

You may have heard the adage “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” That is to say that while on the surface things seem to change constantly, those changes do not affect reality on a deeper level. At a deep level reality is pretty much a constant.

Or to put it another way, after two thousand years of growth, periods of upheaval, reform, schism, along with periods of relative peace and serenity, the state of the Catholic Church is pretty much the same now as it was in the early centuries of her existence.

To be Catholic, that is, to follow the teachings God has given us through the Catholic Church, is to be out of step with society as a whole. This gap between the Church and secular world may be widening in recent years, but it is nothing new.

In the pre-Christian world, it was not uncommon for people to abandon unwanted newborns. They would simply leave the children in the fields or the wilderness for the wild animals to devour. It was up to the followers of Christ to steal into the fields and forests in the dead of night to rescue the discarded children.

When plague threatened the cities of the ancient world, people shut themselves in their homes or fled to the country, leaving those of poorer means to fend for themselves. It was the Christians who stayed behind to tend to the sick and the afflicted.

In ancient Rome, compassion was considered a weakness, and the gladiatorial games, in part, were intended to desensitize people to the suffering of others, to rid them of the feeling of compassion.

But the Christians went against the societal norms. Saint Telemachus risked his life to stop the gladiatorial games by standing between two combatants, refusing to move. For his trouble he was stoned to death by the crowd, perhaps because of the shame the saint elicited among them. But it was the beginning of the end. Within thirteen years, the games were all but abandoned.

Saint Marcellus was an officer in the Roman army. But he began to see that his faith and the duty he was called to observe, were incompatible. At a party held in honor of the emperor's birthday, a party which would have included human sacrifice along with other depravities, Marcellus renounced his position, tearing off the symbols of his rank and throwing them to the floor. He was put to death for being a Christian. But within 15 years the emperor Constantine ruled that Christians were to be allowed to follow their faith without oppression.

We have been somewhat complacent in our faith for a long time now. But we can no longer afford the luxury of remaining in maintenance mode. It is time for us to return to the work of the Church, it is time to return to missionary mode. Each and every one of us is called to go out into the world and make new disciples for Christ.

This is the good fruit that we are called to bear, in spite of the pruning of the master. By following Christ we are transformed. We do not simply hear His words and act accordingly. When we follow Jesus, He unites Himself to us so completely that His very life flows through our veins.

“I am the vine, you are the branches.” Where does a vine stop and its branches begin? The union is too complete to tell.

Just as the same sap nourishes both vine and branch, it is God's grace that flows through Christ and through each of us, allowing us to do remarkable things.

But we are a special type of branch in that it is up to us to stay united to the vine. It is our responsibility. If we do not, if we cease to bear good fruit, then Jesus makes it clear that we will wither, die and be cast into the fire.

So how do we stay united to the vine so that we may continue to bear good fruit and share in eternal life? Our Lord tells us how in today's Gospel reading.

First we need to constantly improve our prayer life. We need to read and reflect upon holy scripture. The Bible is God's plan for our salvation and we need to read and reflect upon this plan in order to open ourselves to the divine light, much like plants need to open themselves to the light of the sun. We need this divine light to grow spiritually and enrich our life of prayer.

Second, we need to make good use of the sacraments, especially the sacraments of Confession and Eucharist.

When we have mortal sin on our conscience it damages our relationship with God, like a branch broken in a storm. This separation causes our spiritual life to wither and die. Just as the gardener knows how to tie up the branch so it will be reunited with the vine, the sacrament of reconciliation, going to confession, renews our connection with Jesus that was damaged by sin. The grace that flows from this renewed connection, restores our spiritual health.

In the Eucharist, the grace that is restored to us in Confession is increased as we receive the Lord, body, blood, soul, and divinity. He is closer to us in the sacrament of the Eucharist than at any other time. The Eucharist strengthens us and nourishes us.

If prayer is sunlight, the Eucharist is a rain shower, refreshing and renewing our souls.

Third, to stay united to the vine requires loving obedience to God's will.

All too frequently we see prominent personalities who claim to be Catholic but do not act like Catholics. We need to do more than just talk the talk, we need to walk the walk. St. John tells us that we need to love one another, not in word or speech, but in deed and truth. We need to show the world our faith by the way we act. Our talk has to translate into

actions and the strength of virtues: into honesty, purity, faithfulness, courage, self-sacrifice, and obedience to Church teaching.

But this requires humility, and humility is seen as a weakness in our day, much like compassion was seen as a weakness to the ancient Romans. Our contemporary society seems engineered to drive from us the virtue of humility. Everyone is affirmed, everyone is entitled, everyone is a celebrity.

But St. Vincent de Paul said: "The most powerful weapon to conquer the Devil is humility. For, as he does not know at all how to employ it, neither does he know how to defend himself from it."

The devil cannot defend himself against humility because he does not understand it. It is a light he cannot comprehend.

Finally, staying united to the vine means that we must allow God to prune us, so that we may bear more and greater fruit. We are pruned when we suffer. It may be painful, physical sufferings, like sickness, disease, financial insecurity, or old-age. Or it may be hidden, interior sufferings, like losing a loved one or watching a dear relative abandon their Catholic faith.

We like to think that we have control over our lives, but we really do not. We cannot control what happens to us, only how we respond. When God allows us to suffer it is our faith that reminds us that He is in control, He is the vine dresser.

The vine dresser knows how much to prune each branch, and it is different for each branch. God will not allow us to suffer more than we are capable of bearing. And God uses our suffering to unite us more closely to Christ, who suffered on the cross to redeem the world.

In times of great pain, we are called to trust in God. Remember to keep deep within our hearts the prayer He Himself taught us through his revelations to St. Faustina of the Divine Mercy: "Jesus, I trust in you."

Allowing God to prune us, accepting our cross and not rebelling against it, this is the secret of the holy life lived by every saint.

St Ignatius of Loyola said: "If God causes you to suffer much, it is a sign that he has great designs for you, and that he certainly intends to make you a saint. And if you wish to become a great saint, entreat him to give you much opportunity for suffering; for there is no wood better to kindle the fire of holy love than the wood of the Cross, which Christ used for his own sacrifice of boundless charity."

By this is the Father glorified, that we bear much fruit and become the disciples of Jesus.

Bearing such fruit makes life worth living; without it we are dry, dead branches good for nothing except the fire.

Notice that Jesus does not say, "without me you can do little," He says that "without me, you can do nothing."

We must be so closely united to Christ that one cannot tell where the branch ends and the vine begins. When we remain in Him as He remains in us, when we cannot tell where we end and Christ begins, then, whatever we ask for, will be done for us.

Prayer, the sacraments, loving obedience, and suffering in union with Christ are the things that nourish us, as the sap nourishes the vine. If you want a life of joy and meaning, a life that positively impacts those around you and changes the world, if you want a life that continues into eternity, this is the way.