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Parishes must put new wine in new wineskins

Isabella R. Moyer | Jul. 8, 2013 NCR Today

"People do not put new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise the skins bursts, the wine spills out, and the skins are ruined. Rather, they pour new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved." (Matthew 9:17)

Pope Francis spoke of the need for new wineskins during Mass on Saturday at Casa Santa Marta. The newness, he said, is rooted in the newness of the Gospel that "goes beyond us." It renews us and "renews the structures." Vatican Radio published excerpts from his homily [1]:

> "In the Christian life, even in the life of the Church, there are old structures, passing structures: it is necessary to renew them! And the Church has always been attentive to this, with dialogue with cultures ... It always allows itself to be renewed according to places, times, and persons. The Church has always done this! From the very first moment, we remember the first theological battle: was it necessary to carry out all of the Jewish practices in order to be Christian? No! They said no! The gentiles could enter as they are: gentiles ... Entering into the Church and receiving Baptism. A first renewal of the structures. ... And so the Church always goes forward, giving space to the Holy Spirit that renews these structures, structures of the churches. Don't be afraid of that! Don't be afraid of the newness of the Gospel! Don't be afraid of the newness that the Holy Spirit works in us! Don't be afraid of the renewal of structures!"

New wine in new wineskins is a brilliant Gospel image, one too often overlooked in various "renewal" programs in our church. Several years ago, our archdiocese undertook a much-ballyhooed "liturgical renewal." We were assured these efforts would revitalize our liturgical experience and promote unity among our parish communities. In reality, we were given an obsessive and unbelievably petty list of liturgical do's and don'ts. Liturgical postures became the defining sign of whether a parish was being obedient to the new directives. Apparently, we were even guilty of passing around the collection basket in an unliturgical manner. The renewal became more about scolding us for misdemeanours than about promoting the beauty of the liturgy. Unfortunately, the new Roman Missal followed closely on the heels of this sad debacle.

New wine requires new wineskins. A pastoral or diocesan council that produces glowing mission statements about communal responsibility and decision-making but is ruled by a heavy-handed, authoritarian pastor or bishop is an old wineskin.

Bishops who produce documents and manuals outlining sexual abuse protocols while maintaining a culture of clerical protectionism are an old wineskin.

Efforts to promote a new evangelization that focuses on doctrinal judgment rather than the joy of a personal relationship with our loving God are an old wineskin.

Papal writings that extol the genius of women while maintaining their exclusion from full participation in church leadership are an old wineskin.

True renewal is not measured in superficial actions. It requires the difficult work of inner conversion, a deep

change of mind and heart. And it requires the courage to discern and implement structural reform when necessary. Pope Francis' call to embrace the newness of the Gospel message and respond with courageous action is one more hopeful sign for the immediate future of our church. There is a sense that new wine is flowing. Let's pray that new wineskins will be ready to receive it.

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[1] http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2013/07/06/pope_francis:_the_holy_spirit_renews_our_lives/en1-708070