

# **Bitterness & Resentment Are Killing Us – by Fr. Thomas Weinady**

Twenty-five years after the Second Vatican Council, despite all its benefits, the Catholic Church continues to suffer from an unintended side effect-resentment-which corrupts truth and suppresses charity. It is a bipartisan disease, affecting church liberals and conservatives alike, robbing them of objectivity and galvanizing them into ideological camps.

I want to propose that resentment can be healed, and that such healing is absolutely essential if we, as individuals and as a church, are to proclaim the gospel.

Immediately following the council, resentment was primarily the prerogative of those who would come to be known as conservative Catholics. For some, the liturgical, sacramental, and devotional changes, and the manner in which they were implemented, caused alienation. Others felt betrayed by priests, religious, and theologians who, in the name of "the spirit" of the council, seemed to abandon not only the church's cultural inheritance, but also elements of Catholic doctrine and morals.

Conservatives compiled lists of grievances. They cited instances in which Jesus' divinity and bodily Resurrection were questioned or denied.

To their consternation, they saw some people dismiss sin as a medieval relic and place moral absolutes in the museum of theological history. The liberal response to *Humanae Vitae* provoked their anger and bitterness, later to be refocused on the issues of homosexuality and feminism.

Resentment alone did not nurture conservative

associations and publications, for there was a legitimate concern to protect truth. But it was surely mixed with the milk upon which these fraternities and publications fed and grew.

Immediately following the council, liberals often became angry with their conservative counterparts for foot-dragging, but by and large in those days they were not resentful. They may have been resentful of real and perceived past injustices and injuries, but they confidently believed they were riding an irreversible wave of renewal.

In the midst of this new enthusiasm, old resentments could easily be cast aside or at least concealed. After all, liberal influence was becoming decisive in chanceries, parishes, schools, CCD programs, universities, academic associations, and religious orders.

But the appearance of Pope John Paul II, and with him, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, became the catalyst for rejuvenated liberal resentment. A new swell of theological conservatism seemed to have returned. Much that had been won since Vatican II seemed jeopardized. .

The Küng, Hunthausen, and Curran affairs, plus the appointments of apparently conservative bishops, symbolized and affected this conservative papal hegemony. Fear and anxiousness among liberals intensified (and with some cause) as conservatives rallied with renewed vigor around the papal flag and the disciplinary authority of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, regularly referred to in liberal publications as "the former Holy Office."

Many conservatives, but hardly all, recovered their hope during the 1980s and lost some of their extreme negativity and stridency. However, most conservatives still seethed with a cauldron of resentment that erupted with the telling of each new

horrific (and often true) tale of heterodoxy. Thus, resentment, expressed in angry words, but more often in mocking ridicule and negative humor—be it conservative or liberal—has infected almost every chancery; parish rectory, and religious house, as well as almost every parish council and academic faculty.

It infects the charismatic renewal too. The movement has its own bitter factional struggles. Some mirror the conservative-liberal split in the wider church, but there are others: prayer group versus covenant community, one kind of covenant community versus another; one set of leaders holding on against rivals.

Few Catholics who have been around the charismatic renewal very long have escaped rivalries, struggles, and upheavals in the movement.

What is the point of this brief but sad tale of resentment within the postconciliar church? Hatred is disfiguring the whole body of Christ, and unless it is dealt with, Christ's body may soon be unrecognizable.

Just how resentment ravages us as individual Christians and how it, in turn, affects the whole church might best be illustrated from a personal example:

While I studied theology in the seminary in the early 1970s, my resentment and anger toward my liberal Catholic peers and teachers so engulfed my mind, will, and emotions that I could hardly pray. I would spend entire meditation periods constructing arguments against the latest lecture I'd heard, which denied, say, Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist or the indissolubility of Christian marriage.

Much of my mental and emotional life revolved around contesting and defeating my opponents. The resentment, bitterness, and animosity nurtured in this mental combat were overwhelming and all-encom-

passing. Driving my car, lying in bed at night, or shaving in the morning, I carried on and rehearsed an almost endless bitter argument.

Resentment began to define me as a person, and if something did not change, it would define my priesthood and spiritual life. I was molding myself into a cynical, bitter priest. Others saw this as well.

I am not psychologically unique. My former mental state is, I think, illustrative of the mental state of many conservatives and liberals in the church today. It also exemplifies the corporate psyche of a church continually embroiled in internal battles.

Some conservatives might say that I had just cause to be angry and upset. Some liberals might contend that they, too, have a right to be bitter.

I was attempting to address legitimate concerns—the integrity of the gospel and the authentic doctrines of the church. But while I may have been unfairly treated at times, I now recognize that my resentment colored my perception and limited my judgment, making me unable to address these issues in an objective and noble manner. In my heart, I desperately wanted to claim allegiance solely to the gospel and the church, yet my resentment testified against me.

Now I clearly understand that I was responsible for my mind and what I tolerated to go on within it. I was responsible for cultivating and fostering resentment.

Is there a solution to this postconciliar syndrome of resentment? I believe there is.

