

Theology of Clay

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“Remember, man, you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Father had a story to tell me, and if he had begun his story with the resonance of these ancient words, I would not have been at all surprised. Indeed, it would have been entirely appropriate for him to do so, for this is where his story really began. Every Ash Wednesday the priests of his parish have opened the sacristy cupboards, taken down several small glazed ceramic jars, filled them with ashes, blessed the ashes, and distributed these ashes to the foreheads of the faithful. Father is a young priest, but he loves the old ways best, as do so many priests of his generation. He is not alone in this parish; two brother priests serve with him, one almost twice his age, the other but a year younger. The two younger priests have a natural camaraderie which warms the hearts of everyone who sees them work together. Both of them prefer the ancient phrasings, the tried and true ways of the Church. They cling closely to the rubrics of the rites. Their homilies are centered on living the sacramental life and avoiding sin, for sin is a subject they do not avoid. They preach against contraception and abortion from the pulpit and without apology. Even in their conversations they remind parishioners that we are called to God by God Himself. They are, in short, good priests doing their best to be good priests. For parishioners who lived through the tumult of earlier decades, these young consecrated men provide a sense of stability that had once long ago been sorely lacking.

"Tradition is the democracy of the dead," said Chesterton, and Father heartily agreed. He kept the good things from the past and shed the innovations, the grand new ideas which had blazed on the scene a few short decades ago but which are even now dying, dying with the same men who emblazoned them, the men who had sought to change the unchangeable

Church. In the vast democracy of the dead, their ideas are less than a drop in the ocean, the waves are grinding their unbreakable boulders to dust.

And dust was precisely the problem. This last year as the young priests returned the ash jars to their proper place in the sacristy cupboards, they remarked not only upon the dust, but on a larger problem. These are methodical and orderly men; they pay attention to detail. And it was clear that details had not been given careful attention in the sacristy for quite awhile. As is true of every room in which men live or work, things accumulate. The sacristy was not immune to the problem. Things, things of all shapes, sizes, and colors, had accumulated over the years, and no one had ever taken the time to clear the shelves, open the windows, do a real spring-cleaning. By Pentecost, the spirit of Vatican II whispered from the numberless objects living on the shelves and lurking in the shadowy corners with voices too strong for either man to resist: it was time to clean.

They began. Old liturgical garments, threadbare, out-of-date, some reflecting now-forbidden innovation, were designated, as the Scriptures say, to be tested by fire. Other items not appropriate for the parish but still of some value were designated for the missions. Still others, the profane items used and abandoned by sacristans and servers long since departed, were unceremoniously dumped into a waiting trashcan. The hours passed and the process moved along smoothly, as garments, pens, paper were discovered, sorted, and tossed, a large shallow ceramic platter heaped with screws, nails, old pennies, and other rubbish was pulled down, placed on the counter and.... and something niggled at the back of Father's mind. A small voice quietly said, "Look."

Father looked.

What was there to see? The maintenance staff did not look kindly on free-will gifts of old screws and nails. Old pennies were pleasant, but Father was not a coin collector. The platter was filled with nothing but rubbish. What was there to look at?

“Look.”

Oh, of course: the platter. Yes... the platter reminded him of something he had seen somewhere... the texture, the color, the size... light dawned. He opened the cupboard containing the small ash jars used during Lent. Quickly, he threw the rubbish into the trash and placed the jars on the counter next to the platter. A slight shudder of surprise ran through him like an electric charge. The ash jars and the emptied platter matched. He turned to his brother priest.

“Do you see this?”

His brother’s jaw dropped. He, too, saw. The jars, grey inside from years of ashes, were not jars at all. They were stem-less cups, chalices which once held the Precious Blood of Jesus during the consecrations of priests long since departed. The platter so recently heaped with the detritus of years was not a platter, it was the paten upon which God’s Body had once silently rested, brought to the altar by the power of the Spirit and the Son, acting through the priest: God made present even as the echoes of the words of consecration were yet fading in a church filled with faithful Catholics in some year long since past.

