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# An upside-down sign

## \_ The Church of Paradox \_

*Robert P. Maloney, C.M.*

As Cornwallis surrendered to Washington, the British fifers at Yorktown sensed the dawn of a new era. They struck up a popular song of tribute to the revolutionary spirit that reigned in this foreign land:

*If buttercups buzz'd after the bee,  
If boats were on land, churches on sea,  
If ponies rode men and if grass ate the cows,  
And cats should be chased into holes by the mouse,  
If summer were spring and the other way round,  
Then all the world would be upside down.*

The new world announced by the gospels abounded with such paradoxes. Jesus, his apostles, and the early Christians loved to use them in teaching. In the Kingdom of God the last are first and the first last. Those who save their life lose it; those who lose their life save it. The humbled are exalted; the exalted humbled. Those who mourn will rejoice; those who laugh will cry.

The evangelists, especially Luke, see the world upside down, so to speak. The coming of Jesus ushers in a new era: the reign of God is at hand. In it the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame leap, the gentle are conquerors, sinners become saints, the dead rise \_ all paradoxes.

Clearly, Jesus' use of paradoxes startled his listeners, shook their presuppositions, and drew them to examine their lives in light of his puzzling statements. As he challenged the way they viewed God, the world, material goods, and life itself, paradoxes were one of his favorite instruments for sounding the call to repentance.<sup>1</sup>

The challenge for the Church, sign and servant of the Kingdom, is to live these paradoxes. The Church is a vivid sign and an effective servant to the extent that the energies of the Kingdom work within her. As she preaches God's word, she herself is subject to it. Consequently the paradoxes of the New Testament must find a prominent place in her life.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Meier. *A Marginal Jew* (New York: Doubleday, 1994) vol. 2, p. 146.

Of course, the Church is not merely the hierarchy, but all its members. We are the Church, God's people. Let me suggest some ways in which these paradoxes express themselves in the Church's \_ in our \_ life.

1. *When the Church saves her life, she loses it; when she loses it, she saves it.*

The Church must not be too concerned about the Church. She is for the Kingdom. Her ultimate concern lies there. She is a servant of the Lord and a servant of the world in view of the Kingdom. Rather starkly, the Lord promises her a full share in his sufferings and death. His paradoxical saying must always ring in her ears: "One who loses his or her life will save it."<sup>2</sup>

In that perilous context, the Church can be utterly confident that the Lord takes care of his own. Luke's gospel, the most paradoxical of them all, brims over with sayings about God's providence. God loves his chosen ones in the dramatically varied experiences of human existence: light and darkness, grace and sin, plan and disruption, peace and turmoil, health and sickness, life and death. The risen Lord walks with them, listens to them, speaks with them. He accompanies them in their suffering and dying and raises them up in the power of the Spirit. In times of crisis his Spirit teaches the members of the Christian community what to say and how to act.

The Church, therefore, must not be overly preoccupied about herself and her own future; otherwise she will be too timid in times of crisis, too silent when confronted with evident evils.

Some, over the many years of the Church's history, have been strikingly unafraid to lose their life, since they were utterly confident that they would thereby save it. There have been countless martyrs, known and unknown. Sometimes they stood together in great numbers, strengthening one another by their faith, like the martyrs of Nagasaki, of Uganda, of China, or of the French and Spanish Revolutions. At other times they stood almost alone. Franz Jägerstätter, an Austrian peasant, refused to fight in Hitler's army when many other much better educated members of the Church cooperated, or remained silent, as Nazism crushed human rights and committed incredible atrocities. In Reformation England, Thomas More and John Fisher went to their deaths largely abandoned by fellow politicians or fellow bishops, most of whom found reasons to accommodate themselves to the king's desires.

2. *The poor are rich. The weak are strong.*

Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul, the founders of the Daughters of Charity, used to say this to the young women who came to their community:

*Everyone loves to see the king and queen. People stand on lines in the streets for hours to catch a glimpse of them. They come home excited to*

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<sup>2</sup> Mk 8:35; Mt 10:39; Lk 9:24; Jn 12:25.

*tell their families, "I saw the king and the queen today! They passed right by me in their carriage." But in the Kingdom of God the poor are the royalty. You have the privilege of seeing them every day, of listening to their needs, of serving them. What a wonderful gift God has given us if only we can see with the eyes of faith!*

We may be tempted to think that it is just the saints who talk that way! But actually, the saints only highlight what the New Testament clearly states to all of us: the real royalty in the Kingdom of God are the poor. Those who are really powerful are those bereft of power. The poor Christ ushers in the Kingdom of God. The crucified Lord, in his weakness, stands at the center of history.

