

## SALUS ANIMARUM: THE CHURCH'S FUNDAMENTAL MISSION

Persistence pays off. While I was outside on Selby Ave. waiting to greet the set-up crew for last Friday's choir concert, a car pulled up to the rectory. I inquired, "Good morning, may I help you?" The gentleman responded, "Yes I'm hoping you might have an hour to spend with me for a survey." Other than once playing telephone tag two months earlier, I was surprised that he showed up *sans* appointment. But Scripture speaks of persistence— it was the least that I can do. "Sure, come on in." Called the **National Congregations Study**, a group of researchers from **Duke University** is surveying 1,200 congregations nationwide "to document the work, programs, and activities of America's religious congregations." Through insights gained from rigorous statistical analysis (data are not tied to specific congregations), they hope to paint a picture of the state of religious life in United States.

We would become part of Wave IV of research in this study that began in 1998. While surely a worthwhile endeavor, as the 122-question survey unfolded I became increasingly intrigued and later perplexed by the nature of the questions. The initial questions were mostly of a demographic nature, entirely understandable, even if some were **nearly impossible** to answer on the spot, such as those dealing with what percentage of congregants fall into which financial, ethnic or age categories. Clearly, I was in no position to be able to give a precise answer. The questions that raised my eyebrows centered upon our participation in or support of various initiatives, most of which could fairly be described as **advocacy** for contemporary political issues. True enough, the abortion issue was included.

But I **cringed** when questions such as the following were asked: "Would you describe your congregation as "pro-life" or "pro-choice"? Or "Would you allow a same-sex wedding to take place in your congregation?" Could someone who "drinks alcohol in moderation" be a full-fledged member of your congregation?" They did ask if we have responded to a natural disaster in the past two years and I proudly shared of your generosity to the Cathedral in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I succinctly answered the questions. To be perfectly blunt, it was eerily sinking in just how few of the questions were focused specifically on the preaching of the Gospel. Only after 61 questions did a biblical reference appear; as it turns out, the **only one**: "Does your congregation teach that the Bible is the literal, inerrant word of God?" Uh, oh...trouble ahead. "How do you define inerrancy?"

I knew my response was futile. The interviewer wasn't in a position to be able to make such distinctions, but this is precisely the issue when secular research firms employ theological language, unaware of its nuances across various religious groups. In point of fact, the **Catholic Church does teach** the word of God is inerrant, but it defines and qualifies the term in a **much different way** than is used by biblical fundamentalists. Consider *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II's **Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation**: "Since therefore all that the inspired authors or sacred writers affirm should be regarded as affirmed by the Holy Spirit, we must acknowledge that the books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the Sacred Scriptures" (*Dei Verbum* #11).

No, we are not biblical literalists, as in "the earth is 6000 years old," etc. We believe that God uses the sacred authors as fully human instruments. One must ascertain what the author of scripture was intending to assert. Was the author **intending** to assert that the world was created in seven 24-hour periods? This is a topic for another column, but to answer "Yes" or "No" prescinds from the fact that the survey's designers had **one specific** understanding of those terms, sharply different from mine. At the risk of sounding petty, my point is not to question the methodology of the research or to get into the weeds about deep theological issues.

God was mentioned in just two of the 122 questions, the other being whether we teach the Gospel of prosperity? Jesus? Nope. Not mentioned even once. The survey effectively presumes that the main ministry of a congregation is community organizing and issue advocacy. To borrow Pope Francis' own words a few months after his election in 2013: "The Church is not an NGO." (non-governmental organization). Our mission is simple— the *salus animarum*— the **salvation of souls**. While acknowledging that our moral teachings absolutely have implications in the public square, those implications flow naturally from well-formed laity exercising their

civic duty. For heaven's sake (literally), political activity/advocacy is **not** the *raison d'être* of the Church. The Church is the living Body of Jesus Christ.

- In July 1988, after spending hours in the scorching heat examining pottery shards, we were crushed when our guide nonchalantly informed us we had no time to ascend **Mount Tabor**. A glimpse from the bus would suffice. Not a chance! Two of us seminarians exited the bus– “We’re going up– we’ll find our own way back!” A fire broke out July 25, but thankfully the Church of the Transfiguration was unscathed. A continuing dispute with the Israeli government centers on the lack of a regular water supply atop the mountain.
- Time for a mulligan! The interior photo of the **Anglican Cathedral in Rochester** (Kent England– built in 604 A.D.) must have been photoshopped. Or so I thought. The interior nave has temporarily been turned into a miniature golf course. This is no joke, but an attempt to draw people to the Cathedral for a summer activity. This was the martyr **St. John Fisher’s** Cathedral. Each hole featured a different bridge along the banks of the River Medway. To me, that’s a bridge too far, way too far.
- The state chaplains for the **Knights of Columbus** will celebrate a **special Mass** tomorrow **Monday August 5<sup>th</sup>**, in honor of St. John Vianney. Celebrated by Archbishop Lori of Baltimore, the Knights’ Supreme Chaplain, all are invited to attend. Given their schedule, the Mass is at **4:15 p.m.** and will include organ and cantor– it **will replace the 5:15 p.m. Mass** that day. Confessions begin at 3:00 p.m.
- Last week’s concert featuring the boys’ choir **Libera** was truly outstanding. They sang beautifully and clearly enjoyed themselves. When I went to Hayden Hall to greet them prior to their pre-concert meal, nary a cell phone was in sight. The boys were conversing with each other or reading books; one was solving a Rubik’s Cube. Their director explained that cell phones are **strictly forbidden** on tour. Good call! No wonder they were so engaging–check them out on YouTube.
- Better safe than sorry! It is always good to **remain alert** and avoid leaving any valuables visible on your car seats while at Mass. We do not want to be easy targets for a potential thief. We do have **Avalon Security** personnel present at all of our weekend Masses.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel  
Rector