

**YOUR EXCELLENCY:**

My schedule this past summer gave me the opportunity to attend daily Mass. Nearly every noon found me seated in the pews, garnering the gifts—fewer distractions, the bare-bones order of worship, the solace of quiet prayer—often missing on crowded Sundays. Those 40 minutes of reflection in the middle of a hectic day allowed me to recharge some spiritual batteries.

There were, of course, minor glitches in my attempts to focus on prayer and charge the engines of my soul. One of our priests read the Gospel in both Spanish and English, despite the fact that few or no Hispanics were present. The same priest several times lambasted bishops for holding to certain teachings and practices of the Church. Both good priests, I noticed, launched a homily against the legalists in our midst, traditional Catholics whom the priests regard as Pharisees, but neither priest has ever, to the best of my knowledge, spoken a word from the pulpit about Catholics who dissent from Church teaching.

Part of me was inclined to mark these practices as trifles. Like so many Americans, I am infected by the go-along get-along commandments now institutional in this country. Tolerance is king, with a sticky love of mankind for queen. I am certain you know what I mean, Your Excellency. Judging by what I read in your diocesan newspaper, you, like the rest of us, are adept in the language of mealy-mouth.

Then came a minor revelation. After each daily Mass, I would light a candle in the Marian chapel and offer up prayers for friends, the dead, and my family. One Thursday afternoon a stout female parishioner entered the chapel ahead of me and began lighting candles herself. One, two, three, four candles, then more and more candles, until she had created a bonfire of twenty or more in that dark place. She then extinguished the wooden stick that bore the flame and left the chapel.

This woman had not paid a dime for the candles. When the same event transpired a few days later—this time, the woman's teenage son added to the conflagration—I approached a parishioner who is as much a fixture in the church as the statues, one of those women who lead the rosary before Mass, act as lectors, dote on the priest, and generally behave as if they own the place. "She didn't pay, you say?" No, I answered. "Well, it's probably best not to say anything," she went on. "She'll probably stop after a while."

Two weeks later, the requested contribution for these small candles rose from 25 cents to 75. Too weak to address even so minor a misdeed, the church had punished all by levying higher prices on its candles.

**AT THAT POINT** came my revelation. I understood that, one, I would light my candles at home from now on; two, the woman would continue to fire up free candles no matter what the donation asked by the church; and three, the "broken windows" theory, that idea advanced by James Q. Wilson and others stating that crime in major cities could be reduced by attention to small details—fixing the broken windows in a neighborhood, cleaning up litter, banning beggary—might be equally applicable to the Church.

Fifty years ago, certain commentators touted Vatican II as the end to the Catholic "ghetto." By opening her doors and embracing the times, the Church, they

predicted, would bring change to a fallen world. Do away with the Latin Mass and special devotions, soften the rigidity of certain doctrines, preach love rather than law, and the teaching of the Church would illumine the darkness.

What has happened instead, metaphorically speaking, is that the Church has become a real ghetto, a vast neighborhood of broken windows, crabgrass, rutted streets and cracked pavement, panhandlers, junkies, and gangs. Both the priesthood and religious orders have been crippled by diminished membership and sexual scandals. In numbers reflecting those of the general population, Catholics engage in premarital sex, divorce, and abortion. Though deceived in the past by Washington, you bishops continue to issue various pronouncements on health-care and immigration, dull tools for politicians who bear only contempt for the Church and her leaders. Perhaps worst of all, catechetical ineptitude has ensured yet another generation ignorant of its faith, meaning that the problems of our ghetto will only worsen.

Your Excellency, a church that can't admonish a parishioner for petty theft is in trouble. From the fifth grader who can't say a Hail Mary to the remarried man who doesn't trouble with an annulment, from the newlyweds who have never heard of natural family planning to the graybeards and bluehairs who refer to God in the feminine, the Devil is, quite literally, in the details. ♦



## Broken Windows

## Goodbye to Gold and Glory

by Clyde Wilson

*"A crocodile has been worshipped, and its priesthood have asserted, that morality required the people to suffer themselves to be eaten by a crocodile."  
—John Taylor of Caroline*

"THE FATHER OF WATERS now flows unvexed to the sea," Lincoln famously announced in July 1863. He was, according to a reporter, uncharacteristically "wearing a smile of supreme satisfaction" as he related the news of the surrender of Vicksburg.