This paradox has two striking implications. First, the Church, if she is to be truly Church, must be the "Church of the poor," as John XXIII said at the opening of Vatican II. Today, with great insistence, the Church asserts her preferential option for the poor. She reminds us again and again that the proclamation of her social doctrine is an essential element in the new evangelization.<sup>3</sup> One must surely ask, however, whether this teaching has dug deep roots in the life of the Church globally, or whether, at least in many parts of the world, it remains an eloquently stated, but still theoretical assertion.

A second implication of this paradox is that the Church herself must be content to be "powerless." St. Paul points out that many will regard this as "foolishness."<sup>4</sup> But the crucified Lord, the foolishness of God, is present today, as always, in the "crucified peoples." The Church will find her greatest vitality when she is at ease among them, at the grassroots, where they suffer. The measure of the Church's strength is not her political influence, nor her prestige in any given era, it is her ability to live in solidarity with the powerless. Her pre-eminent weapons will not be her influence in the corridors of power; her strength will be the word of God, as it proclaims the truth, and the witness of sacrificial love, as it proclaims the abiding presence of the crucified Lord.

There is a perennial temptation to which the Church can easily succumb: to love to be with the wealthy and powerful rather than with the poor and weak. In some ways this is understandable. Wouldn't we all like an invitation to dine at the White House! Yet the real Church heroes are those who dine with the needy, who ladle out soup in a hostel for the homeless, or who search to find the causes of poverty and ways of eradicating it.

A few years ago, during the Synod on Consecrated Life, I thanked Cardinal Bernardin for a moving homily that he had given on prayer one evening at a tiny church in Rome. He told me that he had really learned to pray, and to feel God's strength, during the terribly trying months in which he had faced false accusations. It

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<sup>3</sup> *Centesimus Annus*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 1:22.

seems to me that it was then, and in the months of his dying, that he was most powerful as a Christian witness.

3. *Those in charge are the servants.*

Few assertions are clearer in the New Testament. Jesus repeats this lesson over and over to his apostles: "The leaders of the gentiles lord it over them but it is not to be that way among you. The one who is first of all must be the least of all and the servant of all, for I am in your midst as one who serves."<sup>5</sup> In washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus demonstrates this conviction as a parable in action.<sup>6</sup>

As one who exercises authority in the Church, I know how easily one can forget this lesson. One gets used to commanding. Of course, it is necessary to make decisions; at times, in fact, one must be quite decisive, for better or for worse. But leaders in the Church, even as they make decisions, are ultimately servants.

They are, first of all, servants of God's word in its many forms. As servants of the word, they must be good listeners. The scriptures form the foundation upon which all their decisions are to be built. The words of the community too have a high place on the list of criteria for discernment. In the Church, the leader is never separate from the community, nor the community from the leader. Together they form one body, "hearers of the word," as Karl Rahner so often put it. The servant leader does not dictate to the community; rather, as one who emerges from it, the leader utters the community's deepest beliefs and concretizes her practical judgments.

Listening always involves risk for a leader. It may force me to change my mind, or even to change my life! Occasionally, out of fear or even out of a conviction that we "possess" the truth, church leaders (and others as well) do not listen. "They have ears, but do not hear."<sup>7</sup> Sometimes too the structures of authority \_ the bureaucracies, the curiae \_ become hard-of-hearing, impervious to outside influence; rather than serving others, "they lord it over them," as Jesus stated. But the best of leaders are good listeners. They meditate on the words of the gospels, the cries of the poor, the calls of the Church \_ all voices through which God speaks. They are genuine servants.

Two of the best servants whom I have ever known were former provincial superiors. One, whom I lived with, would do anything in the house: washing floors, making beds, cleaning toilets. Another had the true "simplicity of a little child," knowing how to listen endlessly, discern, and offer wise advice. I am convinced that both had grown in servanthood during their years of leadership.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Mt 20:25-28; Mk 10:42-45; Lk 22: 25-27.

<sup>6</sup> Jn 13: 1-20.

<sup>7</sup> Mk 4:12; Mt 13:14; Lk 9:10.

4. *Even sinning provides an opening to the good (or, to paraphrase Paul's letter to the Romans<sup>8</sup>: where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more).*

*Felix culpa* (O happy fault) is one of the Church's loveliest tunes. It is a hymn to God's mercy. We chant it with joy every year at the Easter Vigil. Who is not moved by the story of the penitent woman in Luke's gospel who washes Jesus' feet with her tears and dries them with her hair? Who can fail to be struck by John's touching accounts of Jesus' conversations with the Samaritan woman and with the woman taken in adultery?

