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## Where We Belong (I)

These exquisite articles of Fr. Ralston's are reprinted from 1990. Their message is timeless.

Over and over again in her history the Church has been tempted to measure her life on earth in terms of her service to the world and its needs. What happens then is an inversion of order of the two great commandments: thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, and in so doing thou shalt love the Lord thy God. The value of the Church comes to be measured by the value of her compassionate caring for human beings and by the degree to which she can sweeten human life for us. We remember, with thanksgiving, what the Church in all her long life and ministries has meant to the poor and the sick, to the miserable without hope, to those deprived of their worth as human beings. We remember what we call, in one of our great prayers, "the mercies by which she hath enlarged and comforted the souls of men." We now tend to refer to this, in a term whose secularity and vulgarity show how debased our minds have become, as the Church's "social outreach programs", her championing of "minority rights."

The commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves has become the point of reference. But that is not the way we are given it. The second commandment is based firmly on the first, and has it as the point of reference and likeness. The order is important. The Church in the world is the Church as the servant of human needs, acting in imitation of the Son of Man, who came "not to be ministered unto, but to minister", but this function depends on another and primary obligation.

The Church in the world has also been the instrument of darkness. The corruption of the best is the worst, and the institutional Church in the midst of us has also been and still too often is careless, cruel, greedy, hypocritical, immoral, faithless, and the cowardly, craven enemy of freedom. She has construed the second commandment into self-service and self-love.

This duality of the Church as we experience her life in time is very disturbing. Indeed, the mind cannot rest upon it. Why cannot the Church teach us to love our neighbor as ourselves and live up to this precept in her own life? An even deeper mystery emerges as we try to

confront this question. Every time the Church builds her life around the world, even around such virtues as kindness, tolerance, and compassion, she has given priority to her ministry to the needs of human beings. The paradox is that just then

the Church is most apt to go sour. It is just then that a great deal of her life tends to become a mockery of her ideals. I think of the "Social Gospel" and the "political activism" of the Church in recent years, so passionate in its professions of caring, identifying itself with every right cause, pushing at us constantly the necessary reformation of society, and appealing for the world's attention with every means at her disposal. How cockeyed all this has become. Dead sea fruit indeed.

Surely there can be nothing wrong with a Church which ministers to human needs and which has a vision of herself "the form of a servant". There is, however, a catch in it. The catch is the nature of that servant whose life is the paradigm for the Church of his followers, "the blessed company of all faithful people" He certainly said, "the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister"; but then he added, "and to give his life a ransom for many."

It is here that the imitation of Christ by his Church, its willingness to show mercy, pity, peace and love to all the companions in nature of the Son of man, must go another step. Jesus is indeed a servant and a minister. He is also the redeemer for sin, and this takes us into another realm.

It means categorically that the second commandment is not and never can be the first. You cannot have wholesome service to you neighbor apart from service to God. Your very neighborliness will go wrong. It will lead to judgments and criteria of worldly success and failure, to the alterations of self-pride and guilt, to the fearsome pit of fetid self-righteousness and compassion without that other strange thing, the "ransom", for it is this that brings us from our neighbor back to God.

The first commandment remains first: "Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." God is the measure of man, and without Him we do not know truly how to love either ourselves or our neighbor. Jesus says this over and over: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness"; and, "Without the Father I can do nothing." Whenever his Church has lost its sense of the other-worldliness of the Gospel it has fallen into the trap of the world. The Church cannot afford ever to forget that Jesus did not come to perform miracles, nor to heal, nor to do all the immense good works he actually did, but rather to announce the Kingdom of God and to inaugurate it amongst us. The essential Gospel is supernatural and other-worldly. Its compassion, its love, its ministries in the world depend for their good on a reality not of this world. We have Jesus' own word for it: "My Kingdom is not of this world;" "My Kingdom is not from hence."

Christianity therefore puts before us the absolute opposite of the ideal of the well-adjusted person. Christianity is a gospel of disaffection, dissociation, and dissatisfaction with Caesar and all his works. It is a Gospel of restlessness and maladjustment in this world. It states absolutely that while we live here, even though our life here is not

unimportant, "our citizenship is in heaven." We do not belong to this world. We pass through it. This world is important only because of its spiritual source, that other world. Heaven gives earth its true significance.

This is implied in the very idea of revelation and in the Bible doctrine of creation. Jesus never falters in his grasp of either. He teaches us how to pray as we go along, strangers, and pilgrims in our long Babylonian exile" "Our Father, who art in heaven...Thy Kingdom come."

(to be continued)

**The Rev. William H. Ralston, Jr.**

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