



The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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BINDING AND LOOSING

Excommunication is not something that most of us think about or deal with on a regular basis. It seems to be more the stuff of movies, especially movies set in the Middle Ages, than an up and running part of our practice of the Catholic faith in the modern world. Or at least that was the case until perhaps a dozen years ago when excommunication and its kindred, less severe ecclesiastical penalties began to be raised in the discussion about what could or should be done with Catholic politicians who not only support the abortion-on-demand status quo in the U.S., but also pledge their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to the maintenance and defense of that status quo. To many Americans, both Protestant and Catholic, the raising of the possibility of excommunication seemed like a totally new and totally unwarranted intrusion of the bishops (or at least some of them) into the political process. But is it? To answer that question, we must take a look at the origin and purpose of the practice of excommunication, and also at how it was used in America in an earlier conflict.

Tracing excommunication back to its roots takes us not to the Middle Ages, but much farther back, to the words of Christ and to the practice of the apostolic Church as revealed in the letters of St. Paul. The word "excommunication" is not found in the New Testament, but the reality is clearly there, presented with a different vocabulary. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks of "binding and loosing," and in his letters, St. Paul speaks of removal from the community of believers and of turning to forgiveness.

Beginning with Jesus, we hear him twice on binding and loosing: first in Matthew 16:13-19, when he gives to Peter the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and specifically includes with them the power to bind and to loose; and again in Matthew 18:15-35, which is a much longer teaching and one which presents this power within the context of the order and mission of the Church. When faced with a "brother" (i.e., a disciple, a member of the Church) who is doing wrong, the goal is always the repentance of that brother and his salvation. Jesus wants a graduated response to the brother's wrongdoing – first try a private, one-on-one conversation; then bring a few more members of the Church to try to convince him; and finally, bring the matter before the Church as a body. If he remains obstinate through all of this, then and only then is he to be excluded from the body of believers, treated "as a Gentile and a tax collector."

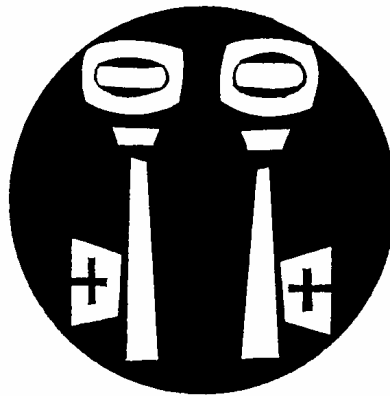
But that is not the end of it or your relationship with him, Jesus insists, for when Peter asks the Lord how many times must I forgive a brother who has sinned against me and then repented, Jesus responds with a symbolic number and a parable which says, in effect, "Always." If he sins and if he genuinely repents, he must be welcomed back and forgiven. This makes it clear that the power to "bind," the power to punish and to exclude, is but one member of a pair whose other member is the power to "loose," to remove the punishment, to reconcile, and to welcome back. Indeed, the strong suggestion here is that the former power is oriented to the latter, that the whole point of binding is so that later on there can be a loosing. Odd as it sounds,

the act of exclusion should always be performed with the intention that it be the prelude to a later act of inclusion, if the one excluded repents.

Certainly this is how the apostle Paul understood the Lord's mind on this, as we can see from his two letters to the Corinthians. Paul devotes all of chapter 5 of his first letter to the Corinthians to a case that warrants exclusion from the community of believers. The man in question is not a heretic, it is not a matter of belief or doctrine. It is a moral issue – he is cohabiting with his stepmother. This is beyond belief, Paul says, for not even the pagans allow this kind of thing. As harsh as Paul is on the sinner, he is even harsher on the Corinthian Church. How can you tolerate this? How can you allow this immorality in your midst? You should not continue to associate with him, the apostle says, but you must drive him out from the community of the faithful.

Paul is very careful to say why he makes this judgment. It is not that Christians should avoid all association with all sinful persons; that is unrealistic, Paul says, that would require you to leave the world. No, what is special about this case is precisely the sinner's status as a "brother," as a member of the Church. He is committing a notorious sin and yet he still wants to continue the normal life of the follower of Christ, including (one must suppose) table fellowship and sacramental communion. This is impossible. His immoral life has broken the bond of communion, yet he is acting as if it were not so; he is acting like there is no problem, when in reality he is doing grave wrong.

And the community of believers, by tolerating this situation, is making things even worse. Perhaps it thinks it is being kind to the man by allowing him to remain a member of the Church, but it is really doing him great harm by seeming to countenance this charade, and it is falsifying its own identity and betraying its own mission to boot. If you are genuinely concerned about his salvation, if you want him to be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus, then you must put



him out. This is the essential, indispensable first step, as the apostle sees it.

