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IT TOOK A VILLAGE TO PREPARE FOR THE RESTORATION

Daniel C. Peterson

Abstract: “No man,” wrote the early seventeenth-century English poet John Donne, “is an island entire of itself.” Likewise, nothing in human history springs entirely from a vacuum, ex nihilo. Even the Restoration, although it was initiated by God and is orchestrated in the heavens, draws on resources created by previous generations of men and women. We are borne on a tide of scriptural texts and freedoms bequeathed to us by our ancestors, whom we should not forget.

On a beautiful sunny day many years ago, I found myself standing in the Piazza of St. Peter in Vatican City with Elder V. Dallas Merrill and two or three others. We had just emerged from a relatively lengthy meeting with Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, the genial Australian who was then serving as president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and whom some regarded as, after the Vatican Secretary of State and Pope John Paul II himself, the third most powerful person in the Roman Catholic Church.

Among other things, Cardinal Cassidy had invited us to meet with the newly named cardinal Walter Kasper, until recently archbishop of Stuttgart, who had been appointed to succeed him after his impending retirement as president of the Pontifical Council. He had also arranged for us to attend a gathering at the Papal Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls (the Basilica Papale di San Paolo fuori le Mura). Pope John Paul II joined with representatives of the eastern churches in an effort to bridge the longstanding gap between the bishopric of Rome and the other ancient episcopal sees of the first centuries of Mediterranean Christianity.¹

1. Dressed in our Latter-day Saint ecclesiastical uniforms of dark suits, white shirts, and ties, we stood out somewhat in the sea of scarlet and purple worn by the

Elder V. Dallas Merrill, an emeritus member of the Seventy, had been a pioneer in building a relationship between leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and high-ranking Catholic leaders, and specifically with Cardinal Cassidy. He had brought us to visit with the cardinal.

As we stood there talking, Elder Merrill turned to me and, referring to the high-ranking prelates with whom we had been meeting, asked, “Well, what are we as Latter-day Saints to make of these men?”

The answer came clearly and immediately into my mind, and I responded that I felt that we should honor and respect them as true successors, in a very real sense, to the leaders of the earliest Christian community in Rome. While, from the Latter-day Saint perspective, genuine priesthood authority had long since been lost, and many doctrines had become garbled, they had kept the flame of basic Christianity alive, often through great tribulation and at great cost. They had preserved and disseminated the scriptures. They had sent missionaries throughout the world. They had served and sought to imitate the Savior.

Yes, there had been periods when the popes and others in high leadership positions had sometimes been corrupt, greedy, power-hungry, and tyrannical. The “Renaissance papacy” offers several especially terrible specimens. The notorious “warrior pope” Julius II (1443–1513), for example, who commissioned Michelangelo’s paintings in the Sistine Chapel and for whom Michelangelo created his famous statue of Moses, fathered an illegitimate daughter, had at least one mistress while a cardinal, and likely gained election to the pontifical throne via bribes and sometimes insincere campaign promises. But Julius II’s reputed misdeeds pale into insignificance compared to those attributed to his predecessor, Pope Alexander VI Borgia.²

assembled cardinals and bishops. Incidentally, the choice of St. Paul’s Outside the Walls as the place of the meeting was plainly quite deliberate. The vast Basilica of St. Peter’s was built as a statement of pontifical power, and symbols and inscriptions emphasizing the primacy of Peter — according to Catholic belief, the first bishop of Rome (whose successor the pope claims to be) — are omnipresent throughout it. John Paul II, I’m sure, didn’t want to remind his separated brother-bishops, representing cities where other apostles were credited with the founding of the local episcopal lines, of the traditional Catholic claim of papal supremacy. While I’m at it, I might mention how thrilled I was to be so close to a man (now a canonized Roman Catholic saint) whom I regarded even then as one of the pivotal figures of the twentieth century.

2. Actually, one brief pontificate intervened between those of Alexander VI and Julius II: Pius III reigned for twenty-six days, from September 22, 1503, until

“I will not live in the same rooms as the Borgias lived,” Julius is reported to have declared. Explaining his vow, he said:

He desecrated the Holy Church as none before. He usurped the papal power by the devil’s aid, and I forbid under the pain of excommunication anyone to speak or think of Borgia again. His name and memory must be forgotten. It must be crossed out of every document and memorial. His reign must be obliterated. All paintings made of the Borgias or for them must be covered over with black crepe. All the tombs of the Borgias must be opened and their bodies sent back to where they belong — to Spain.³

Although I haven’t sought to confirm the claim, a well-informed Italian academic specialist on Vatican history said in my hearing just a few years ago that Julius II actually summoned an exorcist in order to drive the demons from the rooms in the Vatican associated with Pope Alexander VI.⁴

But such fascinatingly lurid and salacious stories shouldn’t mislead us. The vast majority of those who have led and served the Roman Catholic Church have historically been, within their human limitations, good and sincere and faithful men. And, overwhelmingly, they still are. My encounters with Cardinals Cassidy and Kasper and others, and with other Catholic priests and leaders and nuns, and my readings about the popes of my own lifetime — Pius XII, St. John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, St. John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis — leave me with no doubt about this. And it’s part of the point I want to stress in this essay.

