

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

21 Pentecost
October 9, 2005
Fr. Bill McGinty

“The Christian Outlaw”

Prelude:

Last Tuesday I sat down and wrote a very strange sermon. Maryann thought it strange. When I re-read it I thought it strange, and I can only think that I was influenced by our recent concentration on finances and business, money and other worries; or maybe by the state of our country, and what it really means to have religious freedom. Do we appreciate it; do we value it or do we just take it for granted?

To understand this sermon I believe you have to imagine that we are now living in 2025. 20 years have gone by and we are all 20 years older.

The year is 2025 and multi national corporations have taken over the Government of the United States. The Congressional two party system is no more, after oil rose to \$19. a gallon in 2008, the Economy and Government collapsed. Now Boards have taken over Government and the military, police their rulings. It is nothing new. The same thing happened in Europe five years before us, and the Boards lifted them back to financial stability. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights have been suspended and a few personal freedoms eliminated. Life is governed by one simple rule:

“Profit margins come before all else and anything that interferes with that is unpatriotic.”

Two years ago Religion and Churches were outlawed after clergy and Church leaders protested at a mass rally in Washington. People were killed and the Board immediately set forth the following ruling:

“October 1, 2023 to all States: By the intervention of the Board, Religion, the practice of Religion, Churches, Religious Schools and Colleges and all Charities will in future no longer function. They are deemed unpatriotic and an obstacle to economic growth. Violators will be taxed, fined and if necessary imprisoned. All Church property not sold by January 2024, will be confiscated under Eminent Domain by the local boards and used for business schools, or retraining. Crosses, stars, or other religious symbols are banned and any parent caught teaching Religion to their children will lose custody.

Signed G.R.S. Marshal, Chairman of the Board

In Washington, an old silver haired lady, named Debra Conroy chained herself to the Whitehouse Gates, where the Chairman resides, and was immediately arrested. Dragged screaming and kicking down Pennsylvania Avenue she was heard to shout and I quote:

”I don’t give a salted peanut for your profit lines, Jesus is my Lord and I store up my treasure in heaven.”

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In a television discussion group yesterday Larry King the III led a heated debate on the new legislation and its likely impact on America. George Marshall, the Chairman of the Board, conferencing the program appeared on screen to make this comment:

“My fellow Americans, Americans in all States have to remain calm at this time of national emergency. People need time to assimilate the wisdom and long term benefits of this legislation. For too long Religion and Charities have been a drain on the Economy and their ethical teaching not in line with the fiscal responsibilities that rest on the shoulders of this nation. It is time; Christians in particular stepped up to the plate and laid down their own wants and beliefs, in favor of sacrificing to the needs and responsibilities of the Nation and the Economy. God is not going to put ‘bread on the table’ or ‘a dollar in your pocket’, your Board will. My advise to all Americans is, if you witness people you suspect being religiously unpatriotic, then it is your patriotic duty to report the same to your local police. Enough is enough; just who do these Christians think they are?”

All across America Bible burning BBQ’s have taken place Cemeteries report stone crosses have been carted away and used in construction. For the first time in NFL history football matches have been scheduled for Sunday mornings. Colleges everywhere have redesigned their badges and flags with many forced to change their names.

On a State level, Sacramento has changed to California City, and Los Angeles to Ronald Regan Township. Meanwhile in Washington the National Cathedral has become the home of the National Opera.

Back in New Jersey the Star Ledger Newspaper has reported a strange story coming out of N.E. Pennsylvania. Their veteran reporter J.T. Lockwood ran this in the Friday edition of the paper.

“The cover of darkness brings strange goings on in Pike County, Pennsylvania, and this reporter has observed some strange happenings in the last few months.

While churches are closed, boarded up, or sold, there have been rumors of secret gatherings in the woods deep in Shohola. I have stood at check-outs in many a store and witnessed signs and looks exchanged between shoppers. Bread laid down on a counter with a fish product, had me wondering: “is this a Christian symbol?” I watch as women scan the store ceiling for cameras once used for shoplifting, now lurking to pick out the secret Christian or Christian symbol.