For the church to be healed, we must take to heart Jesus' injunction that we love our enemies (see Matt. 5:43-45). "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27).

To love our enemies means first of all that, while our opponents may consider us enemies because of our theological or ecclesial stances, we ourselves wish to be enemies of no one, but. desire only to penetrate and uphold the truth of the gospel. The Pharisees, for example, made Jesus their enemy; he did not make them his enemy.

Secondly, however, we do not pretend to see our opponents as intimate comrades, but recognize them for who they truly are-as those who may seriously differ with us and zealously oppose our beliefs and judgments. Some may even detest and abuse us.

Thus we argue and contend with every whit and fiber of our being, knowing that the truth of the gospel and the eternal salvation of our people are at stake. Yet, despite our radical and often irreconcilable differences, we must seek the good of those hostile to our convictions and recognize that we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

I no longer consider all theological liberals my enemies (a true work of grace), since I admit there are legitimate emphases and approaches different from my own. Nonetheless I recognize that those who deny or undermine the central affirmations of the creed-those who would question or reject the full divinity and humanity of Jesus-could never fully be one with me in heart and mind, unless I (God forbid) or they (God be praised) change. Still, I must love them in Christ.

But how can I or anyone learn to love those who oppose us, even while they continue to do so? How do we purify ourselves of resentment and replace it with love?

There are at least four basic spiritual or gospel practices which, when done daily, can purge us of resentment and help heal the church as well.

**1. Repentance.** In repentance we acknowledge that we alone are morally responsible for resentment and thus for the sin that it is, even if perceived or real injury or injustice led us toward it. We devise no excuses.

Through repentance, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we cast away resentment. We ask Jesus to heal us of its effects.

**2. Forgiveness.** To forgive is doubtless the hardest thing Jesus commanded us to do, and yet our own salvation depends on it. "If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you" (Matt. 6:12-15, 18:35; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).

Forgiveness is contrary to our perverted sense of justice. We can excuse people who unintentionally harm us, but we find it repugnant to forgive someone we believe to have knowingly and willingly hurt us. Yet this is precisely what Jesus said we must do.

In forgiveness we no longer hold the injustice against the person who committed it. We strive instead to think about and act toward the person with respect and honor. We promise neither to mock nor maliciously ridicule our enemy.

Forgiveness then dispels the emotional negativity that accompanies resentment. It restores inner peace, intellectual objectivity, and emotional balance, from which we can honestly consider how we are to love our enemies-and relate to them.

**3. Guarding our minds.** If we do not -vigilantly shepherd our thoughts and feelings, new grievances will reawaken old injuries. Resentment will regain access and gather renewed momentum. For this reason, frequent examination of conscience is true spiritual wisdom.

**4. Prayer.** In daily prayer, we remember that love of God and love of neighbor is paramount to the Christian life. Likewise in prayer we remember that our real concern must

be for the gospel and the salvation of people and not just the defeat of those who oppose us.

Of course, we may pray for them and their transformation, that God's love and mercy would be upon them and that the Holy Spirit might fill them with wisdom and knowledge. We should also pray for protection from our enemies.

Only as individuals overcome anger and lack of forgiveness can a more prophetic church emerge, capable of proclaiming the gospel and healing the divisions in the world. Even the presence or absence of resentment can teach us something very important about discerning today's work of the Spirit.

For example, resentment prejudices scholarship, rendering it incapable of being genuinely prophetic. Resentment breeds ideology, factionalism, defensiveness, closed-mindedness, and egoism. Resentment, then, is contrary to authentic Catholic scholarship—which requires openness to the Spirit, objectivity, a desire that the gospel shape and transform our minds and hearts, and an ardent pursuit of truth, even if it means we ourselves must change. Only those scholars striving to be free from resentment have the intellectual and emotional freedom to rise above partisanship.

A personal example illustrating how I believe the Spirit helped me transcend my rigid conservatism may be helpful. There was a time when I assumed that the church's disarray could be alleviated maybe resolved entirely—solely by better theology, clearer magisterial teaching, and more ecclesial documents. While I still maintain that good theology and prophetic documents are of the highest importance, I now believe that the lived witness of Christians is at least equally significant.

Only vibrant Catholics authenticate—and only animated

Christian communities embody—an otherwise lifeless orthodoxy. And only they, by their obedient faith, witness to the Spirit empowering them both to live the gospel and to stand firm amid the winds of fad and idle speculation:

The lesson, then, is simple: Resentment so perverts the truth that even if a person says something that embodies some real element of truth, but says it with the breath of bitterness, it cannot be genuinely anointed or bear the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (see Gal. 5:22-23).

When I strive to speak the truth without anger and resentment, I speak with purity, objectivity, conviction, forthrightness, power, and compassion that are notably absent when I speak with indignation and malice (which happens more than I would like). Moreover, truth spoken in love softens the hearts of those who hear in good faith, thwarts their potential anger, heals their hurts, and bears fruit in their lives.

Those who desire to be prophetic in our day, who desire to help heal our afflicted church, must heed the words of St. Paul:

"Let everyone speak the truth with his neighbor ...But let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one - another; as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:25-32).

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