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DO NOT BE ANXIOUS (Mt 6:25)

We have been through an extended process of change in the American Catholic Church. After Vatican II, a more prosperous, better educated community of believers faced the world they lived in, willing to shake hands with it instead of turning away. And of late we have moved through an intense cleansing process. Pruning is always a delicate operation. Its purpose is to eliminate extraneous or harmful matter so the organism will flourish with renewed vitality. In responding to a call for purification, people need special skills to make sure the surgery isn't a hacking job. We don't want to approach it the way loggers do when they have to clear-cut a part of our Maine woods-- with heavy machinery that removes the whole growth.

2003 is a time for reflection on our Catholic Christian legacy as we turn to members of earlier generations who are living witnesses to the way their faith nourished them in former periods of stress. The year just past has been a time of intense criticism for all things Catholic--some of it perhaps too long suppressed. The Church is involved in a humble self-study process. The longtime practice of the examination of conscience, usually advised for persons intent on spiritual progress, is now being undertaken by our Church in this country. Careful scrutiny of Christian motives and Christian priorities are pursued. In the wake of this probing and searching, much buried anger and hostility have been unleashed.

How do you pray in a season of upheaval? Prayer at such a time has to move to a profound inwardness, way below the surface storms. The pray-er looks for what nourishes and what gives strength. The pray-er searches to find fuel for the fires of faith.

Some voices murmur that God could have prevented the chaos. The ancient Israelites often complained to God, asking where the Lord had been in their times of trial. Lamentation is a frequent theme in the Psalmist's songs. "How many are my adversaries, Lord. How many rise up against me...How many say, 'God will not save that one.'" The psalmist did not give in to despair but went on, "But you, O Lord are a shield...my glory, you keep my head high" (Ps 3:4).

As we recognize failures and mistakes on the human level of our Church, we still believe in the promises left us by Jesus. Relying on Him, we move into hope. Paul says, "Through (Christ) we have obtained access to the faith in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). Hope looks beyond the crisis, recognizing the seeds of new life.

When some parts of the walls of institutions come tumbling down--as they have in all areas of human living, not just religion--the mighty sound of crashing can't help but unnerve us. Fresh air and sunshine may be pouring in but the old securities are shaken. Fear of stormy days ahead can make us remember how cozy the old safe haven was

before scandal shocked us. Yet amid the pervasive confusion and distress, a purer longing for God emerges. The faithful still reflect the glory shining on the face of Jesus and they are spreaders of that glory.

Other times of upheaval have released a new dawn of religious consciousness. We see this in the fourteenth century, when the Black Death decimated populations and rival popes claimed the papacy. Yet it was an age of mystical flowering with such giants as Meister Eckhart, Bl. Ruysbroeck, and the English authors Walter Hilton and Juliana of Norwich. The sixteenth century which witnessed the terrible conflicts of the Reformation, also gave birth to the golden age of Spanish spirituality with St. Ignatius, St. Francis Xavier, St. Teresa of Avila, and St. John of the Cross.

Crisis seasons in our society and in our Church lead us toward quiet reflection and inwardness. When outward forms prove fragile, crumbling under the weight of close scrutiny, we seek for meaning in deeper dimensions of human living. And in those depths, we find a Savior awaiting us. Are we who are Christians and citizens of a global village with nuclear threat overshadowing us--are we in a time of despair? We above all are bearers of hope, children of light. Peter tells us in his first epistle, "You are already filled with a joy so glorious that it cannot be described, because you believe; and you are sure of the end to which your faith looks forward" (1 Pt 1:8,9).

We are singers of songs that turn away from oppressive anxiousness. With the Psalmist, we chant "Many say, "Oh, that we might see better times!" We answer "the many" by turning to our Savior. "O Lord, let the light of Your countenance shine upon us! Put gladness into my heart....As soon as I lie down, I fall peacefully asleep. For You alone, O Lord, bring security to my dwelling" (Ps 4: 7-9).

As He did centuries ago encouraging His disciples, Jesus speaks to us, "**Do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will take care of itself**" (Mt 6:34).

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