is heard not in the sound of self-focus, but rather in the expansive inclusion of the believers to whom you are connected. In its observation, a natural American sense of responsibility and courage emerges. We have a long history in our nation of plain-talk; frank-talk. I think we are not shy in speaking to power. We have shed those layers of old Europe, of class and place, where people, especially the peasants, were expected to be silent. They were never expected to voice their opinion. In our America everyone has a voice and a vote, plus the opportunity to use our voice. It is a natural extension of our Yankee personality and for it we need never apologize, even if some of us are Irish. I'd like to think that there is a little of Eleanor Roosevelt in all of us.

When we see something that needs fixing - what other choice do we have? Perhaps that is why some Europeans, especially in Rome, have difficulty with the sound of the American voice. We ask too many questions. We want the truth. We will not take no for an answer. We have little use for the courtly manners of the curia. And we want a response immediately - and it better be good.

But I also believe that Voice of the Faith is uniquely Catholic. You share a sense of faithfulness to the Lord; to the sacraments; to the life of grace; and to eternal life. Who else but a Catholic would spend so much time trying to bring about reform? Who else but a Catholic

would sort through the life-long learning and living of our faith tradition and try to affect change where we see it needed? Who else would be so loving of the institution that at times has failed them; or lied to them; or treated them as second class citizens? As Catholics we know that the life of faith is far and away more important than our failed leadership or the institutional structure's inability to treat us as involved members or share leadership, authority and equality. We are the breakers of bread and the tellers of the story - in that, we know the Lord is risen.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

Perhaps these are familiar words. It is the very first time we hear the voice of God in the Scriptures. They appear in the third verse of the first chapter of Genesis. They are the very first spoken words in the scriptures. They are God's own words by which He orders the darkness over earth to be transformed -- by light. It is our first encounter with him. His first words describe not only a magic moment in the process of creation, but also a profound challenge to us all. "Let there be light," is both a divine command for the planet and a warning to those who would abide with him. They are his words. He wants light. The warmth and brightness of light must abide in all our comings and goings.

Voice of the Faithful - for ten years this has been your mission - to be a voice for light. Your voice has both challenged authority and at the right time comforted those who see hope fade. Life in the Catholic Church in our nation has hit an all time low. Morale is on the wane on both sides of the communion rail. The promises that so readily rose up fifty years ago in the stirring events of Vatican II are now treated with little attention as long-suffering reformers of the reform seek to do the inconceivable - turn back the hands of time.

And it didn't take long following the death of dear Cardinal Carlo Martini, retired Archbishop of Milan, this past August 31, to recognize that his passing actually marks the end of an era in pastoral leadership of balanced intelligence and heart. At 85, Cardinal Martini, a prestigious Jesuit biblical scholar and former rector of the Biblicum in Rome, came from an age of promise that many feel has been smothered in recent years. Buried with this successor of St. Ambrose in many ways was the spirit of openness that we tasted long ago. 200,000 people lined up outside Milan's cathedral to pay their respect to this holy man of loving pastoral leadership. But he was honest until the end. He was critical of some of the visions of the Church that stand on shakier ground. In a final interview for publication after his death, he said that he felt the Church was "200 years out of date." What does that say about those who want to race back to the confinement of the past?

Let's be honest - this "turn back the hands of time" movement, desirous of returning to the way things used to be in the Church is not just about changing the words of prayers - it is a way of looking at the world. For me it is all about whether we spend our time working towards inclusion or exclusion. And when there is too much red watered silk in the sanctuary - guess what? There is no room left for women. As we watch the return of obsession with rubrics and liturgical details from the past, you can bet there will be few spaces reserved for women. So there will always be fresh issues to galvanize us. The problem becomes - how long can anyone keep going like this? The DNA appears stranger and stranger. How much can we endure?

As Cardinal Martini said - "Our culture has aged, our churches are big and empty and the church bureaucracy rises up, our rituals and cassocks are pompous. The church must admit its mistakes and begin a radical change, starting from the pope and the bishops. The pedophilia scandals oblige us to take a journey of transformation."