On a tip, I headed for Route 6 at 10 pm on Sunday night. Sure enough there were cars parked and hidden by the road side. Flashlights among the trees giving away the gathering of Christians. What would make people risk everything even their credit rating and freedom on such a venture I thought? Deep in the woods I found the answer, Christians praying together around a small rock with a cross placed on top. From their faces emanated joy at being together. They recited their Creed with an enthusiasm you would only hear at a Superbowl when the national anthem is sung. I wondered if any Board could

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ever wipe out this faith or this belief? After the reading of the Gospel, individuals spoke of how they had found ways to practice their faith in the last month.

They talked of sick people they had laid hands on, and prayed over for healing. One had smuggled a small cross into the prison. Another had distributed food to poor families across the river.

I was amazed that they had no fear. They ate bread and sipped wine and hugged each other before melting back into the darkness. I wonder how many other groups there are across the County. As I turned to leave my flashlight picked out something carved into the nearest tree. It simply said: "Jesus is Lord"

"Wow", I thought, "it is as if we have gone back 2000 years to when Christianity really meant something. This has been, Jim Lockwood, the Star Ledger, Friday somewhere deep in Shohola.

In New York Supreme Court, December 26th the ex- Bishop of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Bishop Eddie Erb was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment for illegal Christian activities. Before sentencing the Judge asked him if he had anything to say. This is his reply:

"Your honor, fellow Americans, I stand before you a Christian, guilty on all charges! I am unrepentant, nor do I recognize the validity of this court. For I answer to a higher authority and a higher court. You say that I am a Christian, a follower of Jesus! You say I practice his teaching and teach others to do the same! You accuse me of caring more for the poor, the oppressed, the destitute that I do for the national economy! You are right, I am guilty. You may sentence me today, but there is one thing you should know. You can tear down our churches, destroy our symbols and imprison our Christian Rights, but you cannot kill the faith and belief that is within us. You can burn our Bibles, but you can never eradicate God's word that is written on our hearts.

Better you try to turn back the sea than try to stop our children learning about the God of love. Because, although I stand alone before you today, across this country millions stand with me. In every wood and on every mountaintop God is praised. Imprison us and our spirits will roam free; tax us and we will still give; chain us and we will pray for you; beat us and we will unite our suffering with that of our Christ. And know this, - we do not need a place, a building or even a priest to prosper, "for where two or three are gathered together" there Christ's Church will be. You stand next to me in the street, but you cannot hear me singing deep within: "How great is our God, how great is his name!"

Because you see no crosses, no churches, you say now that God is dead and is no longer needed in our world! But I say this to you: 'Wake early and observe the sunrise; watch winter turn to spring; look on the beauty of new birth, then tell me there is no God!'

You take away our symbols, but how can you remove God's symbols? Can you make the Earth stop rotating around the Sun? Can you pull the countless stars from the sky? Can you stop the caterpillar from becoming a butterfly?

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You are more powerless than I am. Today you can imprison my body, but you cannot imprison God's word. It will flow on the wings of God's spirit. It will touch hearts. It will plant seeds and those seeds will grow faith, faith that will bring victory. Victory for us and our king.

With that Bishop Ed. Fell silent and the Judge passed sentence. As he was escorted away a smile played across Bishop Ed's face. He was thinking a deep and complex thought.

"I remember back to 2005", he thought. "O, we thought we had it pretty good back then. We could almost do anything we wanted. We built churches! Celebrated the Eucharist twice a week. We had Bible study and Conventions and we thought we were good Christians. But what did it all mean?"

We said that we wanted to be like Jesus, but we really didn't suffer.

We said we'd give money to the poor in Africa, but we still lived pretty well.

We said that we believed in the faith and the creed, but it never really cost us anything.

We came to church, when we felt like it. We did what we thought we needed to do."

Bishop Ed smiled again. "These people, these Corporations have brought us Resurrection, " he thought. "These pagans have made us suffer for our faith. We have never been closer to the Lord. They have woken us all up. Now we are poor with the poor and imprisoned with the prisoner. Now we have to give more than money, for the Gospel."

He looked at the sign on the door of his cell before it slammed shut. It said simply: 'Christian!' he marched in with pride, and once inside he began to sing:

"Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before!"

And Ed smiled again, because for the first time, he knew he had sung those words and really meant them.

Outside a little Church in Manhattan some years ago, a Poster appeared one day and it said:

"If they were arresting people for being Christian, would they have enough evidence to convict you?"

As we prepare to celebrate our Eucharist today, let us thank God for the Religious freedom we enjoy and share with one another. But let us never be afraid to let the world know we are Christian and Jesus is our Lord!

Amen+

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