

## ADMONISHING THE SINNER: WHAT MILAN CAN TEACH NEW YORK

Okay, **Theodosius** is not exactly a household name, yet the encounter between the last Roman Emperor of both East and West and St. Ambrose of Milan is illustrative for the ages. Theodosius had proven capable of crushing Maximus and restoring the unity of the Empire. Serious about his Catholic faith, he sought to enact measures to protect and promote it. In 380 A.D., he issued a decree at Thessalonica **ordering the subjects** to follow the Catholic faith, something that would surely offend American pluralistic sensibilities. He forcibly removed heretical Arian bishops, replacing them with ones committed to the faith of the Nicene Creed. But a decade later, his zeal got the best of him, and he lashed out. Precise details are conflicting, but essentially local citizens had killed the Roman garrison commander and several officials during a riot. Theodosius ordered retaliation, but soldiers mercilessly **massacred several thousand** citizens in the Circus. It came to be known as the **Massacre of Thessalonica**, the 4th century equivalent of Vietnam's *My Lai Massacre*. Theodosius immediately regretted its severity and sought out Bishop Ambrose of Milan. But Ambrose **refused to celebrate Mass** in his presence, effectively excommunicating him until he showed some sign of repentance.

In an extant letter (*Epis.* #51), Ambrose muses: "Should I remain silent? But then the worst thing would happen as my conscience would be bound and my words taken away. And where would they be then? When a priest does not talk to a sinner, then the sinner will die in his sin, and the priest will be guilty because he failed to correct him." (see Ezekiel 3:18) He then became very **directive, yet pastoral** in his outreach to Theodosius, whom it should be noted, could have easily had the bishop killed! "Are you ashamed, O Emperor, to do that which the royal prophet David, the forefather of Christ, according to the flesh, did? ...I have written this, not in order to confound you, but that the examples of these kings may stir you up to put away this sin from your kingdom, for you will do it away by humbling your soul before God. You are a man, and it has come upon you, conquer it. Sin is not done away but by tears and penitence. Neither angel can do it, nor archangel. The Lord Himself, Who alone can say, I am with you, if we have sinned, does not forgive any but those who repent." **Repent indeed** Theodosius did, and on Christmas Day 390 A.D.

The Carthaginian theologian **Tertullian** (†220 A.D.) famously asked a rhetorical question— "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" He was asking whether ancient philosophy provides any lessons to present day theology. I humbly ask— "What does Milan have to do with New York?" I believe the lesson is clear. A strong stand by the Church serves notice to Catholic politicians that similar actions to Governor Cuomo's carry significant consequences with respect to such an evil abortion law. The NY bill had several sponsors. Do any profess to be Catholic? Is it at all relevant whether or not Cuomo will accede to any potential sanctions? And here is yet another, perhaps even **more fundamental** question—Can strong sanctions also serve for faithful Catholics as confirmation that our teachings **mean something to us**, whether or not they do to anyone else?

By all accounts, **Gov. Andrew Cuomo** has a lousy relationship with the Church, though he proudly and quickly "stands with Pope Francis" with respect to the Catechism death penalty update. He reportedly has refrained from approaching Holy Communion for some time, causing some to note that a sanction prohibiting its reception is therefore irrelevant. Others surmise that imposing a formal sanction would provide him an opportunity to wear it as a **"badge of honor,"** showing how a weakened Church unable (unwilling even?) to right its own ship with respect to sexual abuse does not hesitate to attack politicians. It will provide him a ripe platform to excoriate the Church, a Church we know has problems enough of its own. While I understand that line of reasoning, it is manifestly unconvincing. **"So what?"** Who cares if Cuomo uses it as a badge of honor?

I care that faithful Catholics have been wounded by his brazen celebratory **touchdown spike** of lighting the 408-ft. spire of **One World Trade Center** pink. (had to slip in a Super Bowl reference!) Failure to publicly censure Cuomo makes the Church appear weak, apologetic, and fearful. Accompanied by a sincere call to repentance **for the sake** of his **eternal salvation**, the strongest possible canonical sanction (including excommunication) would provide the lay faithful (not to mention us priests!) a soothing salve **to bandage our wounds**. More is at stake than one man's relationship with the Catholic Church. "But the sanctions won't do anything- surely you know that, Fr. Ubel. He'll just ignore them, thumbing his nose all the way up the I-87 corridor from Manhattan to Albany."

I repeat again that the implications are deeper. A similar bill is being debated in Virginia right now. In the herding world, a **shepherd's staff** was used both as an "extended arm" to steer the sheep into the pens, but also to fend off the wolves— it was a defensive weapon. When the Church fails to respond to such an egregious **public act** so contrary to Catholic teaching (and basic human decency!), she forfeits her moral voice to millions of faithful throughout the world. I beg that the Church impose upon Andrew Cuomo the strongest possible canonical sanction, both for his sake and that of the Church.

- I have become that **annoying adult** from my childhood who always bragged— "We walked to school in -20°F every day and thought nothing of it." When we opened for morning Mass on Wednesday, it was a chipper -27°F yet, sixteen hearty souls attended! Our winters have indeed become milder in my lifetime though, making this past week truly a [cold] blast from the past!
- **Planned Parenthood's** 2017-18 annual report notes an increase of 11,000 abortions from the previous year and shows \$563.8 million in taxpayer funding received, an increase of \$20 million. I was appalled to see an MTC city bus covered in pink, with multiple large images of various birth control devices, all while advertising "Birth Control...it's what we do." Nice try, Planned Parenthood, but it is patently obvious that the organization's *raison d'être* is abortion, plain and simple.
- Several bishops who had quickly condemned the actions of the **Covington Catholic** boys offered words of apology for having rushed to judgment. Deo Gratias! **U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar** (D-MN 5th district) tweeted of the boys: "The boys were taunting 5 Black men before they surrounded Phillips and led racist chants." (She also claimed they chanted about sexual assault with words I will not print). Video demonstrably proves the falsity of both claims. It was precisely the opposite— the taunting was from the Black Hebrew Israelite Group. Gee, I must have missed her apology... it is shameful!
- **Jackie Robinson** was born 100 years ago this past Thursday. Major League Baseball will rightly honor him this coming season. That **1948 Leaf** Rookie card I purchased years ago? I checked out a recent eBay sale price of the identical card in the same condition. Wow! Who said baseball cards are a bad investment?

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel  
Rector



*Saint Ambrose barring Theodosius from Milan Cathedral* is a 1619–1620 painting by Anthony van Dyck, now displayed in the National Gallery in London. It shows the Roman emperor Theodosius I and his entourage being barred from Milan Cathedral by its bishop Saint Ambrose, as punishment for the Massacre of Thessalonica.