We need the Voice of the Faithful to ask those awkward embarrassing questions of those who want to turn back the clocks. Perhaps the Pope's butler is our friend after all. It is said there is a power play underway in Rome and it is a whopper. What I love is how such goings-on focus our attention to what is real - or at least real

inside the papal court - the struggle for who will be the next pope. Who ever it is, it will not change the way Rome looks at the world. However, because we are faithful - we can also look to the Holy Spirit, who does not abandon us even in moments of conclave. As John XXIII said - *Anybody can be pope; the proof is that I have become one.*

You are the faithful - the lovers of the Church, the enablers of the People of God; you cherish the life of the parish; the cycle of the liturgical calendar; the movement of scriptural readings; the fragrance of incense; the brilliance of a good short homily; the quiet sound of holiness; the embrace of a humane pastor; the cadence of an eccentric spiritual voice; the legacy of the past and the promise of the future.

You are the faithful - fasters, abstainers, believers, people of prayer, people of sacrament, and people of the Word.

The great Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman long ago wrote that the first Vicar of Christ was conscience; then, the pope in Rome. This is no put down for whoever is sitting in the Chair of Peter, but, rather, a stirring defense of the grandeur of Baptism and the life of the sacraments. It is a wondrous defense, too, of God's gift of the human mind and its capacity for intelligence. Catholics have always

believed in the sacredness of our conscience - why else would we always be "examining it?"

Conscience really does dispose us to the life of grace. Conscience permits us to know the truth and allows us to know a falsehood as well. During the past decade we have had many examples of each. Conscience protects us from brain-washing, foolish leadership, witch hunts, crackdowns, palace plots and scandals. It allows us to see through them. And of course conscience permits us the wisdom to remind ourselves that it is our faith they are playing with.

As we look around at the long lists of growing scandals, from sex abuse among the clergy to fresh inquisitions on thought; from narrowing opportunities for women to finger shaking at gays; and from a needless attack upon the women religious of American to the chilling culture war now being carried out by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, is there not just a hint of the apocalypse in the air we breath? Has the time not come to refashion the quality of leadership in our Church? And in that endeavor should not the loudest voice be that faithful voice, your voice - the voice of lay reason? I am reminded of something John Wayne said many years ago - *Courage is being scared to death -- and saddling up anyway.*

We have watched Catholic leadership in America create an institutional expression of Church that asks us to check our brains at the front door. How many of you thought ten years ago, in the darkest days of the abuse scandal, remember, when Cardinal Law went east, that we would see the hierarchy come back to life - not humbled and ashamed, but cranky and angry and ready to fight? We need your voice once again; a voice to call forth truth and accountability. Famed American monk Thomas Merton put it this way long ago - *Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real*. We need you to make our leadership real.

If the Second Vatican Council did anything for the Church - it did this - it recaptured a lost sense of passion for the truth. The documents of the Council are a testament to this truthfulness in all its biblical and human realities. The Voice of the Holy Spirit peeled away all the refuse of centuries that obscured the "true" call to discipleship. The truth refocused the Church's attention on what really mattered - the coming of the Kingdom of God; the mystery of Christ; the meaning of discipleship; the mandate of Christ's disciples in the world; and the promise of Christ to stay among his people, the Church.

As the late John Fitzgerald Kennedy reminds us - *The enemy of truth is very often not the lie - deliberate, contrived and dishonest - but the myth - persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.*

It is time, once more, for truthfulness. Catholics in our nation need to know that we are not, again, involved in a clerical deception, in which the backs of the laity will once more carry the load of clerical misdeed. We do not have to look far for examples of the Church wearing thin for people we love. All I can do is make sure our 16-year old celebrates the liturgy in a wonderful parish. The rest of my family has a mind of their own.

But I feel compelled to ask - Is the current strategy of attack, demonstrated by the bishops, one diocese after another, a new form of lay abuse and or just re-heated authoritarian overrule? Can they really believe that going after the Girl Scouts; religious women; Catholic elementary school teachers; theologians and Catholic politicians actually will once again fill the pews of emptying parish churches?

Ironically, those parishes that do remain full and alive have their remarkable parish priests to thank. It is not hard to read the psychic health of a parish. You can see the signs of life in the relationship of priest and people. You can see it in the quality of homiletics and in the attention given to liturgical practice. You can feel it in the mood of welcome and celebration - lay leadership in

parishes working side by side with the pastor. When things work - they really work.

