

The Five Wounds of The Church

Expectations run high, these days, whenever Catholic bishops gather.

Group the cardinals around the Pope, and you have the makings of a front-page story in all the major media, with a headline that screams the word "crisis."

It's a shame, however, that the media turned to the crisis so late in the game, because the Church's crisis — along with other world crises just recently come to bloom — was diagnosed in painful, prophetic detail in a meeting held on a summer day some years ago.

If we had heeded the call then, perhaps we would not be facing these crises today. Yet you didn't read about the meeting here. You didn't see it on CBS, CNN or Fox.

It's easy to see why. The Pope called the cardinals and bishops to meet him *in-site*, far from the Vatican, and he himself traveled to the meeting in secrecy, incognito. Many bish-

ops attended; estimates of the head count range from 150 to 300.

After praying the traditional prayer *Veni, Creator Spiritus* (Come, Holy Spirit), the Pope opened the meeting with a sermon on a text from the Psalms: "When the cares of my heart are many, thy consolations cheer my soul" (94:19).

The cares he counted off were indeed many, but they were summed up in five general categories, which he described as "The Five Wounds of the Church."

He was evoking, of course, the five wounds Jesus suffered at his crucifixion; but now, the Pope lamented, Christ suffered five grave wounds in his mystical body, the Church.

What were those five wounds? You might recognize them now, though few people could have listed them in this order a year ago.

► *The sins of the clergy and the spread of heresy.* His Holiness saw that clergy who were lax in morals were unconvinced and unconvincing in their Christian witness. No doubt, he was alluding to sexual scandals of the sort that fill the papers and the airwaves today.

► *The rise of militant Islam.* At that time, the Pope was watching the drama from afar, as it took place in the Middle East. But he predicted that, if left unchecked, it would soon come crashing into the Christian West.

► *The continuing, tragic division of Christianity.* Not only the Catholic Church, but all the nations that are traditionally Christian, have grown weak because of their inability to present a unified, compelling moral vision.

Thus, the lands formerly known as Christendom are vulnerable to conquest in any significant clash of civilizations. Most devastating to the Church is the schism between East and West.

We face the same problems, within and without, as our ancestors in the faith. But we work with the same graces as well.

► *Military threat from the Far East.* China quietly grew stronger while the West went about its business. As it grew more powerful, it persecuted any Christians who stood in its way — and many, too, who offered no resistance.

► *Persecution by secular political power.* In the century leading up to this sermon, one after another godless government had seen the Christian Church as the greatest threat to its authority. Some states marginalized the Church by killing its leaders; others accomplished the same end by strictly limiting the Church's sphere of influence far from the naked public square.

It's chilling for us, today, to see these crises as clearly as the Pope saw them then.

It's more remarkable still if we realize that the Pope — Pope Innocent IV — preached that sermon on June 28, 1245.

The occasion was the First Council of Lyons, during which the bishops agonized over what to do about the breakdown of clerical discipline, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Saracens, the Mongol invasion of Hungary and the anti-religious machinations of Emperor Frederick II.

Some seven and a half centuries later, the problems remain — in the same order, perhaps. Yet so, too, does the prophecy.

Though priests and bishops resign in shame, the Church continues to speak with the same voice, guided by the same Spirit, guaranteed by the same promises of Christ. Though many declare themselves to be enemies of the cross — and zealously shed the blood of the martyrs — the cross stands taller where Christian martyrs have died.

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If Christians can take little comfort in history, we can at least find hope there.

In addition to the grace we get, a little historical perspective can't hurt.