Like many popular sayings about the war of 1861-65, Lincoln's words rest on certain unexamined assumptions. Why had the flow of the Mississippi been "vexed" to begin with? It is true the Confederates had forts guarding passages on the river. But these forts were not there to interfere with peaceful travel of the Mississippi—something which, in fact, Confederates devoutly desired and knew to be greatly in their interest. The forts were there to interrupt invasion by heavily armed gunboats and transports which had already established a record of bombarding undefended towns and landing thousands of men to loot, burn out, and murder noncombatants.

In fact, Lincoln wanted the Mississippi to be "vexed" as long as he was doing the vexing. The potential of New Orleans to become a Confederate free-trade port for the commerce of the world had been crushed in one of the first expeditions of the war. If the government could not control New Orleans to enforce its tariff on imports at the mouth of the Mississippi, then the Midwest would ship its produce to, and buy its cheaper goods in, New Orleans, even if it meant smuggling in evasion of U.S. law. The industry of the Northeast would no longer enjoy profit-

able "protection" of its captive markets, and commerce would no longer move to Northeastern ports. Not to mention that the Treasury might find itself with diminished funds with which the newly empowered Republicans could buy and reward supporters.

So much for emancipation of the Mississippi River.

Lincoln, of course, was also pleased by the simultaneous "victory" at Gettysburg, which had contributed mightily to "saving the Union." More of those unexamined sayings. Lee's army had not been defeated at Gettysburg; it had merely stopped attacking a much larger army on its own territory and returned home without any serious interference. And how about that "saving the Union"? As everyone had understood in earlier times (and many still did), the very act of "preserving the Union" by military conquest destroyed the Union and converted it into something else—a consolidated empire in which duly elected state governments were to be destroyed and a large part of the population was to be governed by force rather than consent. As H.L. Mencken commented, the Gettysburg Address is a very pretty composition, but it has it exactly backward as to which side was fighting for government of the people.

Neither had the war much to do with slavery, except that slavery helped to produce the immense crops of the South, which made up the vast majority of America's foreign trade, which the ruling interests of the North were not about to relinquish. Chronology here is important, as it is, indeed, in achieving clarity about any historical event. Large segments of Northern opinion at first received secession calmly: "Let the erring sisters go in

peace." Southerners, however rashly and unwisely, were simply invoking the good old American founding principle of "consent of the governed." Abolitionists felt freed of contamination. But then the capitalists began to collar the editors and the politicians. The North could not afford to let the Southern economy get beyond its grasp. Lincoln announced that he would initiate no hostilities, but he would collect the tariff at the ports.

Nationalism was the major force of the 19th century, and Lincoln rested firmly on its two pillars: the idea that a strong centralized government over a large territory meant prosperity, at least for some, and the emotional force attached to the widespread feeling that "national greatness" was a supreme and sacred thing to be preserved at any cost. The odd marriage of economic interest and nationalist fervor has, through all of American history, motivated the desire for a strong and unchallengeable central government. It still does.

It is now established with near-Soviet rigor and unanimity that the war of 1861-65 was "caused by" slavery. Never mind that it explains nothing to assert that an event of such vast and revolutionary dimensions was "caused by" one thing. Never mind that an earlier, magisterial generation of American historians, much more learned and objective than the current crop, emphasized economic interests and cultural conflict. The war must be slavery and nothing but slavery because of obsession with race and the well-established benefits of victimhood; self-righteousness, which takes for granted that any resistance to the domination of the righteous must be evil; failure of historical imagination in inability to distinguish the domestic servitude of the South, as old as the Bible, from 20th-century enslavement by governments; and willful refusal to accept that the withdrawal of a polity from a union is not "treason."

The "causes" of the war were many, among them slavery. But, strictly speak-