But sadly, parishes and dioceses are also dying on the vine from want of attention. The cost of the abuse scandal across the country has resulted in countless closures of parishes and consolidations of others - not only because of money, but as a result of no local leadership.

And you only have to look at the terrible state of church life in Ireland to know that something needs to be done. There is talk there of the entire nation being reconfigured and reconstituted with totally new dioceses. Though at the same time, St. Patrick's successor, there, is hearing calls for his resignation for the inept handling of abuse cases from decades ago.

Tragically, none of this appears to be keeping bishops humbled and contrite. It makes their assaults on Catholics around the nation and world so pointless. We need less posturing by the bishops not more. Is this not what got them into a jam with the sexual abuse issue for decades in the first place - pride, untruths, protecting the institution at all costs and treating the laity like serfs? Have we learned no lessons in a decade? We have no interest in returning to

the way the Church of our youth was led - you know the Church of cover-up, secrets and hidden crime.

The quality of life in the pew is not a doctrinal question. We are aging. As the vilified French Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin once said - *Growing old is like being increasingly penalize for a crime you haven't committed.*

The quality of life in the pew is far more important than some academic clerical argument. The quality of life, I the pew, is, more importantly, about grace, character and truth. It is about a sense of belonging and loving affirmation - you remember, the way Jesus began it all.

The great thing about Jesus in the Gospels is that he stays so focused - on the Kingdom. Every word; every action; every encounter - reveals the presence and the power of God. Jesus stays true to displaying that in every cure; in each moment of healing; in each sympathetic embrace; in each betrayal and in every moment of suffering. I always believe that Jesus had a lot of Dr. Seuss in him. I can hear him now setting his disciples at peace and calling forth great things from them - *Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind don't matter and those who matter don't mind.*

So forget resurrecting the Inquisition. Instead let your voice challenge us to reach out to the poor, tend the hungers of the breadless, the thirsts of homeless, the lonely and the forgotten. Put an end to the bishop's passion for a culture war, even if they have to live through four more years of an Obama presidency.

Let us work together to shape a church in this nation that is open to our neighbors, not frightened of them and their differences. *Find common ground*, the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin asked of us. End the cultural aggression that shames us and so transparently looks as though it was designed to make bishops look better to their Roman superiors. We are Americans. We are not frightened of those who are different from us. Where is the largesse unleashed in Vatican II? We need leadership that restores confidence and hope, not the threadbare strategies of past eras of error and crime. If bringing back the 1950s is the goal, few people of faith will follow. We'll just stick with Jesus, thank you.

My challenge to you is on this tenth anniversary of your founding, is you, the Voice of the Faithful to propose a world-wide Council of the Laity in the time ahead. Imagine, if you will, an assembly of the Voices of the Faithful from around the globe - processing piously into St. Peter's Basilica in Rome to the amazement

and anguish of the shallow and the frightened, trying to *turn back time*, as Cher might say.

Take as your theme those stunning words of Pope John XXIII - *See everything, overlook a great deal, correct a little.*

Just picture the thousands of men and women, young and old, coming together to listen to the one sitting in Peter's Chair - anxious to have the Voice before him. Think of the power of the baptized in this gathering. Think of the faith, truth and honor in this crowd for Vatican III. What kind of theology is at work here? What kind of ecclesiology is unfolding in this gathering of the baptized? Imagine Peter's successor alone with the laity! - Cardinals and bishops sent off to spool pasta. What would come of a pope sitting alone among the baptized - among the faithful - with only the love of his own heart to guide him?

Perhaps, it would resemble that gathering long ago in the upper room on the day of resurrection when women, yes women, came to report that they had seen Jesus - and he was alive. What dynamics might be unleashed in such a gathering deciding how to move ahead to the truth?

This, my friends is not science fiction, or a Jane Austen novel - it is the grandeur of faith in all its wonder riding the wings of the Spirit into a fresh Pentecost. It could happen, Voice of the Faithful, so never give up. Hockey legend Wayne Gretzky once said - *You miss 100% of the shots you never take.* So never stop taking shots. Sooner or later you will score.

Thank you for listening.