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Good event, bad event

Joan Chittister | Jul. 19, 2011 From Where I Stand

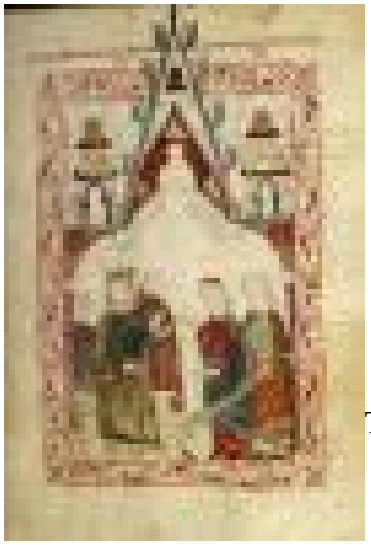
In this in-between time, remember that our history is steeped in despair turned to hope

Boethius, a philosopher of fifth-century Rome, taught the world of his time something important for ours. ?Every age that is dying,? Boethius taught in the midst of a declining Roman Empire, ?is simply another age coming to life.?

New life, in other words, is not death unless we reject it. New life is growth, not decline unless we refuse it. New life is evolutionary, not revolutionary unless we make it so.

A Zen master wrote in a similar period of history, ?No seed ever sees the flower.? We are all meant to begin things that will only come to fullness of fruit after us.

With those insights in mind, we have to ask how it is that two groups of people, bred from the same tradition, cut from the same social cloth, can possibly see the same agenda -- the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council by bringing all facets of the church to recommit itself to the fulfillment of that council -- so differently: one ripe with hope, the other thick with despair.



Then I remembered another story that may explain best the difference between despair of the present and hope in the future.

In this Taoist tale, an old peasant has only one son and one fine stallion with which to farm his land. All the other farmers in the valley pity him for his poverty but the old man says of his situation simply, ?Bad event, good event, who knows??

Then, one day, the farmer?s only stallion bolts from his hitching post and thunders up into the mountains, leaving the farmer and his son to do all the sod-breaking work by themselves. Neighbors commiserate but the

old man says simply, ?Bad event, good event, who knows??

Suddenly, the next morning, the stallion races back down the mountain and into the corral, followed by a whole herd of wild horses. The neighbors are astounded by the man?s new wealth and congratulate him but the old man says simply, ?Good event, bad event, who knows??

Soon after, one of the wild stallions throws the son, falls on him and breaks his legs, crippling him for life. The peasants grieve such a loss but the old man says simply, ?Bad event, good event, who knows?? Then, one day in the fall, just at the beginning of the harvest, the local warlord rides into the valley and conscripts into his army every young man there with one exception: the crippled, limping, apparently useless son of the old farmer.

The other farmers in the valley wail in despair at their misfortune and the old man?s luck, but he says simply, ?Good event, bad event, who knows??

Despair, that story taught me, can be found in every situation, however much good may also be there. But in the end, how we see a situation depends on what we?re looking for. The fact is that you and I live in a good event, bad event time, when one age is dying and a new one is coming to life. We are, this in-between generation, the seeds that will not see the flower. The only question is whether or not in our time we will see reality as reason to despair or as the very foundation for hope. Whether we will see the seeds we, too, are planting as simply the beginnings of a new future, planted in hard ground, yes, and slow growing, yes, but to be tended and believed in so that their harvest time can surely come.

The fact is that the history of God?s ways with God?s people has always been a good event, bad event situation, a continuing affirmation of life despite the unending threats to it of death. We are the children of a history steeped in despair turned to hope, of bad events turned to good:

n The enslavement of God?s people by power-hungry pharaohs put a people searching for fullness of life in despair. But then came Moses with the courage to confront those who were more concerned with cementing their power than they were with meeting the needs of the people. To defy oppression is of the essence of hope, in every age.

n Indeed, the entire Christian life is a bad event, good event story. A bad event made good by those who refused to accept it. It is a history of the need to face up to those that seek to deny a people its personhood. It is an array of instances in which the outcast and the invisible are raised up to save the system from itself.

The question is: How do we know the good from the bad? How do we know what is really meant to be done now and here by those of us who love the church and desire its new blooming so that now, as in the past, slaveries may end and prejudices may be palliated and the people may be saved and the church may finally become church and the model of Jesus may become more important than the model of a medieval system now abandoned by humanity everywhere, except by us?

The fact is that we have already been given the blueprint for good over bad. They call it Vatican II. We have already seen it bring new life to old wineskins. And at the same time we can now see it silently, surely, surreptitiously being eroded in many places, in many ways. If you?re any kind of church-watcher at all you know that, for Catholics, life?s been good/not good now for a long time.

The decision to take the church out of the 16th century -- out of the character and quality of Trent -- into the vision and character of Vatican II was good. At the council of Trent in the 16th century, the church?s response to calls for reform was to lay new laws and new regimentation on the backs of the people rather than bring reform to the policies at the center of the system itself.

The brave decision of the bishops of the world in our time to bring the church into the 20th century in Vatican II -- 400 years after the fact and more necessary than ever -- was good. But the response this time, too, is being delayed by a few.

It is being denied by those in the system who fear loss of privilege and power for themselves more than they value spiritual gain for the many. In the name of reforming the reforms there is a move abroad now to define who are the ins -- the clerical, the hierarchical, the male -- and who are the outs again -- the laity, the women, the gays.

Yet the fact is that great good has happened in our time. In our time we learned that the church is the people of God -- not simply a gathering of hierarchs around an even higher hierarch. Instead, we learned from a church alive with Vatican II that the church is indeed the people of God and we are it!

If I were a Roman Catholic bishop I would not be disturbed that Catholic women were throwing themselves on the steps of the cathedral wanting to minister in the church, begging to minister in the church. I would be disturbed that they had to go to Protestant seminaries for the theological and pastoral preparation to do it.

Vatican II gives us all the right to give God?s gifts to God?s work, and to God?s church. Among the great religious orders and congregations of the church, after all, the ideas for Benedictines, Benedict; Franciscans, Francis; Jesuits, Ignatius Loyola; Sisters of Mercy, Mother Catherine McAuley; Sisters of Charity, Mother Elizabeth Seton; Sisters of Loreto, Mary Ward; the ideas for teaching ministry, education of girls, nursing the sick, not to mention peace and nonviolence through Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin -- all came from laity.

Point: The church has always needed more than financial capital from the laity. It needs intellectual capital, moral and spiritual capital, again, now and here. It is your name they?re waiting for now, the one right under the names of Moses and Judith, Esther and Joseph and Jesus. You are the voice of today?s church: Speak loudly. You are the fire of today?s church: Burn brightly. You are the hope of the church, now and for centuries to come.

Let faith impel you. Let love direct you. Let hope be the glue that binds you and courage your eternally enduring Pentecostal flame. You are the good event of the church in what has too often become a bad event time.

In the Native American tradition at the time of initiation the elders tell the younger, ?As you go the way of life you will see a great chasm -- jump.?

When the retreat to yesterday threatens the movement of the Holy Spirit within us all today, this is no time for despair. This is no time to stop. This is the time to jump, move on, begin again.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is an *NCR* columnist. This article is excerpted from her address to the American Catholic Council meeting in Detroit in June.]

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