

Easter IV 2024
Saint Patrick's
4/28/2024

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be always acceptable unto Thee, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

From the Gospel: **“Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.”** (John 16:13)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

We have noted how the meaning of words change over time.

Sometimes this is no more than changing fashion.

Sometimes, however, changes in meaning reveal changes in understanding.

Two words which have greatly changed, in their connotations, at least, are “orthodoxy” and “heresy.”

Orthodoxy used to be a good thing, and heresy used to be a bad thing, indeed a very, very bad thing.

The definitions have not changed, “orthodoxy” still means right belief, and “heresy” still means wrong belief.

On the other hand, the connotations of both have been turned on their heads.

Today, “orthodoxy” connotes something to be sneered at: antiquated, closed-minded, mean-spirited, and almost certainly wrong.

By the same token, “heresy” now connotes something brave and wonderful: fresh, interesting, insightful, freeing, and almost certainly right.

This change seems to point to the modern approach to truth itself.

Today there is a general notion that whatever the official teaching of “the establishment” is, whatever that means in the case in question, is by definition,

wrong; it is intended to keep the powerful in power and the people in subjection and ignorance.

We could point to the “revisionist” history now being taught in our schools for one example.

For another, in popular religious culture, there is a fascination with the sort of Gnostic Literature which was, as one TV program puts it, “banned from the Bible.”

The mean old Fathers of the Church presumably wanted to keep the people ignorant of these wonderful gnostic teachings so they could keep them down.

Behind all of this, in addition to the rather bizarre “conspiracy theory” approach to history, is the idea that truth is ultimately unknowable.

I am reminded of a Roman Governor who once washed his hands and asked, “what is truth?”

If truth can be whatever I chose it to be, by what right does the “establishment” tell me what to think?

At an even deeper level, the notion that truth is unknowable means that we cannot know reality; truth is that which corresponds with reality.

At the deepest level, this means God is unknowable, because God is the ultimate reality.

This is the deadliest form of agnosticism; if we, a priori, cannot know reality, all inquiry is useless.

Theism, and Christianity in particular, takes the opposite approach.

We believe that God wants to be known, and indeed has gone to great lengths, even becoming one of us, to make Himself known to us.

As Jesus told Thomas, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life.”** (John 14:6)

If we know Jesus, we know the truth.

The problem is that Jesus is a very rich and very compact message.

It is no accident that John did not write, “the word became flesh,” until after many, many years of reflecting on Christ in the light of his ongoing experience with him.

Few of us will attain that level of spiritual insight, in this life, at least.

Even now, however, we are blessed to have the record of many centuries of the Church’s experience available to guide us.

We have the Scriptures themselves, of course.

We have the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church.

We have the ancient liturgies of the Church which show us the Church’s Faith as it informed Her prayer life and vice versa.

As we believe, so we pray; as we pray so we believe.

(As an aside, the reason orthodox Christians resist liturgical innovation is that a change in the liturgy may both reveal and promote a change in the Faith.)

Taken together, this wonderful heritage: Scripture, Patristics, and Liturgy, forms the Holy (capital “T”) Tradition, the orthodox teaching of the Church.

The very orthodoxy which modern thought hates is a God-given gift.

Orthodoxy did not develop in a vacuum, however, nor was its development always linear.

Wrong ideas came into the Church from time to time.

The first few centuries of the Church’s life were a time of extraordinary religious and philosophical turmoil; the old paganism was passing away and new religious movements, such as the mystery religions and Gnosticism were taking its place.

Those who came into the Church brought with them ideas from their former lives.

Sometimes they tried to incorporate those ideas into their understanding of Christianity, which led them astray.

Also, in trying to delve into the mysteries of Christ, some men quite innocently drew wrong inferences.

Finally, and perhaps most dangerously, there were those who wanted to “simplify” the Faith.

Christian truth almost always involves synthesizing two seemingly contradictory ideas.

For example, the necessary Truth the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are all God, yet there are not three gods, but one God is a difficult notion.

Various attempts to get around this difficulty were proposed, some quite ingenious, but all of them wrong, dangerously wrong.

Then too, there were many spurious gospels, epistles, and acts written (much beloved of the “Banned from the Bible” crowd), and some liturgical innovations attempted which were inconsistent with truth.

Almost certainly, we don’t know the whole story of these errors.

