

1. Our first reading made reference to the remnant of Israel and so I thought I'd take you on a deeper dive on that piece of divine revelation and how you might secure your place among that remnant.
  - The word "remnant" is used 70x in OT and 3x in NT when Paul quoted Isaiah in his Letter to the Romans.
    - Most of these are references to the remnant of Israel, Jacob or Judah.
  - The first reference comes from Gen 45:7 where Joseph, sold into slavery, told his brothers that God actually sent him ahead to them *to ensure for you a remnant on the earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance*.
    - So we see from the start that the existence of this remnant would be the work of God, not of man.
  - The next major reference would come from the person and prayers of King Hezekiah.
    - He was a good king sandwiched between a couple of bad kings.
    - Prior to his reign, his kingdom was about to be sacked by the Assyrians for their lack of loyalty.
    - When he became king, he did his best to revive the faith of his people, esp. through his own prayer-life.
    - Hearing that the Assyrian commander was about to wage war on him, he commanded his people: ***So send up a prayer for the remnant that is here*** (2 Kg 19:4).
    - In answer to his prayer God promised: *For out of Jerusalem shall come a remnant and from Mount Zion, survivors. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*
    - In 2 Chronicles 30:6 Hezekiah acknowledged God's promise fulfilled when he invited *the remnant left from the hands of the Assyrian kings* to celebrate the Passover.
    - A few chapters later he called for a special collection to be taken up *from the remnant of Israel* to help restore the Temple (2 Chr 34:9).
  - After the Babylonian Exile Ezra is called to help with the restoration, not merely of the Temple, but the very faith of Israel as a nation.
    - Among his efforts was an Exhortation he gave: *And now, but a short time ago, mercy came to us from the Lord, our God, who left us a remnant and gave us a stake in his holy place; thus our God has brightened our eyes and given us relief from our servitude.*
    - Their sin: intermarriage with pagans, watering down their faith and practices, slipping back into the disloyalty that got them in trouble in the first place.
  - These early Books certainly highlighted the reality of the remnant established by God.
  - The following Wisdom Literature would only mention the term once in Sirach
  - Then the Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Amos, Haggai, Zechariah, Micah, and then from our reading today Zephaniah would each refer to the remnant.
    - Zephaniah, who motivated me with this reflection, finally speaks of some of the qualities and rewards of the remnant, and that is what is important for us if we hope to be counted among the holy remnant of God.
  - Although the term is not used in the Gospels, there are at least two references to the concept of remnant by use of the word ***few***.
    - Mt. 7:13-14 The Narrow Gate makes a distinction between many and few – many take the wide gate and broad road that leads to destruction; few find the narrow gate and constricted road that leads to life.
    - In Lk 13:23-24's version of the Narrow Door: *And someone asked him, "Lord, will only a few people be saved?" He answered then, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough."*
  - Finally in Rev. 7:14 John was given a vision of humanity in heaven. He asked who are they and where did they come from. The Angel told him: *These and the ones who have **survived** the time of the great distress; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.*
2. Seeing that the existence of the Remnant is a divinely revealed reality, how might we secure our place among them? What qualities should the remnant have and what should they do to be counted among the Holy Remnant?
  - **Qualities and Characteristics include:**
    - **Faithful Obedience:** The remnant is marked by strict adherence to God's laws and commandments.
    - **Testimony of Jesus:** They hold fast to the testimony of Jesus and recognize Him as the Messiah.
    - **Righteousness by Faith:** They rely on God's grace and Christ's righteousness rather than on their own merits.
    - **Separation from Worldliness:** They live distinctively, often resisting the prevailing cultural and religious trends; they don't cave to woke mentality and strange ideologies as in our current culture.
    - **Perseverance:** They endure through tribulation and trials, remaining faithful even under persecution.
    - **Truth-Telling:** They are characterized by honesty and an absence of guile in their speech and actions.
    - **Spirituality:** They are characterized by humility, meekness, and a deep sincere, spiritual life.

- **Requirements and Actions include:**
    - **Repentance:** They continuously confess their sins and accept God's cleansing.
    - **Proclamation:** They are tasked with spreading God's messages, ie, proclaim His Kingdom.
    - **Discerning Faith:** They trust in God's Word over the opinions of man, politicians, or popular culture.
    - **Service and Love:** They demonstrate love for God and their neighbor, acting as a positive influence.
    - **Anticipation:** They live in expectation of God's final redemption and the establishment of His kingdom.
3. If you appreciated this lesson and would like to learn more on how you can become an active member of the Holy Remnant, I invite you to attend my next Theology on Tap on Fri. Feb 13 at 6:00pm at PJ's.
- In my research for this lesson, I learned that Five Crowns await those who are counted among the Holy Remnant.
    - Would you like to know what those Five Crowns are? Yes? Then I'll see you on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>.
    - For those of you who take Lent seriously, this will help you to establish your 1-1-1 Plan for this year's Lent.

**The Remnant of Israel** refers to a faithful minority, chosen by grace, that survives judgment to fulfill God's purpose. Key characteristics include keeping God's commandments, having the testimony of Jesus, walking in faith, humility, and maintaining purity. They are defined by unwavering loyalty to God, separation from worldliness, and perseverance through trials. The concept emphasizes that while the majority may fall away, God preserves a dedicated group who maintain their covenantal faithfulness.

**The Catholic Church teaches** that the "remnant of Israel" consists of the faithful Jewish believers who accepted Jesus as the Messiah, forming the initial core of the Church, which is considered the "new Israel" or "spiritual Israel". This remnant bridges the Old and New Covenants, expanding to include Gentile believers.

**Key aspects of this teaching include:**

- **Theological Definition:** The remnant refers to those in Israel who remained faithful to God, a concept extending to the "elect" in the New Testament who accepted the Gospel.
- **Spiritual Israel:** The Church views itself as the continuation and fulfillment of God's covenant people, incorporating both Jewish and Gentile believers.
- **Continuity and Promise:** The Church does not teach that the Jewish people have been rejected or replaced, but rather that the covenant is fulfilled and expanded in Christ. St. Paul (Romans 11) notes that a "remnant" remains, chosen by grace.
- **Final Restoration:** Catholic teaching, following Romans 11, anticipates a future, final gathering of the Jewish people to Christ, which is seen as a crucial part of God's plan of salvation.
- **Irrevocable Calling:** God's covenant with the Jewish people is considered irrevocable. The "firstfruits" (the converted remnant) keep the "root" (the patriarchs/covenant) holy.

The Church emphasizes that while the Old Covenant is fulfilled, the Jewish people remain "most dear to God" and their special calling remains.

**The New Testament teaches** that the remnant of Israel is the small group of ethnic Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah, serving as the faithful nucleus of the Church. This remnant represents the continuation of God's covenant, forming the foundation of the New Israel (the Church) into which Gentile believers are grafted.

**Key aspects of Catholic teaching on the Remnant include:**

- **Definition:** The remnant consists of Jews in the New Testament period (e.g., the Apostles, Mary, early Jewish Christians) who remained faithful to God during widespread rejection of the Messiah.
- **Paul's Theology (Romans 9-11):** St. Paul clarifies in Romans 11:5 that "at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace". This proves God has not rejected his people, but rather, has preserved a believing portion.
- **Bridge to the Church:** The Church is not a total replacement of Israel, but is the fulfillment of Israel, often called the "New Israel," which is composed of this Jewish remnant and Gentile converts.
- **Future Promise:** The Church teaches that a future, full conversion of the Jewish people (a return to the remnant) is anticipated, which is connected to the Second Coming.
- **Spiritual Continuity:** The remnant represents God's grace and mercy, ensuring that the promises to Israel are fulfilled through the Church.

This theological view emphasizes continuity, recognizing the Church as the fulfillment of Israel's vocation rather than a replacement of it, while maintaining that the Church is the true, spiritual Israel.

**To be counted among the remnant of God**, a person must exhibit unwavering faith in Jesus Christ, live a life of obedience to God's commandments, and maintain purity in heart and action. The remnant are defined as the "called, chosen, and faithful" who surrender their lives to God, separating themselves from the world's sinful, self-serving ways.

**Key Actions and Characteristics**

- **Faith and Allegiance:** Maintaining true faith in Christ and standing on God's Word rather than political correctness or cultural trends.
- **Obedience and Surrender:** Choosing to follow God's will even when it costs comfort, and not negotiating with His commandments.
- **Holiness of Life:** Practicing righteousness, humility, meekness, and truth-telling.
- **Separation from the World:** Not bowing to modern "Baals" (idols) or relying on worldly power.
- **Active Witness:** Proclaiming the message of God's judgment and salvation.

The remnant is described as a small, faithful minority, rather than a large group, who are identified by their fruits (actions) and their dedication to God's purpose over their own desires. Recall, also, the following I included in my homily above:

- **Qualities and Characteristics include:**
  - **Faithful Obedience:** The remnant is marked by strict adherence to God's laws and commandments.
  - **Testimony of Jesus:** They hold fast to the testimony of Jesus and recognize Him as the Messiah.
  - **Righteousness by Faith:** They rely on God's grace and Christ's righteousness rather than on their own merits.
  - **Separation from Worldliness:** They live distinctively, often resisting the prevailing cultural and religious trends; they don't cave to woke mentality and strange ideologies as in our current culture.
  - **Perseverance:** They endure through tribulation and trials, remaining faithful even under persecution.
  - **Truth-Telling:** They are characterized by honesty and an absence of guile in their speech and actions.
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- **Requirements and Actions include:**
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**Promises for the faithful remnant of God** include eternal life, presence with Christ, and inheritance of a purified earth. Key rewards include five specific crowns along with ruling with Christ, divine protection, and the complete removal of suffering, tears, and hunger.

**Key Promised Rewards**

- **Eternal Life & Divine Presence:** The primary reward is living forever in the direct presence of God, free from the limitations of sin and death.
- **Inheritance & Reign:** The remnant are considered heirs of God, destined to inherit earth and reign with Christ.
- **Protection & Provision:** God promises to shepherd, comfort, and guide the remnant to "springs of water," ensuring no more hunger, thirst, or extreme suffering.
- **Spiritual Recognition:** Those who hold fast to the covenant will receive a "memorial" or "name" within God's house that is better than sons and daughters.
- **The Five Crowns:** The New Testament details specific rewards for various aspects of faithfulness: promised rewards for Christian perseverance and service, often referred to as *stephanos* (a victor's wreath). All of these crowns represent recognition for faithful service rather than salvation, which is considered a free gift.
  1. **The Incorruptible (Imperishable) Crown** (1 Cor. 9:25 *Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one*): Awarded for exercising self-control, discipline, and perseverance in the Christian life. The Incorruptible Crown is a promised, eternal reward for believers who demonstrate self-discipline, endurance, and faithfulness in their spiritual lives, metaphorically running the race set before them. Mentioned in 1 Cor. 9:25, this reward contrasts with fading worldly honors, symbolizing victory over sin and a life devoted to God.
  2. **The Crown of Rejoicing** (1 Thes. 2:19 *For what is our hope or joy or crown to boast of in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming if not in you?*): Also called the "soul-winner's crown," this is given to those who lead others to Christ and invest in the lives of others. It represents joy and triumph in Heaven upon Jesus' return. Paul refers to the Philippian believers as his "joy and crown" (4:1).

3. **The Crown of Righteousness** (2 Tim 4:8 *From now on a crown of righteousness awaits me, with the Lord, the just Judge, will award it to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance.*): Promised to those who eagerly look forward to and love the return of Jesus Christ.
4. **The Crown of Life** (Jam 1:12 *Blessed is the man who perseveres in temptation, for when he has been proved he will receive the crown of life that he promised to those who love him.* & Rev 2:10 *Do not be afraid of anything that you are going to suffer ... Remain faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.*): Awarded to those who endure suffering, persecution, and trials, remaining faithful even unto death. The "Crown of Life" is a biblical, symbolic reward representing eternal life and victory, promised to believers who endure trials, temptations, and persecution while remaining faithful to God. This "crown" is a wreath of honor, not a royal headdress, signifying the joy of salvation rather than authority.
5. **The Crown of Glory** (1 Pt 5:4 *And when the chief Shepherd is revealed, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*): Given to elders, pastors, and leaders who faithfully shepherd and care for God's flock. The "crown of glory" is an unfading, eternal reward promised to faithful believers, particularly those who shepherd or care for others, to be bestowed by Jesus, the "Chief Shepherd," upon his return. It symbolizes divine honor, victory, and the righteous life, often associated with spiritual leadership and enduring hardship.

### **What Does Remnant Theology Have to Teach us About the Church Today?** By Msgr. Charles Pope

Recently on the blog we examined a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center that reported a decrease in the number of Catholics in America. The good news is that as many as 45% of Americans indicated some affiliation with Catholicism. That does not mean that they are all Catholics. Sometimes it means that they have a Catholic spouse or were once Catholic themselves but have fallen away, etc. What does remain sadly and soberly true is that only 20-25% of Catholics attend Mass weekly (as we are required to do).

**Frankly, as a Catholic and a priest, I am stunned at the decline in Mass attendance that has occurred during my lifetime.** When I was a young child, I remember jam-packed Masses: if you didn't get there early you'd have to stand. In those days (the sixties) if you put up four walls, Catholics would fill them. There were waiting lists for the local parochial school. There were lots of religious sisters. There was not just one associate pastor or curate, there were two, or more four.

**But those days are largely gone.** Yes, there are still some large parishes in suburban areas; some of them are even growing. But during my lifetime, weekly Mass attendance has gone from 70-80% down to 20-25%. And although vocations are beginning to rebound, the usual situation these days is empty convents and largely empty rectories. A parochial vicar is unknown in many parishes. In some parts of the country there isn't even a resident pastor in each parish.

**There is no way to describe this decline other than "stunning."** And I can hear all the usual arguments about why swimming around in my brain: We abandoned tradition! No, say others, we're not progressive enough! There are too many rules! No, say others, our problem is that we abandoned all the rules! I could go on and on. Everyone has an explanation and there are lots of disagreements about them.

**But what might God be doing? What might He be allowing?** Now I know that I am walking on thin ice in attempting to consider this question, but please be assured that I am merely pondering it, not proposing a complete, definitive answer. I have often asked the Lord, "What's up with the Church? What has happened, Lord?" Now I don't claim that I received a bolt from Heaven in answer, rather I just came to a gradual and increasing awareness that what we are experiencing is really not new. There does seem to be a biblical precedent that God has frequently seen fit to thin His ranks, to prune and purify His people. Theologians call this "remnant theology," since a remnant refers to a smaller portion of a much larger thing.

**Remnant theology is seen in** both the Old and New Testaments. The phrase refers to the fact that, of the many followers of God, many (if not most) fell away at critical periods, such that only a small remnant remained to begin again. Here are some examples from Scripture:

1. **There were Twelve Tribes in Israel. But ten of them were lost** in the Assyrian Conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 B.C. The prophets had warned the Northern Kingdom of its wickedness, but the refusal to repent brought the foretold destruction. Those who did not die in the war were deported and disappeared by assimilating into the peoples around them. They are known as the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Only a remnant, the Tribes of Judah and Levi, survived in the Southern Kingdom of Judah.
2. **A remnant of Judah** – Judah also grew wicked and prophets warned of its destruction. The Babylonians then destroyed Judah, and Jerusalem with it, in 587 B.C. They deported the survivors to Babylon. Eighty years later, the Persians conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Jewish people to return to the Promised Land. But only a remnant went back; most chose to stay in the Diaspora, preferring Babylon to the Land promised by God.
3. **Gideon had an army of 30,000** and faced the Midianites, who had 60,000. But God said to him, "Your army is too large. Tell the cowards to go home." So Gideon told the soldiers that if they didn't think they were up for this battle they could leave; 20,000 left. With Gideon's arm down to only 10,000, God said to Gideon, "Your army is still too

large, lest you think you would win this battle on your own.” So God told Gideon to observe the men at the stream as they drank water. Most drank leisurely, but 300 of them lapped up the water like dogs! “That is your army,” said the Lord, “300 men and I will be with you.” Gideon won that day with 300 men whom the Lord had chosen. God thinned His ranks and chose only a remnant as His true soldiers (*cf* Judges 6 & 7).

