

**Palm Sunday 2013**  
**Luke 22:14 – 23:56**

I'm reading a book by Matthew Fox titled *The Pope's War: Why Ratzinger's Secret Crusade has Imperiled the Church and How it can be Saved*. It's all very interesting; Fox was a Roman Catholic theologian who was silenced by Pope John Paul II and his inquisition director, Joseph Ratzinger. Fox is now an Episcopal priest who is no longer silenced by a church hierarchy and is a prolific writer, much to the consternation of his previous bosses. Fox was an insider who writes about the inner workings at the top levels of the Vatican: things that we know are probably happening but for some reason they are hard to read about in black and white. (And yes, I'm reading a physical book, not one downloaded to my Kindle Fire.) One section of the book describes three people identified as the Inquisitor's Enemies: one a Brazilian bishop who stood up against the military government in the 1970's; one a Czechoslovakian woman who was ordained a priest during Communist rule and risked her life to minister to an underground church, only to have her orders declared invalid by the Catholic hierarchy after the fall of Communism in 1989.

The third person is Jim Callan, a young priest in Rochester NY who was assigned in 1988 to Corpus Christi, a dying inner city parish. In a matter of a couple of years, he was able to gather parishioners to start new ministries to those living on the edges – prisoners, the hungry, the homeless, those without medical services, men and women in transition, safe houses for victims of abuse, children in danger, people with AIDS. He was supported by the local bishop until the Vatican heard in words and pictures about what was going on. The local conservative Catholic group took pictures of the priest at the altar next to a woman holding up the chalice; she was wearing half a stole the congregation had given her since the church said she could not be ordained and wear the symbol that is the full stole. That was almost a full page picture on the front page of the Sunday Democrat and Chronicle – no question that there wouldn't be repercussions from the Catholic hierarchy. Within a matter of days, the Vatican had called the local bishop to Rome and gave him a choice – move the priest out or we'll take you out of your diocese. The priest was moved to the farthest end of the diocese and the Vatican sent in another priest to disassemble the parish. The congregation shrunk from over 3000 people to a little less than 200. Most of the staff was fired and most of its ministries were closed down.

About three months later and without permission, the priest returned to Rochester and celebrated communion. He was then suspended from the priesthood and the remaining staff at Corpus Christi was fired. Three weeks later, on Christmas Eve, he and his right-hand person, the woman who had stood at the altar with him, celebrated mass for 1500 people. They then founded a new community in the Catholic tradition called Spiritus Christi – not recognized by the Vatican or the local bishop. Everything about it was Catholic except that it was not part of the official church. The people were told by the local bishop that they were not fulfilling their Catholic obligations by attending this church and that to continue in Spiritus Christi would mean that they would excommunicate themselves. In spite of this, the congregation continued to grow to over 3000 once again. The ministries were re-started and new ministries evolved – all with the aim of serving the people on the margins – the people Jesus served.

This was not a congregation of wealthy people but it was a congregation of people who supported these ministries in any way they could. All gave financially; all gave of their time; all gave of their skills and talents. Those who had the financial resources gave much; many took vacation time to serve in the ministries; some were hired on to an every-growing staff; and their ministries expanded into Haiti and Mexico. The youth of the church were just as active as the adults. The ministries and life of Spiritus Christi had once again become the ministries and life of over 3000 people who loved to follow Jesus.

I had a housecleaner who was a member of Corpus and then Spiritus Christi when I lived in Rochester. She would take two weeks off each year – this meant no income for her – and work in one of the inner city

ministries. Why did she do it? Because that's what people did when they were members of that parish – they helped those who weren't as fortunate and lived the way Jesus told them to. And they continue to love doing what they do as followers of Jesus. There are no limits to reaching out to the poor who will always be with them. And they consider themselves fully Catholic in the religious tradition.

Absolutely everyone participated in a ministry of that parish, even when they were told that the sacraments they were receiving were invalid and that they were no longer real Catholics.

If you were to walk into that church on a Sunday morning, chances are very good you would see a woman celebrating at the altar, and the service would sound like a service in any Catholic church. They celebrate in the Catholic tradition but they are no longer under the thumb of the local bishop nor do they worry about being destroyed again by the Vatican. Baptisms, marriages, funerals happen. There are confessions that are heard, budgets to be balanced, interpersonal issues to be resolved. A few of the leadership are ordained but their job is to equip the saints; the ministries themselves are led by and kept strong by the laity.

It fascinates me that they went from being Corpus Christi Church – the Body, the corpse of Christ – to Spiritus Christi Church, the Spirit of Christ. Their leadership was put on a cross of sorts, they were scattered, everything they had done was destroyed. But after the intensive efforts of the Vatican and the complicity of their local bishop to kill them, they returned. The leadership returned and the people returned and new life was born. They had experienced resurrection.

For some reason I thought about that parish as I was meditating on the story of Jesus' suffering journey to the cross. I especially was struck by his statement, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Until yesterday, I always thought he was talking about the soldiers who had put him on the cross and the high priests who plotted his death. But I think that was a shallow understanding of his penultimate words. Yes, he was talking about the soldiers and the priests and even the Romans, but he was looking out at the crowd that had jeered him as he was led to the cross, bloody and broken and mocked. He was talking to the crowd that stood on the hill and watched as the nails were driven into his hands and feet, as he was tied to the cross, and as the cross was lifted up into the hot sun. He was talking to the crowd, including his own friends and followers, who had run away and left him.

Most importantly, he was talking to us. We stood by and watched as this all happened and even as it continues to happen. It doesn't really matter if we did or did not say the words "Kill him" and "Crucify him" this morning. We are sitting here – we are standing here – watching as he suffers and dies.

Jesus has forgiven the crowds and the soldiers and even his friends. And he has forgiven us. But like those he trusted most, we hide and wait for him, thinking we've been abandoned in our grief and sorrow and troubles. We think he's not around when we need him the most.

But we don't forgive him when we think he's abandoning us. We just get angry and confused and scared. That's okay. It probably makes him sad, but he can take it. Jesus is the one who continues to forgive us for those things which we ought to have done and those things which we ought not to have done. He continues to forgive us for walking away from him as he hangs on the cross and for going back to our daily lives – lives that have little to do with him but everything to do with those things of the world. Oh, we find ways to justify what we do – to rationalize to him that we're really doing his work and we really are his followers. We're good at justifying and rationalizing.

*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*

We all know how this story turns out – in the ultimate victory over the cross and death, in glory and the hope of everlasting life. We all know what has been promised to us in the time of our death. We know that the comfort that comes from the death of loves ones lies in the promise that life does not end but that it continues in the magnificent and glorious light of Jesus Christ.

We all know the story.

But only a few of us will stay with him on the way to the cross, just like those few women who watched from a distance and later prepared to anoint his body. The rest of his followers abandoned him during his journey to the cross and stayed away until they heard that he had returned from death.

Each one of us gets to make the same decision this week. Do we run away this afternoon and stay away until the resurrection? Or do we come back at the end of the week for the last supper and to watch him get hung on the cross – having fulfilled our obligation? Or do we walk with him as he goes through his trial and is beaten and even help him carry his cross? Will we experience the *corpus Christi* as we move into the life of the *spiritus Christi*?

Each one of us gets to make that decision this week. No matter what we decide, he will forgive us. That's the way it works. He doesn't force us or lay a guilt trip on us if we decide to ignore this journey or decide we have other more important commitments. He'll still forgive us.

But he does walk with us every single day of our lives. We count on it. Will we walk with him for this short week through his suffering? Can he count on us?