Somewhere in the ash-heap of history, a previous pastor listened credulously to the theological discourse swirling about the journals and the seminaries. In the delirium of the moment, influenced by men who claimed the ability to renew what comes from God, he decided to purchase, bless and use ceramic liturgical vessels. When glass, ceramic, and wooden vessels were specifically proscribed as unworthy, he or a successor put them aside, but did not destroy them. Perhaps one of the priests in residence liked to use them, despite the ban, or perhaps the pastor was a frugal person who disliked discarding things, perhaps he was still somewhat sympathetic to the philosophy represented by such vessels, and hoped they would one day be found worthy or perhaps, though this is quite hard to believe on anything other than a theoretical level, he actually found the vessels to be singularly beautiful. At this date, the reason is not given to man to know. We can be sure only of this: over the years, as pastor after

pastor came and went, the vessels languished in a cupboard. Their consecrated status was slowly forgotten.

The dust gathered. One day, years later - quite when, no one knows - a server or sacristan needed a container for something. A search was made of the cupboards and a platter was found. It carried no external markings to indicate the sacred - the person who made the fateful decision may well have thought the vessel was merely a refugee from a local rummage sale. After all, to most eyes, it wasn't particularly beautiful, it had no stately bearing or appearance that would attract, as the Scriptures say. It was not a vessel worthy of any particular note or consideration. It was offered for use as a common receptacle and accepted. Likewise, the chalices were pressed into service at Ash Wednesday one fateful year, and had borne the humiliation ever since. What could not possibly happen with a gold chalice or gold paten happened quite easily with the glazed ceramic chalices and paten. The chalices that once bore the Blood of Christ now carried the ashes of repentance. The paten that once bore the Body of Christ now carried nails, miniature icons of the instruments that pierced Him. Clay was understood to be profane, and so it was profaned. Now they lay silently on the counter before the two priests, mute testimony to rogue theology.

In order to prevent the consecrated vessels from ever being used in a profane way again, the Fathers did what had to be done - they smashed the vessels later that week.

The liturgical "renewal" from which we are slowly recovering, like the theology that spawned it, has spawned certain consequences. One of the arguments for using ceramic vessels was the echo from Scripture that these vessels were said to provide. The Holy Spirit, through sacramental grace, is made present in us, vessels of clay. We carry Jesus in ourselves, earthen vessels that we are. What a touching thought! Perhaps someone should write a song. But few people saw the inherent problem with the parallel. God doesn't just enter us, He transforms who we are. What was simply spoiled human nature is transformed, not simply into

cleansed human nature, but into human nature with an unheard of ability – the ability to partake of the divine nature. Grace ennobles us, *changes* us, transforms the clay into gold, imperishable, unchanging, more durable than even the rock which clay clumsily attempts to imitate.

Thus, what looked like an excellent Scriptural analogy was actually a shallow parody of Scripture. The presence of Jesus within us is not an alien presence extrinsic to the vessel, which leaves human nature essentially as it was found. Jesus does not come to clay and leave it clay. The chalice must start as gold because Jesus' own sinless human clay was, from the moment of the Incarnation, plunged into the divine nature. It starts as gold because our partaking of His Body allows us to partake of the divine nature possessed by the Son of God. The old is gone, the new has come, behold! a new creation! The gold chalice represents both the divine nature and the transformation that divine grace works on human nature. Gold represents both Alpha and Omega, while clay represents neither of these, but only the sin-marred Delta we currently struggle through, the betwixt and between state of gracelessness we originate in as a result of our great-grandparents' poor Gardening.

Because the theology of clay that created the smashed vessels doesn't understand graced relationships, the consequence of a Clay theology is precisely the mis-understanding of all relationships. Instead of starting with God and permitting Him to reveal Himself to man, Clay catechesis starts with man's experience and attempts to derive God. Since Clay catechesis requires subjective human experience as its foundation; doctrine – the objective self-revelation of God – becomes secondary, indeed, almost irrelevant, to the process. I can only know those pieces of your experience that you choose to reveal to me. What arrogance for me to tell *you* about your experience! Unless I walk a mile in your shoes... Ah! Our native brothers and sisters have received as valid a set of revelations about God as we who have the Book. The Book tells us the experiences of men long dead – important, no doubt, but we of this century have different

experiences, don't we? The Israelites never heard of Buddha, Lao Tzu, or Confucius, holy men all! The Book was complete for the people of *their* ancient community, but for us who live in a wider world, well...

