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THE NEW CHURCH

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"You are now the People of God." A strange note sent to a dispersed and small band of people spread across Asia Minor not very powerful, not much known really. Yet called, as this letter says, to show forth the goodness and mercy of God. That word is no less to us than it was to them. It is a proclamation both of affirmation and radical call; a statement of what is and a summons to embody a mission for this whole creation.

Those are strange words for any churchman who is half-awake today. For when one looks at the outward signs he cannot help but wonder, what is meant by such a passage. For the Church in its present form is collapsing: great cathedrals of Europe with 10-15 people huddled in the front acting out the drama of worship; a major denomination's membership decreased 168,000 in 1973, its worship attendance down by 65,000 that same year. Thousands of clergy and religious have walked out of the Historical Church.

We've worked hard to stave off the awful awareness that a change is taking place in the all too-familiar life of the Church. We've poured thousands if not millions of dollars into beefing up Sunday School programs, adult groups, more effective worship, fellowship, projects, programs, etc. And yet, it seems it is all we can do just to keep the doors open, so to speak. We've even changed the time-honored hours of worship for the sake of trying to entice the laging loyalty. We've attempted to up-date, up-grade, up-stage, and finally, up-end our liturgy in the hopes that, banjos, bongos, bands or banners would revitalize and turn the weary loyalty of the few into the excited commitment of the many.

Our congregational life, though often concerned with vital issues of care for the world, seems often to be enmeshed in the periphery and the passing: whether to have meatloaf or ham at the Church dinner has too often split our missional fellowship assunder. The words from Peter are strange at such times when indeed we feel like "no people at all" we are called the People of God.

Indeed, as hard as we try everything we touch seems ineffective. It seems ineffective especially because we all experience that we have been called to be the People of God with a peculiar task in the world. There is among us often a sense of hopeless expenditure of energy and a cronic disappointment. No doubt all of Christendom was rocked in the past few weeks when even the Pope declared the ineffectivity of what the historic church is doing.

To the eyes of the world such a situation would be a sign of total destruction, but not for the People of God, the men of Faith. We are a peculiar people who know that death and resurrection are one reality. We are a people who know a secret: out of the ashes come the new--that the dismantling of the old forms, the old ways is the very activity--merciful activity--of God. The destruction of the

People of God does not come in the collapse and passing away of the old and temporal forms; rather the destruction comes when we would rather hold on to the old instead of responding to the activity of God and moving creatively into the future which he is giving.

The disruption is the renewal. You who see the collapse of the old, and acknowledge it to be the activity of God are "now the People of God." Somewhere it says that judgement begins with the household of God. Our old assumptions are challenged, our vision is released, and a new image of hope is revealed. It is in this surrender to the passing that we see for the first time, perhaps, that the People of God is not merely buildings, temporal institutions and denominational forms, but is a unique calling to care for the world--to be mission to all men in all ages. To discover that we never were called to care for the church, but as the church for the world. To recover the awareness that we were not called as the People of God to detach ourselves from the burden of the world, but to bear it, and in the world to be the sensitive and responsive people who beckon individuals and societies to re-creation. To proclaim a world of hopefulness--of possibility to a world which is blind to hope.

We see, as we never saw before that the People of God have always been about this task and calling and that God has always had his people. And when they became turned-in upon themselves, He in his mercy has shaken them up, removed their idols and re-directed them back to the human concerns to which he called them. We are one with those who have been shaken up by God in the past. We are the kin of Moses, Abraham, the prophets who too were shattered and re-directed to human care.

And we see that if this be the Now people of God then wherever across the globe men and women are so being the ones who are bearing responsibility for the creation of a human future they are my colleagues in the common mission. Wherever churchmen have come to terms with the judgement of God--this new light is given.

"You are now the People of God" is no abstraction. The Now is a call to the now of this moment in history--this sociological scene. She now has the summons that focuses her beyond her own self-preservation. Perhaps for the first time in 50 years the world is looking to her for a means of care--not to take over, but to show ways of human care. The body of the church is struggling with the means whereby she can play this catalytic role. What a wonder to again see the church forging directions for life. It's worth being a part of a concrete means of expressing the care for the creation.

The desperate world, blinded by changes, confused by false hopes, and deluded by quick dreams needs to hear a word of authentic possibility. Permission to live in the pain of change, in the uncertain roles of male and female, in the struggle of changing values. They--all men--need to know themselves to have an unqualified YES stamped on their foreheads, but in words they can comprehend. The people of God are the peculiar people who are called to proclaim such an absolution on all life.

The crisis-centered world looks to the church for an adequate style to see

hope for the future. They do not want a pious, other-worldly, other-century style, but one which shows the risk of engagement, the expenditure for others, and the discipline of decision. Without this, words are shallow and projects meaningless.

In hearing the summons, the People of God have seen a point in re-examining their basic roots. To learn again what the Word of Life--the Christ word--is. If she is to be a mission in the world of men then the People of God must re-tool. To take the great statements of faith out of the mystical moth-balls and determine their meaning in the 20th century in order that their reality may make sense in the forums, and marketplaces where men and women are spiritually dying for want of a word which gives permission to live life to the full. The People of God are discovering that theology is not a secret truth for the initiated; it is a means of articulating every man's experience of life.

And through this new awareness of the deeply human and therefore Holy word, the church is given back its story, is discovering the power of symbols, of worship, of all those forms he thought had not meaning at all. Like the army preparing to engage must tell its story of purpose in drill and song and march, so too the church is re-discovering that its liturgies give the corporate courage to engage in bearing the burden of the world.

To care for the world she is again opening the question to the spirit resources, the sustaining exercises and disciplines which continually give the sustenance, which permit a people to care for the world without burning up by the sheer intensity of the task.

She is willing to take the risk of reformulating her own life--of risking changes in her forms and methods that she may be equipped to be the instruments of God today. There has never been a time when it was more painful and yet more promising to stand as the Church. Peter calls us the "chosen generation." Chosen to serve, chosen to expend, chosen to be a sign of the wonder and awe that life is--for the sake of all. This word is to us. You are now that people... not when the church is through its reform, not when the struggle is over, not when the tools for care of the world are adequately prepared, but now. That is the light that we care to see: that in our struggle to be his people in mission a YES has already been said and we are adequate to the task. The judgement is the mercy and the darkness is beheld as the light.

Resurgence has come, not size, not return to old but a new awakening, a new equipping, a new release to care. That's why you first heard the call to be church.

The advent, the coming is light in darkness; it is the Holy YES upon the creation. The People of God are those who demonstrate the YES of Jesus in our present world. "You are now the People of God." May you dare to live the full radicality of the proclamation on your life.