

"'Sentire' con la Chiesa"

Michael Sean Winters | May. 9, 2013 | Distinctly Catholic

The Holy Father's address to the International Union of Superiors General was a small masterpiece. There were many aspects of his talk that warrant attention, but this morning I would like to focus on his paragraph about the ecclesial mission of consecrated life, specifically his call to "sentire" con la Chiesa, to think and feel with the Church.

Here is the [Zenit translation](#) [1] of the relevant paragraph:

*Finally ecclesiality as one of the constitutive dimensions of consecrated life, a dimension that must constantly be taken up and deepened in life. Your vocation is an essential charism for the journey of the Church, and it is not possible that a consecrated woman and a consecrated man not feel along with the Church. A feeling along with the Church which was generated in us in our Baptism; a feeling with the Church which finds its filial expression in fidelity to the Magisterium, in communion with the pastors and the Successor of Peter, Bishop of Rome, the visible sign of unity. For every Christian, the proclamation and witnessing of the Gospel are never an isolated act. This is important. For every Christian the proclamation and witnessing of the Gospel are never an isolated or group act, and no evangelizers acts, as Paul VI reminded very well, "on the strength of a personal inspiration, but in union with the mission of the Church and in her name" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 80). And Paul VI continued: It is an absurd dichotomy to think of living with Jesus without the Church, of following Jesus outside of the Church, of loving Jesus without loving the Church (cf. *Ibid.*, 16). Feel the responsibility you have to take care of the formation of your Institutes in the healthy doctrine of the Church, in love of the Church and in the ecclesial spirit.*

Some people translate "sentire" as "to think" and others prefer, as Zenit does, to translate the Latin as "to feel." Of course, this ancient phrase, "sentire cum Ecclesia," predates the Cartesian revolution which so drastically, and unfortunately, separated our human understanding of thinking from the rest of our existence. Yet, from our daily experiences, we know in our own lives or the lives of others that when one's thoughts are separated from the rest of our lives, we experience this as a problem, as evidence of an internal conflict. And, so we train our minds and our hearts to move in the same direction, to pull forward together, not back and apart, to make up a whole person. I do not want to push this too far: This side of the abyss, it is a mark of our humanity that we are not single-minded, and it is often the person who acknowledges the bumps in the road towards integrity who is the most morally substantive and sturdy bulwark against dehumanization and sin, as well as the best minister of the Gospel.

The other day, I was speaking about my disappointment in the modern academy, its fascination with post-modernism and other intellectual fads, and specifically my regret that Catholic scholars had sometimes joined the academy when it was at its most ridiculous. "Why would we turn to Foucault? We have Augustine and Aquinas," I said to my friend. My friend was Jewish, not Catholic, so he easily grasped my point. Jews also do not claim the Torah as an inheritance, but must make it their own through study. The Jewish intellectual tradition is very different from our Catholic one, but in both instances, we have the great benefit of coming to

the perennial issues that confront humankind with the benefit of some of the greatest minds in history having set out the pathways for us, given us brilliant maps. Why would we throw that away? Chesterton once said something to the effect that "Tradition is the democracy of the dead. If the premise of democracy is that no man should be penalized due to the accident of his birth, Tradition insists that no man be penalized because of the accident of his death."

The other part of this paragraph that jumps off the page is the Holy Father's quoting Pope Paul VI about the "absurd dichotomy" of thinking one can live with Christ without living with the Church. This calls to mind the great phrase of deLubac, "What would I know of Him, but for Her?" We are not Christians because we happen to have been born in a place where Bibles were laying about. Someone taught us about the faith. Someone brought us to be baptized. Someone instructed us before our First Communion. Our parents taught us our prayers. No one comes to the faith on their own and it is not like we are offered a choice among first-century itinerant Jewish rabbis to follow: We are baptized in Christ, formed in His Church, nourished by His sacraments, obedient to His will.

In another part of the Holy Father's speech he spoke about obedience. It is a word with which we moderns and, perhaps especially we Americans, are not very comfortable. The culture tells us to be assertive. It features television shows that crown the most assertive "apprentice" or "survivor." We see the fabulous, and fabulously gauche, homes of the rich and the famous, and are invited to envy. No one is more iconic in America than the self-made man. The Holy Father, of course, is not a self-made man. No Christian, still more no consecrated religious, can look in the mirror and see a self-made man or woman. It is in the reflection of the baptismal waters that we see our truest selves, the selves that have died to self and put on Christ. Again, I understand that baptism is not magic. The baptized will continue to struggle as we put on Christ and sometimes, oftentimes, decide it is the better part of wisdom, or self-gratification, or pride, or sloth, to take Him off and set Him aside. The Holy Father emphasized that obedience must always translate itself into service, and he did not differentiate between those called to obedience to their superiors and those superiors in pointing this out. I do not have any problem with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith exercising its mission to protect the deposit of faith. But, when they exercise that mission in a way that communicates officiousness, a lack of charity, and most especially a lack of service, then they need to re-examine their own exercise of obedience.

There is much in the Holy Father's words to ponder, and not for the first or the last time. His simple way of speaking "you are mothers, not spinsters!" should not lead us to think he lacks spiritual and intellectual depth or complexity. Or humanity. [My colleague Joshua McElwee reports](#) [2] that Sr. Josune Arregui, the executive secretary of the UISG, said that when she spoke with the Holy Father at the end of his talk, she told him that she had been experiencing a "crisis of faith in the church," but that she felt reassured since his election. He replied, "Don't worry. I am twice a month in crisis." Great line. And great insight. Of course there will be times when we encounter something or someone in the Church and we find ourselves scratching our heads. But, the Church is bigger than any apparatchik, bigger than any self-important bureaucrat, bigger than a mean priest, bigger than any difficult teaching. We have Augustine and Aquinas. The challenge for the modern, American Catholic, is to experience the tradition as liberating and, just so, to realize that the tradition is ours and our obligation not to put it on the mantle to collect dust, but to vivify in our lives, changing it while preserving it, making the tradition "and the Church herself" more like Christ, ever ancient and ever new.

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[1] <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-s-address-to-women-religious-superiors>

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