Actually, the gospels make it clear that some *are* unmoved; in all these stories there are observers standing nearby, shaking their heads. Unfortunately, the dangers of "pharisaism" and "perfectionism" have always plagued the Church. Every era has its inquisitors and its pelagians. There are always some who are too eager to expel sinners from the Church, who are not patient enough to let the weeds and the wheat grow together until the harvest. But the "holy Church" is also the "Church of sinners." Paradoxically, the two groups help one another. In fact, they are not really two groups; each of us lives more or less as members of both. As John's first letter puts it,<sup>9</sup> we deceive ourselves if we say that we are without sin. We are harshest with others when we fail to recognize our own sinfulness; we are gentlest when we know that we too have often fallen.

The startling belief of the Church is this: we become truly holy only when we recognize that we are sinners. We can praise God even for the workings of sin in our lives if it leads us to come to him with humble, exuberant confidence. Those who have been forgiven much, love much. The Kingdom is a home filled with God's mercy: "This my child was lost but has been found. He was dead but has come back to life again."<sup>10</sup> The author of Hebrews sings out: "Let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy."<sup>11</sup>

Some of the Church's most illustrious members emerged from shadowy pasts: Peter, Paul, Augustine, to name just a few. We are in good company if recognition of our sinfulness becomes one of our strengths.

5. *Giving is better than receiving.*

Like all paradoxes, this not a universal principle that can be applied to every case. At times it is better for us to receive than to give, especially if we are among those who hate to be on the receiving end of things!

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<sup>8</sup> Rom 5:20.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Jn 1:8.

<sup>10</sup> Lk 15:24.

<sup>11</sup> Heb 4:16.

But the Pauline saying, sometimes judged to be an actual saying of Jesus, has been a constant challenge for the Church: "It is much more blessed to give than to receive." Riches are always a great lure. On the one hand, material things are surely good (God created them!); on the other hand, paradoxically, they easily draw us away from greater goods, particularly from practical love and concern for those who are less fortunate.

One of the paradoxical sayings that was hardest for his disciples to understand was "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God." Riches tend to isolate us. They surround us with a world where our pleasures, even our whims, are easily satisfied, where we become cut off from the pain and needs of the poor, where lavish entertainment is readily at hand, where praise is abundant and honest criticism is often lacking. I remember visiting the home of a rich man who asked me quite sincerely, "Are things really as bad in this country (his own!) as people say? Are there really that many people without work?" I saw that, at heart, he was a very genuine man, but I also saw, with sadness, that wealth had built a wall around him and that he rarely exited from his enclosure.

On the other hand, I know a number of rich people who have passed through the eye of the needle. In fact, I will always recall the day when I was taking part in a board of trustees meeting and someone stated: "We need a van to transport people and supplies to the soup kitchen." The chairman asked: "How much will it cost?" The person answered: "\$20,000." A board member looked up and interjected very simply: "I'll take care of that. Let's move on to the next point." After the meeting I went up to him and said: "That was very generous. Thank you." He responded: "I was just reading that saying about the eye of the needle and I told myself: you'd better do something good with all that money you have!"

Money must flow outward in the Church on all levels \_ from the laity, the hierarchy, the clergy, religious communities. It should be a means for expressing our love rather than for insulating ourselves from others. Pauline sayings abound in this regard: "Those who sow bountifully will also reap bountifully,"<sup>12</sup> "God loves a cheerful giver."<sup>13</sup>

A final word about this upside-down sign, which is the Church. Paul's awareness of the presence of the Kingdom has a wonderful sense of urgency: "I tell you, the time is running out. From now on, let those having wives act as not having them, those weeping as not weeping, those rejoicing as not rejoicing, those buying as not owning, those using the world as not using it fully. For the world in its present form is passing away."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 2 Cor 9:6.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Cor 9:7.

<sup>14</sup> 1 Cor 7:29-31.

Theologians have attempted to describe the paradoxical nature of the Kingdom by saying that it is here "already," but "not yet" fully. Its energies are at work among us now by the power of the Risen Lord, but we await its fullness when all things are finally restored in Christ.

This already-not-yet tension places the Church in a paradoxical position even in regard to time. She adheres to the *past*, with its rich tradition, but is not shackled to it; rather, she develops it, constantly mediating between the word of God and contemporary circumstances. She attends to the *present*, but she is not coerced by its demands; rather, she is continually discerning what is of God and truly promotes the human person, in contrast with what is of sin and ultimately corrupts humankind. She looks forward to the *future*, but not with anxiety; rather, she awaits the Lord's coming with confidence knowing that "eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it entered into the human heart what things God has prepared for those who love him."<sup>15</sup>

A letter written at the end of the first century summed up the attitude of Christians in this way: "There is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all of the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland but for them their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country.... They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all, but all persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many. They are totally destitute, but possess an abundance of everything. They suffered dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do, they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life."<sup>16</sup> Very paradoxical.

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<sup>15</sup> 1 Cor 2:9.

<sup>16</sup> Letter to Diognetus, 5-6.