

1 Peter 2:1-10

The images were, almost literally, seared into our minds as the flames leapt higher and higher threatening to engulf that ancient holy place. Piece by piece it seemed that this frenzy of fire would consume all before it. Brick and mortar. Lumber and nails. Rock and stone. Arches, rafters, and flying buttresses all stood in danger as that wondrous place called Notre Dame appeared to be destined for destruction. It was hard to watch and even harder to comprehend for those of us who had visited that sacred space and stood in wonder of a building which had seemed so sound and solid, indeed seemingly indestructible as it weathered the centuries of time. But then, in the end, any building is always just a building as we all found out when those twin towers were destroyed in New York or we saw the devastation wrought by Hurricane Dorian on the Bahamas.

“Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” This is now the fourth time I have stood here seeking to deliver a pastoral address to the Society gathered in General Chapter retreat. Each of the previous addresses has touched upon a pastoral matter which seemed to be relevant to our Society at that point in time and this year is no different. For of the three texts I considered for this pastoral address, it was this one from First Peter which spoke to me the most, filled as it is with this wonderful imagery and its aptness for our life together. For indeed we know full well that while the temples of man and the finite sanctuaries of God come and go in the eons of time, the Church of Jesus Christ, founded on that one who is the cornerstone, is made of living stones.

When Jesus built His church, He started with a very small, but firm foundation. Though he had the whole world from which to choose, he selected very simple material: a few fishermen, a tax collector and some others of seemingly ordinary means and position. Upon that foundation, he built a structure which, while it has been rocked and windblown, shaken and flooded, even attacked by numerous enemies, yet has withstood and survived down through the ages.

For the church that Jesus built is a living church, alive with the “living stones” that are its building materials, living stones that had as their cornerstone the very stone that the builders of the world had rejected. Though rejected by mortals, God chose this cornerstone, so that it would become the foundation for His building on earth. And, in turn, Jesus chose a variety of living stones to construct His Church. He used stones that would weather the cause; and stones that would not crumble under the weight that would be built upon them. The building material that Jesus chose was well suited for the building He intended to construct. For the church that Jesus was building was to be a living, breathing construction of dynamic proportions, one that would outlast the ancient structures of Jesus’ time or any of those that still stand today. The church of Jesus Christ was built to last an eternity.

But today this Church of Jesus Christ is not without its difficulties. Our congregations on Sunday mornings are too often more empty than full. Our denominations are shrinking, sometimes dramatically. Our judicatories and faith traditions spend more time expressing their disagreements with each other rather than seeking to work together for the sake of the Gospel. The world is scandalized by the behavior of priests on one end and mega-church pastors on the other, all of whom pervert the Gospel for the sake of their own needs and wants. And above all there is, too often, a lethargy in the Church, a lack of vitality, a sense of ennui which is draining and, in the end, can prove disastrous.

And I think some of that same sense of lethargy has drained over to our common life here in this Society. Our Society is now beginning its 23 year of existence and it is normal for any organization, after its initial burst of energy and enthusiasm, to undergo a period of retrenchment and, in part, that is what has happened to us. In the days of confusion within our various judicatories, dating back to the mid 70’s, the Society seemed to be a haven in the midst of those rough seas. But as the face of Lutheranism in North America changed and new ecclesial bodies formed, the question became whether the Society was any longer necessary. The result is that some have left our body because their judicatories demanded it of them and others left because they no longer found meaning in our life together. Our overall numbers have declined and our attendance at both General chapter and individual chapter retreats has shrunk somewhat. And some among us are even choosing which parts of their annual dues they wish to pay rather than

support our common work together. In short there is a sense of acedia which has descended upon our Society and it is affecting our shared life together.

