

Of terrapins and turtles

A long time ago (at my age everything seems a long time ago) I was asked by a pastor in York, Pennsylvania to deliver a couple of lectures on current biblical studies. Residing for the weekend at the local rectory I found myself sitting at lunch one day looking at a bowl of dark brown soup. I assumed it was some kind of beef soup – bits of beef floating in it. I consumed it, delighted with the flavor. The housekeeper then informed me it was turtle soup!! I didn't gag because after all it had been a tasty experience – but I had never heard of turtle soup and if I had known beforehand I wouldn't have touched the stuff.

But York is just across the border from Maryland and the Chesapeake Bay and terrapin soup is so popular (at least it used to be) that the Maryland University football team is named the Terps for terrapin. Which made me recall something I wrote – again a long time ago – about a turtle.

I had read John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* in which he describes a turtle attempting to cross a busy highway. It pushed itself up a steep embankment then tipped itself over the road's four-inch shoulder, hind legs pushing . . . then waggled from side to side over the road itself until one car just missed it, causing the turtle to draw in its head and legs tightly within its shell. No sooner did it venture out again than a truck grazed it, spinning it like a coin right off the road – where it landed on its back, feet in the air, reaching for something to right itself. At this point Tom Joad picked it up and wrapped it in his coat to give to his little brother at home – only in the end for the turtle to work its way out, hide for a while within its shell to avoid a cat and was last seen walking off southwest *as it had been from the first*. In other words, slow as it was and easily diverted by obstacles and human traffic, it knew where it was going and persisted no matter what.

I used that image in a positive way to describe the Catholic Church, very old and usually very slow and misdirected this way and that – and yet it knows its destiny; it is relentlessly oriented toward its ultimate arrival at and contribution to a world of gracious being. Its progress can be frustrating (like watching a turtle cross a highway) but it's the way we Catholics are as an institution – and whatever the setbacks, we'll get where we're headed - - - But then I came across a song by the 70's folksinger Melvina Reynolds who had a different take on the turtle - more depressing and I think expressive of essentially *un-Catholic* behavior and often a handicap to our progress. It goes:

You can't make a turtle come out, / You can't make a turtle come out, / You can call him or coax him or shake him or shout, / But you can't make a turtle come out . . . //

If he wants to stay in his shell, / If he wants to stay in his shell, / You can knock on the door but you can't ring the bell, / And you can't make a turtle come out, come out . . . //

A poke makes a turtle retreat at both ends, / And you can't make a turtle come out, come out / . . . //

So you'll have to patiently wait, / So you'll have to patiently wait, / And when he gets ready, he'll open the gate, / But you can't make a turtle come out . . .