



From the Deacon's Desk

Last week, I began the story of the *Pact of the Catacombs*, the gathering of 40 some bishops shortly before Vatican II ended. They pledged to create a “church of the poor”, to “try to live according to the ordinary manner of our people in all that concerns housing, food, means of transport, and related matters.”

While never citing the Catacombs Pact specifically, Francis uses its language and principles, explaining that he wished for a “poor church, for the poor,” He leads by example by shunning the finery and perks of his office, preferring to live in the Vatican guesthouse rather than the apostolic palace. He stressed that all bishops should also live simply and humbly, and the pontiff urges pastors to “have the smell of the sheep,” staying close to those most in need and being welcoming and inclusive.

Brother Uwe Heisterhoff, a member of the Society of the Divine Word, the missionary community that oversees the Domitilla Catacombs, suggests the Pact was never well known because of times in which it was written. The worldwide social upheavals of the late 60s, plus the drama of the Cold War against communism and the rise of liberation theology — which stressed the gospel's priority on the poor but was seen as too close to Marxism by its conservative foes — made a document such as the Catacombs Pact difficult to support.

Brother Heisterhoff notes that a side effect of wider knowledge of and interest in the Pact is an increased interest in the catacombs. He explains that contrary to the oft-held belief that they were a hiding place to avoid the persecutions they were, in actuality, a place to pray, not so much a refuge.” The Roman authorities knew where the catacombs, and the Christians, were. It was no secret hideaway.

Pope Francis has revitalized knowledge of two jewels of the church: the Pact and the catacombs. Reflection on the content and challenge of the Pact suggests new avenues for living our faith. The reimagining of the catacombs provides the opportunity to better understand life for Christians in the early years of the church. The strength the Holy Spirit provides becomes more evident when we learn those early Christians were not looking for a place to hide but a place to pray. If this information is new, then take some time to reconsider how we view the early church – especially the martyrs who we now know were not hiding but praying. Their prayer may have mirrored Christ's in the garden, asking God to let the cup of martyrdom pass by, but not their will but God's.

Let us pray for our shepherds as they continue to integrate the Pact into their ministry.

If you'd like to be notified when a new Deacon's Desk is published or available on line, sign-up for the “Deacon's Desk” on Flocknote.