

At times of crisis in the Church, we may perhaps feel tempted to opt out, cut ourselves off in some way and do our own private thing. Isolation is not often the best course. Maybe our Lord, in the words of St Paul, is giving a timely piece of advice: whatever you do, don't stop making Eucharist. That is your lifeblood and your contribution to the renewal and up building of the Church.

There you will find comfort, and the gift of mutual support:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.

(2 Corinthians 1 3-5)

Thanks be to God.

By way of postscript, we might also glance at Daniel 6 verse 10. Threatened with the lion's den, in view of an irrevocable interdict of the Medes and Persians, what was Daniel to do? We have his answer.

When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem; and he got down upon his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before God, as he had done previously.



'That they all may be one'

Holy Cross Series

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COMFORT ONE ANOTHER

Whenever there is division and disunity in the Church there is pain, confusion and hurt on both sides. But there are times when there is no escape from the suffering except by remaining in it. Seeking to be elsewhere, or make things other than they are, serves only to increase pain. The seemingly inevitable remains and the deadlock mysteriously deepens in face of stubborn resistance. Passive and bitter resignation lurks near at hand, a close companion to despair.

Jesus at Calvary can alone make it possible for us to continue to be, in such a situation. For the joy that lay ahead of him, he endured everything, and there are times when he calls us to join him in this. In his strength and with his enabling we are to remain with him in his trials and make up what is still lacking in his sufferings for the sake of his body, the Church.

However gravely we might seem to err, in our own eyes, corporately or individually, Jesus remains Lord of his Church, for it is his, the gates of the underworld will not prevail. There may be casualties and bitter anguish on the way for us all, but there will be no final defeat, for victory is already achieved. The Church, in fact, has no meaning or purpose outside the predetermined purposes of God, and if we remain faithful, while human things are shaken, then so much the sooner will the unshakeable Kingdom come.

St Paul would probably tell us to comfort one another with these things. It won't be a cold or sentimental comfort either, that pretends things are not as they are. The comfort we are to minister to one another, even across our conflicting understanding of things, is the strengthening grace of the Holy Spirit, who sustained Jesus through Calvary and the underworld into

the resurrection. Such comfort enables us to remain in the suffering, while God works his redemptive purposes, and so brings a whole universe, in the End, back to himself.

At times, we may feel utterly alone in all this. Companions, if there are any, or well-meant clichés, even from the words of scripture or pious exhortation, are meaningless, or indeed an insult. We are like Job in the face of his comforters. Again, there is no escape, except that of acceptance. This is the rock bottom of faith, the faith that can understand and see nothing, but which persists. It is God's gift and ultimate safety net, which holds us into life. Hope begins to glimmer through. And it is there that we find our companions again. We know of a surety that the Church is the company of all the redeemed in the Communion of Saints, and that nothing can come between us and one another in the love, which is God himself.

It is there, too, that we can know that others are at prayer with and for us, and we are upheld.

However, there is always the immediate, practical moment. What's to be done? At times of pain and bewilderment, after the initial, paralysing inertia, there comes the need to be doing something, the sheerly ordinary, so that we can regain our sanity and equilibrium. What might our Lord require of us, what, in fact, might he be offering us to do?

St Paul, once again, suggests an answer, 'This is what God, in Christ, wills for you', he says (1 Thessalonians 5 18). The suggestions made might well grate at first, alright as some of those pious exhortations spoken of earlier, but next door to impossible to act on in any real situation of acute distress, human emotions and psyche being what they are. Let's look at them:

Be always joyful;
Pray continually;
Give thanks whatever happens.

Joy may well seem furthest of all things from heart and feeling. Yes indeed, if we mean a facile, hand-clapping, 'all's well with God's world' sort. Rather, let us return to an earlier thought – Jesus at Calvary, making it possible for us to endure, because *HE* endured the full cost of the Cross and Passion for the *JOY* that lay ahead of him. The rock-bottom faith we have spoken of, which God graciously bestows on us at our point of near despair, is the birthplace of a renewal of hope. Such hope, as St Paul says elsewhere, does not put us to shame because the love of God, in the Holy Spirit, is shed abroad in our hearts. By this same grace of the Spirit, it becomes gradually just possible to sense a quiet joy at all times and even in the bitterest circumstances, since God is in control and all is in his hands.

Sensing the presence of the Spirit *IS* to be praying continually. There will indeed be moments when prayer, on the individual level, will seem impossible. It is then that we should perhaps recall that there are those in the Church given wholly to a life of prayer. In them, we are upheld. But for all of us this is God's will – pray continually. Just as soon as it is possible, we must return, after moments of crisis, to the regular pattern and framework of daily prayer to which we are accustomed, in liturgy and private devotion. Feelings are immaterial. The framework is vital as our strong support, and we shall be enabled to regain meaning, pattern and purpose there, in the familiar.

Ultimately, of course, we shall need our Eucharist, where we can, day by day, week by week, participate in the full mystery of our dying and rising with Christ. This brings us to St Paul's third point. 'Give thanks whatever happens'.

On the surface, this might seem to imply a false, external show of being glad about awful things as much as the ones we feel to be just right. But not so. Ultimately, our faith tells us that everything is well; in Christ, all things genuinely work together for good, since God is the Lord of his own creation, and God is love. For the Christian, then, it is possible, by his grace, to thank God at all times for everything. When it is well nigh impossible to *feel* grateful, it is all the more important to offer Eucharist.