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The All-weather Christian

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The All-Weather Christian

By R. Stecher, Bishop of Innsbruck

It was a very serious group of active men and women who were sitting around my table. After discussing several practical issues, complaints about this or that condition within the church started and some one mentioned the term "wintery Church", which he had read somewhere. I realized that this term is a lively picture of the heaviness Catholics feel today. To many a Catholic the climate in and around the Church seems to become colder; there are internal tensions, and gushes of cold wind from the media and from society.

The phenomenon of highs and lows seems to also exist on the weather map of church history. Even the kingdom of god is subject to the ups and downs of time and is effected by the swirling clouds above continents and oceans, and by the clashes of warm and cold fronts. As each of us knows, this means precipitation, perhaps snow as low as the valleys. It is true that on Easter morning an ever shining sun has risen, a sun that shines above all, just like our sun shines above all atmospheric turmoil of the earth. But the Lord has by no means promised his Church everlasting fair weather until the last day.

The council was an opening of the clouds. (When you talk with older bishops who were there, you can sense the high pressure front of the time, that let one see far and wide.) But then came the circling eddies of extremes, that spun off fears: the fear of losing the basis of faith or losing traditions -- or whatever people believed to be faith or traditions; the fear of losing identity and authority. Cumulus clouds of suspicion piled up, cold and warm fronts of a closing and opening Church, attempts to control and attempts to liberate.

Wintery Church

Sometimes there was lightening. And everyone was convinced that their way was the right way and that they were doing God's will. Every mountaineer knows that fear is a bad compass. When you panic, you lose your sense of orientation. It is hard to judge who is right when you deal with isolated incidents.

Perhaps I have dramatized the overall weather pattern and have not thought of the many lighter times that brought sunshine to the valleys. But one cannot put aside the "wintery church" and pretend that our weather looks like the weather in tourism brochures. We are glad about every warm Foehn wind proving the weather report wrong. But a spot of sunshine cannot conceal the fact that the regional weather pattern is unstable.

How do you react as a serious Catholic? In these winter days we often have bad weather, and we experience rain, snow, and muddy trails that spoil the fun of being outdoors.

Some Advice

Whenever the weather in the Church deteriorates, there is the temptation to make oneself comfortable on the very private fireside bench of piety and to ignore the wind and clouds storming outside. These pious benches do exist. But this solution is not healthy -- not in the long run anyway.

What should an all-weather Christian do, who wants to go through life and follow his goals unwaveringly without taking refuge in an imaginary peace of mind?

I am going to answer this question in simple words. If I walk up through the mountain forests in spite of bad weather, I

- put on a warm sweater
- take out tougher footwear
- bring an umbrella just in case.

I'd like to advise the weather-fearing Christian to do the same.

The Warmer Sweater

In the history of the Church, such wintery situations ask for a return to essential love. I mention essential love because sometimes Christian circles cultivate love to the largely inessential. Extremists, fundamentalists and fanatics of any conviction concentrate their love on second- and third-rate objects.

When one weeds through bad weather eras of Church history, for example the late 15th and early 16th centuries, one finds that thick dark clouds covered the high regions of Church hierarchy. But at a time when secularization, simony, and misuse of power were blooming, Thomas á Kempis wrote "The Imitation of Christ"; Nikolaus of Flue had his vision of the Trinity; Ignatius of Loyola struggled for the spiritual breakthrough of sacrificing himself totally for the glory of God; Innumerable men and women served the suffering in hospitals, poor houses, monastery apothecaries, charitable trust funds, and infirmaries.

They all helped knit the warming sweater of Christianity in the midst of a wintery Church torn by icy winds. And the sweaters of Love of God and Love of Neighbor have endured; everything else was blown away by the winds of time.

True Love Of God

Today we again need these breaks in the clouds. Whoever looks closely and keeps a keen eye for silent good deeds, will see Christians knitting everywhere, working for the poor, the disabled, the refugees, the victims of wars, the sick, and the lonely. One can watch true and valid love of God bloom in contemporary forms. And in a bad weather era of the Church, when winds chill your face from all sides, there is one sweater that is especially cozy: Love-In-Spite-Of-All. Since Golgotha, she has withstood all cold fronts.

You Will Need Tougher Footwear

When I am wearing mountain boots I do not mind what the trail is like. It can be slippery, dirty, steep, or icy, and my boots will still tread safely.

Tougher footwear for the all-weather Christian means a deeper knowledge of our faith. When the Church goes through crises and unsteadiness, when all trails of values and truths are covered with new snow, a clearer and more mature judgement is needed. In these times there are no prepared trails and roads, the plows have not been brought out yet -- you need to make the first tracks. You need to sharpen your conscience and knowledge, and learn to distinguish between the essential and the inessential, between what is God's eternal truth and what is human and subject to change.

Deeper Knowledge Of Our Faith

A good portion of extreme ideas is made up of ignorance. In times like these, a Christian does not run in flimsy shoes on rough terrain where their faith can stumble easily. The all-weather Christian needs tougher footwear, needs an assuredness that comes from a deeper faith perspective and from a continuous pursuit of God's will, and needs conviction. A lot depends on the footwear of knowledge. If I strap ice climbers onto my boots, I can walk over blank ice with my hands in my pockets. But the boot has to fit -- the parish council, the religion teacher, the woman and mother, the doctor, the preschool teacher, and the bishop.

The all-weather Christian can neither use the felt slippers of disinterest nor the high heels of absurd piety. He or she has to have the secure tread of sound teaching. When I look at the assortment of educational institutions in Austria, I see many a good shoe factory. Stock up in winter times!

And Finally, The Umbrella

You have to use it when it gets really bad. I use the umbrella as the symbol for true Christian patience, this most difficult of all

virtues.

I tend to lose umbrellas and my patience, too. When it pours, I have to buy one. Patience, however, is not so easy to come by. She is not the most highly developed virtue of our time and our society. We lose patience easily. Psychologists tell us that our tolerance for frustration is far too low -- the forgotten umbrella. We cannot bear it. We get mad quickly. And first and foremost, we have no time. Looking at our Church's sky, we just murmur: "Lousy weather!" and forget that during the history of salvation the umbrellas were closed again more than once. Crises pass. Sometimes you can help to make them pass sooner. You should not nurse them. Sometimes you cannot do anything else but wait. Then you need the umbrella of patience.

About Patience

Christ knew so well that his most diligent disciples could be seized by a sacred rage. This is why he told the parable about patience. Jesus did not know the umbrella, but he knew the impatience of the weeders. Did he not tell the Too-Frightfully-Overzealously-Impatient not to overdo the weeding, so as not to ruin the wheat? This is the same as if he would say to us: "Open your umbrellas - it will pass..."

"...Have Seen A Great Light"

A few weeks ago, I took a flight within Austria; it was one of those bleak days of early winter. At 6000m the plane came out of the fog and emerged into bright sunshine. Of course the glory did not last long -- after all, we had to land again. But every now and then even the all-weather Christian needs this revelation and this knowledge of the sun, when he hikes through his everyday life with his warm sweater, tough footwear and umbrella. What do we hear in these days of Advent?

"The people in darkness have seen a great light. Over those dwelling in darkness a light has risen." (Is 9:1)