Now acedia is not new in the life of the Church. It was John Cassian and Evagrius of Pontus in the 4th century who helped define the term for that condition which was affecting the early monastic communities in the Church. Both saw a certain listlessness in the spiritual life of the monks, a lack of interest or concern for their daily work of prayer, a condition which, if left unaddressed, could become the means of driving them from their communities. This state of not caring or torpor, can lead one to a state of being unable to perform one's duties in life. While some have linked it to depression it is perhaps better linked to the deadly sin of sloth. Thomas Aquinas speaks of it as a flight from the divine that leads to not even caring that one does not care. Earlier Cassian had called it "the noonday demon" because it manifests itself in laziness, apathy, ennui and boredom. In his Rule, St. Benedict warns his brothers to be on guard against this acedia because it can undermine the community. And, while it is not a common word in this day and age, this attention to acedia in the midst of spiritual disciplines has taken on new interest partly because such authors as Kathleen Norris, whose work on Benedictine monasticism has become well known, wrote a book entitled "Acedia and me" about her own battle with this issue in her spiritual life and her life in general. One of the things I appreciated about the book was not just the discussion about this whole issue but the addition of a list at the back which quotes dozens and dozens of authors down through the centuries on this very matter of acedia. From Psalm 61 "from the ends of the earth I call; my heart is faint;" to those well-known words of Psalm 91 "you will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the plague that prowls in the darkness, nor the scourge that lays waste at noon" that famous noontime enemy named by Cassian as this acedia. In novels, theological treatises and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, this matter of acedia is addressed and the warnings from one and all are to be careful of this sin because it can be very dangerous and perhaps even deadly. With so much warning and admonition then, let us hold that this acedia is living and real among us. What then should we do to fight against it and its enervating attack both on the Church and our Society?

Peter points out to us that Jesus is more concerned with building the church than building a building or a Society for that matter. The trouble is we have been stuck in this image of building ever since the movie *Field of Dreams* came out some years ago with its famous quote "If you

build it, they will come.” Ever since that line emerged we have been using it to describe everything from a shopping mall to a major league baseball stadium and perhaps even a Ministerium such as ours. But the truth remains - whether it’s a church building or a baseball stadium: just building it is not enough. If you don’t build the baseball team to go with the stadium, people will not come. And if you build a fabulous church building or a religious order but do not build the church or the members of that Order in proportion to it, you end up with a fabulous, empty church building or a hollow Order.

Peter tells us that we are called to be living stones; indeed we are called to let ourselves be built into a spiritual house and living stones do not create a dead or deadly boring structure which lacks energy and movement. Peter goes on to call us “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people” and, as such, we are called to proclaim “the mighty acts of him” who called us “out of darkness into his marvelous light.” There is nothing here that talks about a sleeping church, or a stagnant church, or a church built with inanimate materials that are held together with mortar or nails. Jesus built His church with carefully chosen building materials that, like the material of no other building, are alive and vibrant and coursing with energy; materials that will not become brittle and break apart, but that will continue to breathe new life into the church.

And if that is true for the Church as a whole it is also true for us in this Society. We have bound ourselves to this Society by solemn vow that we will answer the call to be a living stone which lets itself be formed into a spiritual house in which holy priests offer spiritual sacrifices - in essence, the whole shape of the faithful life, the life of holiness. And for us especially that holiness of life is to be found in Chapter II of our Rule “A Life of Obedience to Jesus.” If there is acedia among us, if there is torpor or malaise in our midst, if the noonday demon does indeed prowl around us weakening us and nibbling at the very fabric of our community, then we need to turn again to Chapter II of our Rule and consider its call upon us to be formed and shaped like living stones into a life of obedience to Jesus. It is important for us to recognize that we are not the ones forming and shaping this living body called the Society. Rather it is each and every one of us who, in listening to that call and, in obedience, let ourselves be formed and shaped. Now obedience is hard...I have often said it was the hardest of the three vows I took in my Roman Catholic Religious Order. But obedience is at the heart of our life together and so I like the way

Chapter II of the Rule begins when it states “We will challenge one another to live in obedience to Jesus...” If there is a spiritual malady called acedia among us, I would urge the brethren gathered here and those not able to be with us, to listen to the call of Peter and, like living stones, allow ourselves to be formed anew and shaped in that role of holy priest and to challenge and encourage one another to a form of spiritual renewal in our body, to shake off the malaise that is infecting us and like living stones that are formed and shaped, to seek a fuller life of obedience to Jesus. Indeed I would go one step further and commend Chapter II of our Rule to the Deans of each chapter and ask them to have extended discussion and reflection within their chapters throughout the coming year on this matter and to prayerfully consider how we might be formed and shaped like living stones so that daily we may be yet more obedient to Jesus.

The desert fathers knew that acedia was a hard demon to battle. Benedict, Thomas Merton, the Psalmist, Martin Marty, Alexander Schmemmann, Joan Didion and Kathleen Norris and many others all knew of it and wrote about it. And perhaps in our hearts we know it too. So beginning now and for the coming year, let us turn once again to the living cornerstone, a stone rejected by mortals yet chosen by God and let us submit once again in obedience to Jesus so that like living stones He may build that which will last in our midst to the glory of His Holy Name. For while the noonday demon may be upon us, the Church of Jesus Christ stands firm forever and neither acedia nor the gates of hell shall prevail against it. For you are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” Amen