The second step is taken up by Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians. He may be talking about this same case or it may be a different one, but the principle is the same. In II Corinthians 2:1-11 Paul urges the Church to relent and to welcome back one that it has been punishing. Clearly the man feels sorrow, the "godly grief" that the apostle will discuss later in the epistle (7:8-11) which brings repentance. Paul does not

want the former sinner's sorrow to become excessive and overwhelming. It has served its purpose, and now the man should be welcomed back and reconciled with the community. The punishment has achieved what it was meant to achieve – the person has changed his behavior, he has ceased the sin that prompted the imposition of the punishment, and so he must be received back.

Paul, in obedience to Christ, sees binding as the first step towards loosing. Odd as it seems, the whole point of excommunication is reconciliation. A notorious sinner is punished by the community precisely so that a repentant sinner can be welcomed back later on. It is the same person who is excommunicated and reconciled, but he is not really the same. The shock of the exclusion has been a saving grace, one that forced him to face the truth about his situation and himself, to open his heart to the grace of repentance, and to change his ways. That is the true point and purpose of binding and loosing. That is why excommunication exists.

Turning from New Testament times to our own times, we have two cases in which we can see this process at work. One belongs to the civil rights struggle of the 50's and 60's, and it played out to a successful conclusion. The other is from the current struggle over abortion, and we do not yet know how it will end.

In early 1953, Archbishop Joseph F. Rummel of New Orleans issued a pastoral letter in which he stated that the goal of the Archdiocese would

be the racial integration of all its schools. The archbishop's action took no one by surprise. Two years earlier he had ordered the removal of all "white" and "colored" signs from all Catholic churches, and he had held a number of public consultations and meetings about the school situation. Still, his decision met with a storm of protest, both inside and outside of the Catholic community. Legislative maneuvers, court challenges, and legal proceedings were begun with the goal of frustrating the archbishop's desegregation plan. At the center of the opposition to Archbishop Rummel was Leander Perez, devout Catholic and one of Louisiana's most powerful politicians. Perez pulled strings behind the scenes, and publicly called on Catholics to withhold contributions from their parishes and to fight in other ways to keep the archbishop from moving ahead with his plan.

The delaying tactics dragged on for years, but finally Archbishop Rummel set the opening of the 1962-63 school year as the date for the implementation of his desegregation policy. And on April 16, 1962 he excommunicated Leander Perez and two other leaders of the resistance, having warned them the previous month that this would be the result of their continued opposition. Rummel died two years later. Perez remained in defiance for six years after his excommunication. In 1968, after receiving the sacrament of confession and making a public retraction, conditions imposed on his return to the Church by Archbishop Rummel in the decree of excommunication, Perez was reconciled to the Church. A year later he died and received a Catholic funeral from his parish.

No one can know for sure whether his repentance was heart felt or only an external formality. What we do know for sure is that his excommunication ended the scandal of a very public and very effective segregationist's being a member in good standing of the Catholic Church. In short, Archbishop Rummel's excommunication of Perez did exactly what the action is supposed to do, according to the New Testament – it protected the Church from corruption, and gave the sinner the gift of the strongest possible wake-up call to the truth about himself.

Today, in the state of Kansas and on the issue of abortion, there is a case worth watching. Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann has made public his request to Governor Kathleen Sebelius to refrain from receiving holy communion. In May of this year in his archdiocesan newspaper, the archbishop gave the reasons for his request. Governor Sebelius over the years has made her pro-abortion position clear. Most troubling to the archbishop has been her very public acceptance of campaign contributions and political support from Dr. George Tiller and a PAC he has formed of Kansas abortion providers. Dr. Tiller, notes the archbishop, is "perhaps the most notorious late-term abortionist in the nation." She has also vetoed legislation that would have placed additional legal requirements on the state's abortion clinics.

Archbishop Naumann says that he has met with her several times, over many months, out of concern for her and "for those who have been misled by her very public support for legalized abortion." In August of 2007 he wrote privately to her and requested that she not receive holy communion until she had gone to confession and had made a public repudiation of her previous efforts in support of laws and policies that sanction abortion. Apparently Governor Sebelius complied with this request for more than half a year, but in April 2008 she received communion, which prompted the bishop to make public the history of his dealings with her. He repeated his request that she refrain from the receiving the sacrament. He does this because "the spiritually lethal message, communicated by our governor, as well as many other high profile Catholics in public life, has been in effect: 'The Church's teaching on abortion is optional.'"

Governor Sebelius has not been excommunicated, but the bishop does mention "additional pastoral actions" he may have to take if she does not comply with his request. This is not over, and we do not know how it will end. There are other cases like this, and there may be many more, for the struggle against abortion on demand, like the struggle against slavery in the 19th century and like the struggle for civil rights in the 20th, will be a long and difficult one.