Now there is no end to attain, but only the process of attaining, for my experience must be of the infinite, and I am but finite. The journey is all that matters; we never really reach an end. From our functional point of view, God takes form as we experience Him.

For Clay theologians and catechists, doctrine is no longer "faith seeking understanding" as the traditional descriptive puts it, nor are we any longer "informed by grace." Rather, like grace, doctrine becomes essentially extrinsic to who we are and how we act. Doctrine does not change us, elevate us, transform us. It comes, it goes. We remain. In fact, because it would frame and thereby limit our experiences, doctrine is a positive nuisance in our search for God. Does any of this sound familiar? RCIA directors and youth ministers, call your office.

Like the heaped paten and ash-filled chalices, the detritus of Clay theology continues to haunt our parishes long after the clay vessels have been smashed and the theology debunked. Consider the parish in which such clay vessels might still be found. The pastor might well have been formed by Clay theology. He is a good facilitator, a competent mediator, and he avoids putting "too much doctrine" in his sermons lest he drive people away. Such an event would be terrible, since the parish belongs to the people, not the pastor. Teachings should never make anyone angry. A good teaching makes us realize how good we are. The road to Emmaus is stressed: Our hearts burn! but never with shame. The black-sheep incidents - Jesus armed with a whip, for instance - are never mentioned. God wasn't being pastoral just then.

Similarly, consider the men and women of the local pastoral council, the parochial school board, the administrative committee. These men and women have taken time out of their busy lives to give the pastor advice, support, thoughtful discourse on the interaction between the sacred and the profane. They are successful business people for the most part, pillars of the

community. Their professional knowledge, their acumen in secular affairs, their education in the ways of the world is often unmatched in their community - Catholics tend to do well, even by today's standards. Clearly a pastor should listen closely to their words, except... except these lay people are ignorant as kiln-fired bricks.

Now, this is not meant to be cruel. Ignorance is not stupidity. Ignorance is not incompetence. Ignorance is not a sin. Ignorance is simply lack of knowledge, the state of being uninformed and/or unformed. Because Clay theology ruled our youth, today's adults have not been ennobled by the doctrines of the Church. Instead, they are as Rousseau's Noble Savage: in a state of baptismal grace, perhaps, but essentially uncontaminated by doctrine. For them, Church teaching is not even extrinsic, it is alien, unknown, a mystery. Doctrine comes down from above, rests awhile, is, perhaps, distributed lightly over unbowed heads at Sunday Mass, and disappears. Those who refer to it or study it are like the people of the SETI project - interesting in an amusing way, but having nothing really relevant to say about what we are trying to accomplish in the parish. After all, this doctrine is not derived from *our* experience. It is not *our* vision. It is extrinsic to *our* parish.

And so the clay vessels are heaped with trash instead of being transformed to gold. How many pastoral councils, school boards, religious education boards can boast that even a bare majority of members have read a church document, any document at all, in the last three years? The last five? Ten? Clay theologians inaccurately perceived their own role. They thought they were elucidating new truths, new ways, adapting the Church to the modern age. Nonsense. Theologians aren't meant to adapt the Church to the world, rather, they serve the bishops and priests, the sanctifiers and catechists who lead the adaptation and transformation of the age to the Church. But laity informed by clay theology, that is, nearly everyone educated in the last thirty years, believe their opinions of parish needs are to be the primary drivers that inform parish life.

Thus, we have the spectacle of parochial school boards who have never read what the Church says about catechetics or Catholic education, pastoral councils who haven't read the documents of Vatican II, evangelization committees who haven't read the documents on evangelization, RCIA directors who don't know any doctrine at all. All the parishioners have is their own human understanding, which they super-impose on their local parish. Instead of helping transform clay into gold, they attempt to transmute gold into clay. How many parishioners say, "Pastors come and go, we remain"? Grace comes and goes, clay abides. The theology of clay, like the mud from which it comes, is difficult to wash away. Ultimately, it must be smashed. It is no coincidence that the man in John's Apocalypse holds an iron rod to smash the vessels of clay. That has the makings of a great hymn. For some reason, it appears that no one has written it yet. Perhaps it is time we begin.