Many of these errors simply died out for the “lack of a second;” no lasting damage was done.

In other cases, however some Christians formed groups which held and promoted dangerously wrong ideas; those ideas became formal heresies.

When this happened, to preserve the unity of the Church, it became necessary for the whole Church to come together to settle the matter.

To deal with error, it became necessary to carefully establish what was true.

It is not too much to say that orthodox Christian doctrine was almost always defined in response to heresy.

The idea that heresy spawned orthodoxy may be a revolting thought, but it is nevertheless true.

On the other hand, the very reluctance of the Church to define doctrine too rigidly unless driven to do so by the appearance of formal heresy gives lie to the modern

notion that the early Church Fathers were a bunch of mean old graybeards who sat around inventing new doctrines, presumably to keep the masses in subjection.

This leaves us with the very real question of how the Early Church was able to distinguish truth from error.

Which brings us back to our text for today, “Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth.”

This verse, taken from the Last Discourse in which Jesus prepares the disciples for what is about to come, contains two promises.

First, it is the conclusion of the promise begun in verse 7, **“Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.”** (John 16:7)

Jesus promises the disciples the coming of “the comforter,” which is one translation of a very difficult Greek word, *parakletos*, which literally means “one who is called alongside,” but which can indicate “one who consoles or comforts, one who encourages or uplifts; hence refreshes, and/or one who intercedes on our behalf as an advocate in court.”

Clearly, this is a reference to the Holy Ghost.

This promise is so important that Jesus makes it not once, but three times, once in each of the three chapters of the Final Discourse.

In each case, Jesus also calls Him the “Spirit of Truth.”

The second promise helps us to understand why Jesus calls Him the “Spirit of Truth.”

“He will guide you into all Truth.”

It significant that this promise was made to the group, “you” not to each of them as individuals, “thee.”

(One of the blessings of King James English is that it retains the often-important distinction between the singular and the plural forms of the second person pronoun.)

Of course, the Holy Ghost guides each of us, but in His role as the Spirit of Truth, He guides the Church as a whole.

It is still quite possible for a Christian, or a group of Christians to go disastrously wrong, but the Universal Church cannot.

For this reason, Saint Paul calls the Church, “the pillar and ground of the truth.” (I Tim. 3:15)

The inescapable conclusion is when the Church speaks with one voice, hers is the voice of the Holy Ghost; what she speaks is Truth.

This conclusion was given form by Saint Vincent of Lerins, in what is called the Vincentian Canon, [The Catholic Faith] is “that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.”

The facts of Church history show us that despite the rise of many heresies over the centuries, some of which gained large followings, and some of which persisted for a long time, under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth, eventually those heresies died out and the true faith prevailed.

Of course, since the Great Schism of 1054, and even more so after the seemingly endless schisms in the Western Church in the 15th century and since, the Church no longer speaks with one voice; we can no longer discern in all that babble the voice of the Spirit of Truth.

Nevertheless, we can and do hold as divinely certified truth all those things on which the undivided Church agreed.

In closing, it would be wonderful to think that heresy is a thing of the past.

Unfortunately, men continue to “rediscover” the ancient heresies, recycling them over and over, although under new names.

To the best of my knowledge, there is no major Christian group which self-identifies as being “Arian,” but the tendency to minimize or discount our Lord’s

divinity is still very much present today, particularly with respect to those of His teachings which make us uncomfortable.

Nor are there many self-identified “Gnostics” today, although there are a few, but the Gnostic notion of an illuminati possessing a higher knowledge which is concealed within the lower religion of lesser men is still very much in vogue in some ecclesiastical circles.

These, and many other ancient heresies still exist, although hiding under new names, and sadly are often influential in the thought and teaching of some churchmen, even some senior prelates.

One of the main reasons the Anglican Province in America, and many of the so-called “Continuing Anglican” bodies exist is to provide teaching and worship as free from heresy as we can, God being our help.

Beloved, we have been entrusted with the increasingly rare treasure of the Faith of the Undivided Church.

In gratitude for that trust, it is our bounden duty to share that treasure with others and especially the young, who will live on after us.

Our Lord once asked, “Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8)

Let us make it our solemn purpose to answer Him, “Yes, Lord.”
Amen.

And now we ascribe, as is most justly due, unto Thee, O Lord, all might, majesty, power, and dominion, both now and forever. *Amen.*

“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” (St. Matt. vii. 21.)