As I write, my wife and I have just returned from a showing of Martin Scorsese’s new film *Silence*, based on the late Japanese Catholic author Shusaku Endo’s powerful 1966 novel of the same name. It’s a disturbing, painful, but, in the end, theologically profound story of the persecution of Japanese Christians and of the Portuguese Jesuit missionary-fathers

his death on October 18, 1503. He may have been poisoned by Pandolfo Petrucci, the ruler of Sienna, although he had already been in frail health.

3. Cited in Nigel Cawthorne, *Sex Lives of the Popes* (London, Prion, 1996), 219.

4. Julius’s determination to build new apartments in the Apostolic Palace rather than to live in those polluted by his papal predecessor, by the way, led to multiple artistic commissions. One of them yielded Raphael’s great fresco *The School of Athens*. So, in a way, we owe a debt to the abominable Alexander VI.

who sought at great risk to serve them during an episode in the Edo Period known as the time of *kakure kirishitan* or “Hidden Christians.”⁵

Any serious Christian believer encountering the film or the novel *Silence* will come away wondering how he or she would have reacted under such excruciating circumstances and marveling at the faith and dedication of those European priests and of the humble Japanese men and women who gave their lives for their religious convictions.⁶ And much the same story has taken place many times over the past twenty centuries; it continues today, sadly, in such places as North Korea, Libya, Iraq, and Syria.

Which brings me to my theme: We owe an enormous debt to those who have cherished the news of Jesus Christ and have spread it throughout the world. And this debt is not confined to the early apostles and disciples, who paid so high a price. Rodney Stark has argued that early Christianity spread so rapidly partly because of the reputation for love and caring that the early Saints — many of them women — earned during times of plague and death, when the pagans, even the foremost pagan physicians, often fled in terror to save their own lives.⁷ And that tradition has continued, carried on by (among others) generation after generation of medical missionaries and virtually anonymous nuns.

5. The persecutions followed in the wake of the abortive Shimabara Rebellion (extending from December 17, 1637, to April 15, 1638) in which Catholic Christian peasants played a significant role.

6. We saw the film, incidentally, with my longtime friend and colleague (and former department chair and dean) Professor Van C. Gessel, who was the primary English translator for Shusaku Endo and who served for three years as a consultant during the production of the movie. (His name appears in the credits and in the Wikipedia article about the Scorsese film.) He was not, however, the translator of *Silence*, which came too early for him. Fortunately, at the crucial point in the plot where Father Rodrigues is confronted with the choice of either putting his foot upon a *fumie*, a Christian religious image, and thus denying his faith, or else sending several faithful Japanese Christians to martyrdom by torture, Gessel pointed out to the filmmaker a misleading translation in the 1969 English published version. (Spoiler alert: Read the rest of this note at your own risk.) When the voice of Christ breaks the silence that provides the title of both novel and film, instead of the imperative “Trample! Trample!” in the published translation, the voice tells Rodrigues, “You may trample. You may trample. I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. You may trample. It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men’s pain that I carried my cross.”

7. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997).

We are deeply indebted to the scholars and monks who preserved and copied and translated the gospels and the rest of the Bible. We cannot repay what we owe to the faithful compilers of the Hebrew Bible, to St. Jerome and his Latin Vulgate, to the translators of the Greek Septuagint, to Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, to John Wycliffe and William Tyndale, to the almost forgotten translators of the King James Bible, and to their counterparts for languages around the world. Certainly those of us who produce and read *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* should be grateful every day for the riches that have been handed down to us by others.

One early sixteenth-century day, it is said, a priest confronted John Wycliffe near his residence in Little Sodbury, Gloucestershire, denouncing him and his beliefs. Wycliffe was both unabashed and unimpressed. “If God spare my life,” Wycliffe replied, “before very long I shall cause a plough boy to know the scriptures better than you do!”

It proved not to be an idle boast. The vernacular translations of the Bible produced by Wycliffe and eventually others, coupled with the invention of movable type and thus the introduction of printing, by Johannes Gutenberg in the fifteenth century, played a central role in many areas of human endeavor, from the Renaissance to the rise of modern science. Notably, Gutenberg’s press was a major engine of the Reformation and a principal factor in the wide distribution of the Bible.

When the time came for the restoration of the Gospel — in a society that, thanks to the great Reformers and to advocates of limited government from the Magna Carta through John Milton and the American Founders, offered a space for religious liberty and freedom of conscience — Christian preachers were drawing on readily available Bibles to summon their audiences in western New York to repent and to join themselves to the true church. Joseph Smith heard them, and his mind and spirit were awakened. He was able to read James 1:5 in his family’s copy of the King James Bible, and that impelled him to go into the grove of trees near his home and to inquire directly of God.

