



Apostolic Betrayal

This column is a revised version of a homily given at St. Francis of Assisi in Bend on 23 September.

In today's second reading St. James gets to the heart of the worldwide summer of scandal in the Catholic Church: "Where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice."

With the "foul practice" of sexual abuse by *priests* we have grown all too sadly familiar in the past twenty years. But this summer's shocking revelations brought into focus a different, far more disturbing scandal: "selfish ambition" among *bishops* has spread the "disorder" of complicity-in-cover-up to the highest ranks of the Church—to the apostolic level, that is to say, because successors of the Apostles have been agents of corruption.

In today's Gospel Jesus' question to the Twelve helps us see that the Church He founded has been vulnerable to unhinged Apostolic ambition from the very beginning. "What were you arguing about on the way?" He asked them. They might have been quarreling over a saying "they did not understand" but "were afraid to question Him" about: "The Son of Man is to be handed over to men, and they will kill Him, and three days after His death the Son of Man will rise." There's plenty in that statement to prompt discussion for many a mile about His future—and theirs.

But no: death and resurrection had not troubled them on the way. "They had been discussing among themselves . . . who was the greatest."

And not for the last time. At table with Jesus the night before He died, St. Luke reports, a "dispute arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest."

This Gospel portrait of persistent Apostolic ambition leaves Christians no room for naiveté: "selfish ambition" on the part of Church leaders is an ineradicable component of each generation's share in the Apostolic inheritance.

Ambition seems to have tugged at all of the Apostles; betrayal was peculiar to one. The other Apostles, most notably Peter, ran away into the night when Jesus was captured; they *abandoned* Him. Judas alone *betrayed* Him; he actively plotted with the priests to hand Jesus over to the Romans; he deliberately gave Him up to the will of His enemies.

Judas has never been forgotten. With the Gospels we inherit the Church's bitter memory of his Apostolic betrayal. And we need to draw on it now to get beyond our dismay that the unimaginable has become undeniable: cardinals and bishops abused and covered up and advanced their careers in the Church. They betrayed their innocent victims. They betrayed the priesthood. They betrayed the Mass. Didn't anyone know what they were up to?

Our Lord did. St. John tells us that "Jesus knew from the first . . . who it was that would betray Him." This He made clear well before the Last Supper: "Did I not choose you, the Twelve, and one of you is a devil?" He was referring to Judas, "for he, one of the Twelve, was to betray Him."

Knowing Judas' duplicity all along, why did our Lord not head off his impending betrayal? Why did He not expose and expel His betrayer?

Because to do so would fatally mislead us. Expelling Judas to save Himself would have taught us that betrayal is a sin beyond the reach of Divine Mercy, a sin too deep for the Fisher of Men to catch in His net of forgiveness, a sin too strong for love to break its hold on the heart of the sinner. Instead, because He “came to save sinners,” Jesus followed the will of His Father and died of betrayal in order to overcome it forever with the life-changing love of Resurrection.

Judas, the betrayer, did not live to witness the dark defeat on the Cross which his betrayal brought about nor the bright light of victory which the Father’s faithfulness caused to shine forth from the empty tomb. In stark contrast, Peter, the denier, wept bitter tears of repentance on Good Friday and heard His Risen Redeemer tell him to feed His sheep on Easter Sunday.

Jesus knew going in to His Passion that Apostolic betrayal would cost Him everything—and He kept going, all the way to the end. He drank the cup of betrayal to the dregs for you and for me—and for all those who will come after us if we hand on to them what was handed on to us.