

Whether we like it or not, we influence one another, become, in a sense, part of one another. God saves us as a body, as a Church, as a people. Here, in today's readings, we see this communal hope expressed in terms of a multitude of people standing before God in heaven with their Saviour singled out as the Lamb. This is a scene expressly written to give comfort to people facing persecution and death. And the gospel passage is chosen to highlight what salvation might look like while on earth: a body of people willing to be poor in spirit, gentle, willing to love and therefore to mourn; keen to pursue justice, to show mercy, to be truthful, to make peace and to take the risk of the inevitable persecution which follows; persecution, whether physical or mental: a sense of being at odds with society, placed on the margins, unpopular, caricatured as part of a people no longer relevant to the demands and pleasures of today. Or, in the words once again of the monk, Thomas Merton, writing, mark you, at the time of the Second Vatican Council, a time, seemingly, of great hope for the Church:

In the 'diaspora situation' the Church will (and indeed already does) exist to a great extent as a stone of stumbling and a sign of contradiction. The faith of the individual Christian will be constantly menaced and insecure. The official apostolic activity of the clergy will be blocked and neutralised by the arbitrary whims of secular powers.

(p.95 *Redeeming the Time*)

He's exploring Karl Rahner's concept here of the 'Diaspora Church' and goes on to say

Yet the work of the Church in the world, and precisely in the secular sphere will be carried on with ever greater dedication and effect, chiefly through the heroic and enlightened work of the laity. In a word, Rahner says, the Church will depend entirely on the good will and favour of her ordinary members.

Looking back to a time when the Church was seemingly a powerful player on the world stage with intricate and impressive imperial ceremonies and much land (especially as owned and managed by monasteries) is no longer an option – indeed, it's a sign, Rahner suggests, of 'a thinly veiled despair'. Rather our hope is in the victory achieved by those who have identified with the Lamb in the qualities listed above, who now already find themselves in heaven and are there willing us, too, to join them. We cannot know for sure who these people are but we know enough of saints, dead and alive, who have displayed such qualities, to inspire us and act as role models in a time when the Church, as we know it, is destined to disappear.

This paradoxically, of course, is a sign to the world of its own fate and future but, like the death and resurrection of Christ, a sign of hope rather than despair. We will survive as saints, or not at all.

PS This may help put the synod in a wider perspective.

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