When the first Latter-day Saint missionaries were dispatched across the early United States and eventually beyond, they were able to preach to men and women who were often quite familiar with the Bible and with the story of Jesus. Even in far distant Japan, the seed had been sown, often painfully and in suffering. The importance of this cannot be overstressed; early Mormon preachers typically didn’t need first to tell their audiences the basic story of Christianity. The groundwork had already been laid. In a metaphorical but very real sense, much as Moses

had promised the children of Israel, those early missionaries — like those of us who’ve succeeded them — were given “great and goodly cities” that they hadn’t built, “houses full of all good things” that they had not filled, wells that they had not dug, vineyards and olive trees that they had not planted.⁸

None of this is, by any means, to diminish the greatness of the founding prophet of the Restoration, let alone to minimize the role of divine revelation in the recovery of the Book of Mormon, the founding of the Church, and the unfolding of its doctrines. But we have also been the recipients of untold blessings from the generations who have gone before us, and we would do well to recognize and remember them. It is with us as it was with Sir Isaac Newton: “If I have seen further,” he wrote in a 1676 letter to Robert Hooke, “it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”⁹

William Ernest Henley’s famous Victorian-era poem “Invictus” provided the title and the theme for Clint Eastwood’s inspiring 2009 film about Nelson Mandela. It also provided the memorable claim: “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.”

It’s a stirring assertion and, in a very real sense, true. A great proportion of what we are and do rests upon our own decisions, upon our own efforts. We’re not mere playthings in the hands of fate. We’re intended to rise above our circumstances. But not everything is within our power, under our control, or created by us, and many of the most important things are not. Henley’s claim contains truth, but it’s also false and misleading.

“I thank whatever gods may be,” says Henley, “for my unconquerable soul.” But our souls can be conquered. We cannot save ourselves. That’s why we need the Atonement of Christ.

Thirty-five years ago, my wife and I traveled with our infant firstborn son from southern California to her parents’ house in Denver, Colorado, where the whole extended family were gathering for a Christmas trip to Florida. We participated in a *Messiah* sing-along and then went home to prepare for our flight to Orlando the next morning, serenely and complacently aware that a storm was coming but confident that, unlike those we were leaving behind, we would be spending the time of that storm among palm trees and blue skies.

8. Compare Deuteronomy 6:10–11.

9. Isaac Newton, “Letter from Sir Isaac Newton to Robert Hooke,” Historical Society of Pennsylvania, http://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/9285.

But then came what's been called "the Christmas Eve blizzard of 1982." Stapleton International Airport closed at 9:30 AM on December 24, remained closed for thirty-three hours and, for several days thereafter, was open only for severely limited operations. Ten-foot-high snowdrifts were left throughout greater Denver, highways into and out of the city were shut down, power outages darkened large portions of the metropolitan area, roofs collapsed, supermarkets closed because their employees couldn't get to work, hospitals were reduced to minimal staff on emergency power, and snowmobiles dominated suburban streets. It was astounding to me and revealing to see how easily a simple snowfall could shut down a major modern city quite accustomed to seeing snow.

We're plainly not entirely the masters of our fates, the captains of our souls. Rather, from one very important perspective, as Elder Orson F. Whitney (d. 1931) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles put it in "The Soul's Captain," his response to "Invictus," "Men are as bubbles on the wave, as leaves upon the tree."

We're fragile creatures. In our earliest years, we are entirely dependent upon our parents and especially upon our mothers. But we remain fragile even as adults. A few days without food, even fewer without water, a few minutes without oxygen, and we're gone. If our hearts miss just a few beats, none of our plans, ambitions, schemes, or careful investments will mean a thing. And, in the end, no matter how we fight it, we'll die.

Our comfort and survival in the meantime depend upon cycles of evaporation and precipitation that few of us really understand, and we rely upon complex networks of exchange and transportation that very few of us could begin to explain.

The ground on which most of us live and where our food is grown was cleared of rocks, trees, and stumps by millions of hardworking people whose names we've forgotten. Our cities, big and small, feature innumerable large buildings erected by generations of construction workers to whom we've probably never given the slightest thought.

We owe a debt of gratitude that we can never repay. "For behold, are we not all beggars? Do we not all depend upon ... God, for all the substance which we have, for both food and raiment, and for gold, and for silver, and for all the riches which we have of every kind?"¹⁰ The Book of Mormon's Amulek wisely counsels us that we should "humble ourselves even to the dust, and worship God, in whatsoever place we may

10. Mosiah 4:19.

be in, in spirit and in truth; and that we live in thanksgiving daily, for the many mercies and blessings which he doth bestow upon us.”¹¹

It is never inappropriate for us to remember the debt that we have to God, “in whom we live, and move, and have our being,” but also to the men and women in our church — and beyond our church — who’ve preceded us and who’ve done so much to make what we have possible.¹²

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11. Paraphrased slightly from Alma 34:38.

12. The scriptural citation is from Acts 17:28.

