

## “SECURUS JUDICAT ORBIS TERRARUM” THE CHURCH AS PILLAR OF TRUTH

It can happen in the blink of an eye. You may recall that Saint Augustine’s moment of conversion came on the day in which he heard a voice in a garden– “Take up and read, take up and read.” He thought it was the voice of a child, but in retrospect, it was the voice of God. He opened the Bible to the very first place upon which his eyes came to rest, Romans 13:14. “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh.” A similar watershed moment would happen about 1450 years later. In 1839, then Anglican priest **John Henry Newman** stumbled upon a rather obscure passage in a letter written in 400 A.D. by Saint Augustine, directed against a heresy of his day. That phrase helped to alter Newman’s view of the Catholic Church, and he entered full communion six years later. Augustine was arguing that the heretics, when pressed with the question “Where is the Catholic Church?” would point to the building in which the priest offered the Mass. They would never point to their own homes or gathering spaces. The Church was something more than individuals; it was a community of believers.

Indeed, centuries later there was a time when the authority of the Pope in Rome was seen as so absolute, that some wrongly attributed infallibility to practically every utterance that came forth from the mouth of the Holy Father. Known as **Ultramontanism** (lit. “beyond the mountains”), it referred to those in Europe looking beyond the Alps (i.e. to the seven hills of Rome) for guidance on everything. That mentality did a tremendous disservice to the pope, but more importantly to the Catholic faith. Being a student of history, Newman struggled with such exaggerated claims. As an Anglican he was content to look to the early creeds and councils prior to any split in the Church, but in his own day could only accept a kind of infallibility in a common judgment of all the branches of the Church “catholic,” namely the Orthodox, the Roman and the Anglican.

Absent an English translation, I’ll quote the passage that caught Newman’s eye: *Quapropter securus judicat orbis terrarum, bonos non esse qui se dividunt ab orbe terrarum, in quacumque parte orbis terrarum* (*Against the Letter of Parmenian III, 24*). My best crack at a rough translation: “And on account of the **secure judgment of the whole world**, they are not good who separate themselves from the world, in whatever part of the world.” Augustine was really pointing to the **universal Church** against the localized schism that tried to create a Church of the perfect. Newman asked himself– “Where is the Catholic Church?” Could it be that the reformation itself was separating itself from the Church? Clearly, people have very different answers to this question and the Church is always in need of reform, precisely because she is comprised of individuals in need of reform! But something perdures and this is the Church herself. Like Augustine before him, Newman found this truth in the “secure judgment” of the Catholic Church.

Augustine labored for years to demonstrate the continuance of the Church despite the unworthy lives of some of its members– especially the clergy! The Donatists (named after Bishop Donatus of Carthage) believed that a priest who was guilty of serious sin could **not validly celebrate the sacraments**. The “worthiness” of the minister was a constitutive element for validity. Think about it– it totally begs the question of how the laity could ever know if their Eucharist was valid! Augustine saw the pitfalls in this because he knew that the holiness of the Church was dependent upon the action of the Holy Spirit and not upon the state of individual souls. In showing that Parmenian’s view (successor to Bp. Donatus in Carthage) was dangerous, Augustine was not defending clerics being in serious sin while celebrating the sacraments! But he was vigorously articulating that the universal Church was much greater than the sum of her members. The “secure judgment” of the whole world demonstrates the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. The Donatists had broken communion with churches outside of North Africa, and had become schismatics.

When we recite the **Nicene Creed** each Sunday, the first words out of our mouths are “I believe.” That itself is a positive and intentional formulation of assent to all that follows. The desire for God is written in our human heart. We were created for God and as so beautifully summarized centuries ago: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” (*Confessions I:1*) When we fall in love with God, we do not fall in love with an “idea” but a Person. And yet, it is equally true that we cannot love that which we do not know. To love God is to know Him, this is where theology and doctrine intersect. Theology as “Faith seeking understanding” takes hard work and commitment to grow in the faith.

I can recall my frustration as a fourteen year-old when I asked my Biology teacher, “How do you spell photosynthesis?” Though it seemed a perfectly legitimate question, he merely glanced up and pointed to the dictionary. No **Google** or spellcheck in those days! He wanted me to formulate an hypothesis as to how the word *might* be spelled, test my theory and “figure it out.” He refused to “spoon-feed” us as he called it. Looking back, he did more than any prof in my life to teach me how to think and work! The Church too grows in her understanding of doctrine by means of the hard work of thinking, studying, reflecting upon Scripture and Tradition and relying on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Saint Paul, when writing to Timothy, was hoping to visit him soon. He added (1 Tim 3:15): “But if I should be delayed, you should know how to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of truth.” This ought to give each of us comfort on our journey of faith.

- Ready or not...Lent begins this **Wednesday March 1, 2017**. Each of the three Masses will include the distribution of ashes: **7:00 a.m.** (note earlier time for workers), **12:00 Noon** and finally at **5:15 p.m.** with our Children’s Choir. **Stations of the Cross**, one of the hallmarks of the Lenten season will be offered **Fridays at 7:00 p.m.**
- As a gift from my sister, each member of our family received a **DNA Kit** that purports to identify our exact ethnic genealogy. Perhaps you’ve seen the television ads. I’m skeptical of any conclusion based upon a single saliva test tube deposit. But I eventually acquiesced, right after washing down my **Wienerschnitzel** and **Coq Au Vin** dinner with **Guinness Extra Stout**. Can’t wait for the results!
- Whither the **thimble**? After an online poll, **Monopoly** execs decided to remove the thimble as a game piece. It has been a fixture since 1935 and was my mother’s favored piece. Since few sew today, I’m not surprised. A new piece will be revealed next month. I’m guessing a cell phone or a Monopoly emoji.
- **Norma McCorvey** may not be a household name to you. But she was the plaintiff at the center of the infamous 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision, using the pseudonym Jane Roe. Many are unaware that years later, she was a “born-again” Christian. Then, several years after that she was received into full communion as a Roman Catholic, becoming a staunch pro-life activist. Never doubt the power of God’s grace!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector