

## **Pastor's Pen: Leaving Lukewarmness Behind—Part 4**

The second recommendation of Jesus to the Church of Laodicea to correct their lukewarm nature was to “buy white garments in which to be clothed, if the shame of your nakedness is to be covered.” (Rev 3:18) Laodicea was well known in the cloth trade. Its cloths were made of the dark wool of the sheep raised in the region. It would seem madness from this vantage point to bleach the local wool to a bright white. The ears of the Laodiceans who first heard this message would well understand what was being asked.

### ***Standing Out, Not Blending In***

To understand what makes lukewarmness so very tempting is to understand that lukewarmness is the temperature of compromise. Lukewarmness lacks the fiery heat of passion or the icy cold of hatred. It blends into whatever is around it. It is a spiritual chameleon. The lukewarm do not like to stick out. Playing it safe is the goal of the lukewarm. The huge problem with this is that they drift where the society drifts. They adopt externally, at least, whatever the surrounding culture adopts. They either adopt or sit in silence. Either way they refuse to stick out.

For the Church of Laodicea, being part of the Roman Empire, there was a vested interest in blending into the populace. So much of what Christianity embraced was in direct opposition to the Greco-Roman culture and Rule of Law. Concepts we take for granted such as the dignity of the human person, family life, the role of government, the role of religion, human sexuality, and other items were viewed radically different from the morals and ways of governance of the Roman Empire. In the face of such things, the Laodiceans took the position with their Christian faith to hold internally to Christian beliefs, do only what was safe, and then publicly hold a different stance from their internal beliefs.

Spiritual lukewarmness leads to the same deal with the devil. It is the all too common “I am personally opposed but...” deal where a compartmentalization of the person comes into play. Lukewarmness leads to that wiggle room that allows a cafeteria approach to faith. There are certainly a boatload of issues that our popular culture takes offense at with the Church to this day. In fact, let's be honest, it still is same list as before: the dignity of the human person (especially in abortion), family life, the role the government, the role of religion, human sexuality, and so on. In our own country, to hold morals contrary to the popular morals leads to derision, ridicule, and other forms of public humiliation. In other areas of the world it can lead to imprisonment, lawsuits, suspension of human rights, and in some areas, death.

Yet in all of this, Christ wants us to stick out. He wants us to be as different in appearance to the world as we are belief. This is threatening. It is worth noting that in the Roman Empire, despite sporadic and intense persecutions over three centuries, the Christians grew from a handful of believers measured in the hundreds to a dominant faith numbering in the millions. It did this without returning violence for violence or persecution for persecution. They stood out. They stood tall. They held their ground. They won the day.

## ***With Clear Sight***

Finally, Jesus tells them to “buy ointment to smear on your eyes, if you would see once more.” Again, to the Laodiceans, this would sound familiar. According to Greek historian Strabo, there was a medical school in Laodicea. In the region was a key ingredient used in eye lotions. Jesus compares their lukewarmness to a blurred vision. Perhaps the lack of fire in their faith comes from a willful resistance to see the truth of the Gospel. The Church of Laodicea does not see themselves as in such a state as Jesus does. In verse 17 of the same chapter, earlier Jesus says, “You keep saying, “I am so rich and secure and I want for nothing.” Little do you realize how wretched you are, how pitiable and poor, how blind and naked!”

Jesus tells his disciples, “The truth will set you free.” (John 8:32) Clear vision is necessary for conversion. As individuals and as a parish, we need to ask ourselves in all honesty as to whether we effectively witness to those in our lives and to the community as a whole. The clearest place to see this in our personal lives is the list of priorities we set in our life and why we choose one thing over another.

Our Christian ancestors were willing to risk everything to follow Christ. They left all manner of safety, security, comfort, and convenience behind. Even today, many in our world are made to make the same choices. Their courage should encourage us.

To be blunt: when we make choices between faith and other things, who wins? Is faith something we fit into the rest of our schedule? Do we drop Mass when it becomes inconvenient to other things going on? Do we feel compelled to take on a worldly moral just to keep the peace? Do we adopt a worldly moral because it is more convenient to our lives? Do we resent a teaching of Christ because to accept it means to take a unpopular stance? Does a worldly way of looking at life influence our faith (political party for example) or do we seek to use our faith to influence society? Do we compromise some elements of the faith to move ahead? Do we teach our children that faith, the practice of faith, or the deepening of faith all take a back seat to getting ahead in this world? Do we prioritize sports, leisure, work, entertainment, and such over our faith? The more we answer yes, the more lukewarm we are. Remember, again, that Jesus finds lukewarmness so revolting that He spews it out of His mouth. Can we be spewed from the mouth of Christ and still enter heaven?

As a pastor of souls, it is my job to spur all of us to a fervor befitting our faith. It is my job to spur us to give God the first fruits of our time, energy, attention, and resources...not the scraps. It is my job to want this parish to stick out in our community where the wandering can find a home, where the injured will find care, where the tempest tossed can find safe harbor, and where the broken can find healing. I want our school, all our education programs, and our worship to be bastions of truth and excellence. I don't want a parish that merely wants to survive, but one that wants to thrive.

Christ tells the people of Laodicea to buy the refined gold, the white clothes, and eye ointment because that is what He offers us. He will give us the things we need, through His grace (especially through the sacraments) to thrive under all circumstances. Our parish will rise to great heights, by God's grace, but we must chase from it all vestiges of lukewarmness. The Church grew by leaps and bounds because Christians stood out, stood up, and stayed strong. They responded to the grace of God. Let us shake off any lukewarmness. Let us be the greatest version of what we can be by God's grace and be a place that will draw many to Christ.