4. **Jesus, too, didn’t seem to trust large crowds.** Some of His most difficult sayings came when there was a large crowd. In fact, anytime you hear mention of a large crowd in the gospels, fasten your seat belt, because it’s practically guaranteed that a hard saying is coming! Once when there was a large crowd, Jesus taught against divorce (Matt 5 & 19, Mark 10). Another time He spoke to crowds He declared that no one could be His disciple unless he renounced his possessions, took up his cross, and followed Him (e.g., Luke 14). Yet another time, Jesus taught on the Eucharist, causing many to leave Him and no longer walk in His company (Jn 6).
5. **And surely we cannot forget Jesus’ sad lament** that the road to destruction is wide and many are on it, while the road to salvation is narrow and only a few find it (*cf* Mat 7:13-14). Yes, only a few, a remnant.

**These are just a few examples of remnant theology in the Scriptures.** There are many more. I would like to quote one last passage from Zechariah because it also gets to the root of what God may be doing in our times, if my hunch is correct. *“Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is close to me!” declares the LORD Almighty. “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered, and I will turn my hand against the little ones. In the whole land,” declares the LORD, “two-thirds will be struck down and perish; yet one-third will be left in it. This third I will bring into the fire; I will refine them like silver and test them like gold. They will call on my name and I will answer them; I will say, ‘They are my people,’ and they will say, ‘The LORD is our God’” (Zech 13:6-9).*

**It is a stunning passage to be sure. But it also shows God’s purpose in thinning His ranks.** There is something very mysterious about why God allows so many to stray. And yet it is true that we are always free to stay or go. There seem to be times in the history of the Church and Israel during which God allows many to depart, even “causes” them to depart as this passage describes it. It is a hard mystery to stomach. But I suppose I understand one aspect of it.

**An Image of why** – In November it is pruning time here in the Northeast. My mighty rose bushes, some eight feet tall, will be pruned back to just one foot off the ground. And I do it on purpose! But if my roses are to thrive next year, the pruning has to be done. The roses do not understand what I do, but *I* know why I do it. It is necessary, though painful. And God, too, knows what He is doing. And we cannot fathom it any more than my rosebushes can understand why I prune them. But God does it. In the passage above, the one-third who remain must also be purified, refined as in fire. But when it is done, they will be pure gold. Those who remain and accept purification will call on God’s name. They will be a people, a Church, after His own heart.

**To me it has become clear that the Lord is pruning His Church.** He is preparing us for spring. And we *are* in fact enduring a difficult winter. But we’re being purified, cleansed. These are tough days for the Church, but I can already see signs of a great spring ahead. There are many wonderful lay movements and growth areas in the Church. I am very impressed with the caliber of men entering the priesthood. These are men who love the Lord and His Church and who deeply desire to speak the truth in love. In my own convent, we had 25 young sisters of the Servants of the Lord, a wonderful new and missionary order. They had to leave to find a larger convent because they were growing so much. They, too, love the Lord and His Church and want to spread His Gospel everywhere.

**Though the number of practicing Catholics has diminished, I see greater fervency in those who remain.** In my own parish there are many who are devoted to prayer, bible study, and praise of God. Eucharistic piety is stronger in the Church today through Eucharistic adoration and daily Mass. On the Internet there are many signs of excitement and zeal for the faith. Many wonderful blogs and websites are emerging to strengthen Catholics. EWTN is doing wonderful work and many Catholic radio stations have also begun.

**I could go on, but I think you get the point. God has pruned and is purifying us.** I have no doubt that there are still some difficult winter days ahead before a full spring sets in. But God never fails. He is renewing His Church and preparing us for whatever lies ahead.

**Frankly, it is going to take a stronger and purer Church to endure** the cultural tsunami that has been rolling in. The first waves hit in the late 1960s and successive waves look to be even more destructive, as Western culture is gradually being swept away. The Church will have to be strong and pure in order to endure the days ahead, to rescue those we can, and to help rebuild when the terrible waves have worked their last destruction.

**I realize that this post will not be without controversy.** I do not propose it as the only answer to the times. Neither do I claim that fallen-away Catholics have simply been pruned, as though we could know for certain that they will never return and be grafted on again. We should continue to evangelize and to seek to grow the Church by Christ’s own mandate. We cannot know the size that the Lord wants us to be, nor should we ever stifle the Spirit of Christ’s mandate: Go and make disciples of all the nations.