

My Soul Longs For You O God Lesson 4

St. John Parish, Little Chute

Some argue that the Church should be only a community of faith, hope, love and concern for those in need. They complain that the Church as an institution gets in the way and undermines its spiritual goals. There is no doubt that the Church ought to be a virtuous community called by the Father, centered in Jesus and held together by the Holy Spirit. We accept without reserve the Love model of leadership established by Jesus in his call to Peter to be a loving shepherd of the faith community. (Jn 21:15-17).

However we also assert that the Church is an institution. Jesus called Peter to the institutional model of leadership when he said, “You are Peter and upon this rock, I will build my Church (Mt 16:18).” The Church needs an institutional side to serve its continuity, stability and order – and indeed its community growth and maintenance. Problems with the institution are not arguments for removal, but for renewal. We need the rock and we need the love.

The Church with a human face – The example of Blessed John XXIII

“See everything. Correct a little. Forget the rest.” This was the wisdom of good Pope John XXIII. Soon after his election, a number of people asked him, “What titles will you bestow on your relatives?” For centuries many popes had made their relatives, even those from humble backgrounds, counts and countesses. Pope John smiled and said, “Call them my brothers, sisters, nephews, and nieces. I believe that should be enough nobility for them.”

Pope John loved people and liked to have company. He discovered that popes were expected to dine alone. He did not like the custom so he began inviting his secretary, Monsignor Capovilla, to join him at meals, then the cardinals living in Rome and finally the world’s bishops who came for visits to report on their dioceses. One day a prominent visitor commented on the solitary eating habits of Pius XII. “Yes, well I value tradition as did my esteemed predecessor. But I must confess I never found any place in the Bible which suggests the pope should eat alone.”

Pope John enjoyed taking walks in the Vatican gardens. His predecessor also liked to stroll in the gardens, but always did it at the same hour every day. The caretakers of the Basilica would then close the doors to the outdoor balcony around the dome of St. Peter’s so the people would not see the pope in the gardens. Pope John was unpredictable about the timing of his walks. The caretakers did not know what to do.

“Why must you do anything? Why must you close the balcony at all?” “Because otherwise people would see you, Holiness! The people, all those tourists!” John paused a moment and then said, “Don’t worry about it. I promise not to do anything that would scandalize them.” Custom then required the pope to wear red slippers everywhere. John said he could hardly be expected to take good walks in these. So he hired a shoemaker to make sturdy leather walking shoes for him — and dye them red! Soon he heard people calling him “Johnny Walker Red.”

These humorous tales from the life of Pope John show us why he was loved so much. He put a “human face” on the Church, witnessing the warmth of Jesus and creating an inviting attitude. The more he did, the more the divine side of the Church and its religious mystery became attractive to millions. The lesson for us? “Never try to be so holy that you don’t remember you are human.”

Living the Message

1. In what ways are you active in your local parish? How regular are you in Mass attendance? What challenges and values do you experience as a Church member? How spiritual is the life of the parish community? How strong is the liturgical life?
2. In thinking over the Church as both an institution and a community, what issues come to your mind? How do you make a creative approach to these challenges? How is your local parish a vibrant community of faith?
3. The Church should always be missionary in its outreach to others. This means that the members should be willing to share their faith in a friendly and invitational way. What opportunities do you have to implement this? Why is this needed for the vitality of the Church?