

From the Pastor's Desk

Hocus-Pocus

The Priest

To live in the midst of the world without wishing its pleasures. To be a member of each family, yet belonging to none. To share all suffering. To penetrate all secrets. To heal all wounds. To go from men to God and offer Him their prayers. To return from God to men to bring pardon and hope. To have a heart of fire for Charity, and a heart of bronze for Chastity. To teach and to pardon, console and bless always. My God, what a life! And it is yours, O priest of Jesus Christ.

This statement was written by Father Jean Baptiste Lacordaire (1802-1861). I first ran across it while preparing for ordination to the priesthood at Mount Saint Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland. I was quite taken by the lofty status it granted to priests, but didn't think I could measure up to its expectations.

In Emmitsburg, clerical collars were required to be worn by seminarians for classes. The first time I put one on and looked in the mirror I thought, "Who am I to be wearing this collar?" The idea of "going from men to God and God to men" didn't feel right. To be honest, I really didn't want that job and wondered why people couldn't go directly to God themselves. But, I felt a strong call to ministry and saw no options other than Catholicism during that time in my life.

On June 10, 1983, I was ordained to the Roman Catholic priesthood. The idea that I went to and from God on behalf of the laity was driven home when a little old lady kissed my hands as I greeted her after mass in my first congregation. When I asked why she said, "These hands bring me Jesus". I was getting dizzy looking down from the pedestal she and the church had put me on. It was lonely up there and I felt removed from the rest of humanity.

Rather than standing as a mediator between the laity and God, I preferred to see myself standing *along with* others as we celebrated God's grace as equals. Although I didn't realize it at the time, in my heart I was a closet Lutheran who embraced Martin Luther's teaching of "The Priesthood of all Believers".

Shortly after ordination, I remember an elderly priest asking me, "How many masses do you say on a Sunday?" "I don't say any", I replied, "but I celebrate three." His question reflected the idea that all priests need to do is show up and "say" mass. That's the problem when God's grace is understood to be mediated through clerics. All that is necessary is to "say" the prayers and the blessings come.

In the town where I served during those early years of ministry, some members of my congregation chose to go to a neighboring church for Sunday services. I asked one of them why and he said, "Father Schneider says a quick mass, I can be out in twenty minutes. We don't have any singing, his sermon is short, and he doesn't have the sign of peace. I don't know why people think they need to shake hands in church." He was there for one reason, to get what Father had to give with as little effort as necessary.

For me, simply "saying" mass was nothing but hocus-pocus. The words "hocus-pocus" have their origin within the Latin mass. During the consecration, the priest would say, "hoc est

corpus meam”, which is translated “this is my body”. To those in the pew it sounded like “hocus-pocus” and came to be associated with magic.

A theological term used in opposition to the sixteenth century Reformation was “Ex Opere Operato”, which is translated “from the work done”. Reformation theologians were arguing that people needed to be enlivened by an internal faith in order for the sacraments to confer grace. Catholic theologians argued, “no, the sacraments work ex opere operato”, i.e., regardless of the faith of the priest or people, the sacraments confer grace by the very act of being performed. I think the truth is somewhere in the middle.

“Ex opere operato” can degenerate into “hocus-pocus”. It also led to the multiplication of private masses often said for souls who were believed to be in purgatory. This was a practice the Reformers objected to because they vehemently denied the church had any power over the dead. They also objected to having a mass with no congregation present. Some priests were saying multiple private masses a day, which was made even more odious when they collected a stipend for each one. A practice that was later forbidden.

One of the reasons why people are attracted to Catholicism is because it assures them that God’s grace can be seen and experienced directly through a priest. He goes to and from God to mediate grace. It is clear cut and tangible. Such a black and white system creates a sense of security for the laity. However, after a several years in the priesthood, I came to believe that that security is misplaced. While I have respect for Catholicism and it has helped many people on their journey of faith, I am thankful for other denominations that offer alternative understandings of Christianity.

One of the greatest accomplishments of the sixteenth century Reformation was to help people see that God’s grace is not mediated by clerics or hierarchies, which are always susceptible to particular agendas and corruption. This was a huge evolution in the understanding of how God’s grace flowed to people. The Reformation took power away from the church and restore it back to God.

In Lutheran churches after the Reformation, the mediation of God’s grace was understood to flow, not through clerics, but directly through the power of the Holy Spirit, as is seen in this ELCA statement taken from “The Use of the Means of Grace”: *By the power of the Spirit, the Word of God, which is Jesus Christ, is read in the Scriptures, proclaimed in preaching, announced in the forgiveness of sins, eaten and drunk in Holy Communion, washes people in Baptism, and is encountered in the bodily presence of the Christian community.* “The Use of the Means of Grace” p.6. Although the pastor is important to worship services, the grace conferred through the sacraments does not uniquely flow through him or her, but is present in the gathered assembly too, which is equally as important as the pastor. The Spirit uses *our* hands to bring Jesus as we gather in faith around the table of Word and Sacrament. The Spirit uses *our* hands to bring Jesus as we reach out in love and compassion to hurting people.

Lutheranism came out of Catholicism and it is difficult to understand our faith without understanding the disagreements between the Reformers and the Catholic Church that occurred during the sixteenth century. There is no need for discord to continue today. We are blessed to have a wide variety of denominations because they help people to follow Christ, which is what it’s all about.