

## "Catholic in America"

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It's never been easy to be a Catholic in America. Okay, let's be honest, it's never been easy to be a Catholic anywhere. But America, by which I mean this particular part of North America whose independence we celebrate today, has been an especially sticky wicket. There were the prejudices which came from the persecution of the Catholic church in England. There were the salacious rumors and misunderstandings of consecrated life which led once to the burning of an Ursuline convent. There was the poverty of Catholic immigrants, who were considered a public nuisance in some of our cities because of their Catholicism but more often because of their poverty, which is always a public nuisance because it demands public attention and a public response - and that costs public money. There are many other examples that come to mind, some striking and some subtle, but all were real difficulties faced by people because of their Catholic faith.

But let's also be honest that it hasn't always been that difficult to be a Catholic in Dickinson. Oh, sure, some of the above manifestations of anti-catholicism were certainly around. But in the recent history of our Queen City, especially in the post-war and cold war era, Catholicism experienced an unprecedented influence and tolerance. This was in part because of the ideal of faithful family life in the greatest generation, in part because our immigrant farmers recognized both the value of life and the means to sustain the farm through family, and in part because

the baby boom for Catholics meant that there were just plain a lot of us...especially in this particular bit of Dakota.

Whether we live in times of intense persecution or in times of relative quiet, it's not supposed to be easy to live our faith - this is one of Christ's promises we would like to forget in our weaker moments. There are no "born Christians", because we must all be "born from above by water and the Spirit." The fact that we are born in original sin into a world filled with darkness, means that we are born into struggle. Tertullian it was who said, "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church."

The fact that I was baptized into the Body of Christ from my infancy means that I have the immense privilege and availability of Grace to fight the good fight. But these facts in themselves do not without effort mean that I am engaging. If living my faith is easy, I am probably not fighting, not dying to myself, not recognizing my weakness. I'm most likely drifting along in my easy chair in front of a screen of whatever size. Ease and happiness are not actually the same thing.

The opposite is also possible. Instead of taking our ease, we might see ourselves as mercenaries who take all comers for the thrill of victory. We fight because we are combative or because we are forceful, but we have no King, no Country, and no Right. We speak up for what is most popular or most goading, not because we seek a greater good but because it will win us accolades or attention. Those who encounter us know they have been whupped, but not that a prophet has been in the land. On every side of the aisle, much of what passes for prophecy currently is really just pot-stirring and tossing out grenades

because it's fun to watch stuff blow up. The prophet speaks for God, where "love and truth meet; and justice and peace kiss".

It's never easy to be Catholic because, this side of heaven, we are always part of the Church Militant. But the Church Militant is led by the Triumphant Lord. He is our point of reference, not the battle. We are not merely Christians, but Catholics. The battle is sure, but the Victor is surer. I am certain of the Church not because we are stronger, faster, or louder than anyone else. I am more certain than ever that the Church is on the winning side of history not because it is mine, but because we are His.