



Dear Friends,

I find it difficult to pay attention to the news these days. I have to consciously choose to subject myself to what's portrayed on the TV or put in print. To watch our people rip and tear each other apart is painful. The intensity of the bitter criticism the Representatives hurled at each other day during the impeachment debate was upsetting. I expected one side to rush against the other at one point starting a donnybrook. How are they even going to be able to talk to each other let alone govern the nation after that?!?!

The "National Catholic Reporter" newspaper reported this week on the Holy Father's annual Christmas message to the Roman Curia (the Cardinals and bishops who lead the world-wide Church). Pope Francis has criticized this group before for their gossiping and back biting. This year he scolded them for taking sides and harshly criticizing each other. Within what is the "Capitol" of our Church these leaders are apparently as divided as Democrats and Republicans in Congress. The Holy Father chastised them, accusing them of causing and perpetuating division within the Church by staunchly sticking with those who agree with them and bad mouthing, if not condemning, those who don't. Pope Francis noted that continuing in such a way will lead to deepening division within the Church. It can also be a prelude to a schism.

I fear for our future. The divide within the nation and our Church grows deeper by the day. And the divisions have some similarities. In both cases a major disagreement revolves around how to operate in the 21st century which has changed in so many ways from the last century. Both Church and nation face major changes begun in the last century and continuing into this century. For the USA, racism once again has become a major issue; the role of the central government is another; and the economy a third. Boiled down, all of this becomes a power struggle.

Ditto for the Catholic Church. Vatican Council II fundamentally altered the trajectory of the Church changing not only ritual practices, but our fundamental understanding of and our relationship with God. Absolute obedience to Rome was undermined by the Council's call for collegiality. That, in turn, has led to questions regarding the role of women in the Church and to calls by local communities having a say in choosing bishops. "Mismanagement" of the Church finances has led to calls for greater transparency which has led to removal of finances from the traditional Office to another. Theologically, the notion of a kinder, gentler God (as well as cultural shifts in the western world) has led to a re-examining of some moral teachings. As within our country, these disagreements have led to a power struggle.

Neither our nation nor our Church is a stranger to strong disagreements leading to a fracture. In the US, very strong disagreement led to the Civil War; in the Church such disagreements led to the Reformation. Are we headed in that direction again?

In the Civil War military conquest settled the question of whether a state had the right to secede from the Union, but did not address the issue of black/white relationship. In the Church, excommunication and mutual condemnation shattered the unity of Christianity, but did nothing to address the issue of ultimate authority. In both cases, anger and bitterness were sown in people, which is the legacy of both and the issue of today.

I don't pretend to be a politician nor a student of democratic government so I can't speak to the national issue as such. But as a student of and proclaimer of the Gospel, I can speak.

Last Sunday we heard the prophet tell us "The Spirit is the truth." In this morning's Letter to the Hebrews, the author referred to "the deceit of sin," i.e. sin is a lie. To me, the way is clear. As Christians we need to turn to the Holy Spirit for the truth that we all need. But to do that, we have to acknowledge every baptized person has received the Holy Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation, which means each of us has *a bit* of the truth. *Only the Spirit has the truth.* So, we have to listen to each other to discover the truth. That means repentance from "my way or the highway" to "thy will be done." This in turn requires the humility to accept that I don't have all the answers and that others may have ideas that, combine with my/our contribution, may lead us to a better life. Our help is in the name of the Lord. That much is clear.

*Fr. Denis*