

Ordinary 10-b

Immaculate Conception, Kelowna

9 June 2018

Dear brother priests, parishioners and trustees of Canadian Catholic schools:

Introduction

First of all, a warm expression of gratitude to the parishioners and pastor, Father Cerlouie, here at Immaculate Conception Parish for welcoming me and the trustees to this Sunday Vigil celebration of the Eucharist. We are appreciative of your graciousness and kindness.

At the end of Mass there will be a short ceremony of commissioning the trustees, asking the Lord's blessing on them, so that they can carry out the very important mission the Church entrusts to them.

Today's Readings, especially the Gospel, present several different ideas to ponder, making it difficult – at least for me – to weave them together into a single, common theme. So, instead of attempting that – and failing – I am going to propose three short, but not necessarily connected, reflections. The first from the Book of Genesis on “blame-shifting,” the refusal to accept responsibility for our actions which follows upon sin; the second and third reflections come from the Gospel: what is the sin against the Holy Spirit? and why did Jesus seem to rebuff his Mother and relatives when they wanted to see him?

1. From Genesis

The Book of Genesis tells us of the first no, the original “no,” when men and women preferred to gaze upon themselves rather than on their Creator. They wanted to go their own way, and chose to be self-sufficient. However, in so doing, they began to hide themselves and to accuse those who were close by of being the cause of their actions (cf. Gen 3:10,12). Adam held Eve responsible for his act of disobedience, and for her part Eve claimed that “the serpent tricked her” (cf. Gen 3:12) into eating of the forbidden fruit.

That serpent was too smart to deny God, but awoke in her the suspicion that the relationship she and Adam enjoyed with God was a chain that bound them, that deprived them of their freedom. Satan offered an alternative to such a God. He suggested that they could build the world by themselves by refusing to accept the limitations of being creatures. This is always the essence of temptation: creating the illusion that there is a path to life other than obedience to God’s commandments.¹

As for us, who are heirs to this original sin, we are tempted to think the commandments obstruct our freedom. Moreover, like Adam and

¹ Cf. R.R. Reno, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010), 77-89; Benedict XVI, General Audience (6 February 2013).

Eve, we accuse others of being responsible for our sins and mistakes and not looking at ourselves as the cause.

Genesis calls us to own up to who we are and what we can do – and place ourselves in God’s merciful hands.

2. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

Now to my second point, which takes a look at Jesus’ terrifying affirmation: “Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (Mk 3:29).

In light of God’s infinite mercy, over the years I have often puzzled about how there could be an unforgivable sin. In Mark’s account, where this statement occurs, Jesus is incensed that people are so hardened in their resistance to him that they claimed that he was possessed by the same unclean spirits which he cast out.

What, then, is this blasphemy against the Spirit? Biblical commentators generally agree that such a sin is an obstinate refusal to accept the love of the Father of mercies. It is the sin whereby a person excludes him or herself voluntarily from forgiveness. Blasphemy against the Spirit is a radical resistance to grace and redemption. The blasphemer wants to persist in evil, claiming that God’s mercy is not for him. It closes the door of mercy.

This outright rejection of divine mercy is unforgivable, not because

God hates this sin particularly, but because this sin against the Spirit is a recalcitrant refusal to accept forgiveness: “I refuse mercy.”

If a person turns away from God even when he forgives that individual, then there is nothing left that God can do. The gift of his forgiveness is there. But if the person isn’t open to receiving it, then even God can’t force it; to do so would eliminate our freedom.

In effect, a refusal of God’s forgiveness is a rejection of God as love.

We hope, of course, that very few persist in this attitude to the end of their lives but rather ultimately accept God’s merciful love.²

3. Jesus’ Family and the Will of God

My third point today is from the last section of Mark’s Gospel which can also puzzle us. We are still near the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.

The main shock comes from Jesus’ surprising response to his relatives when they come after him to seize him, apparently to bring him back to Nazareth from Capernaum, where his healing ministry has stirred up a great following among the people and scrutiny by the authorities. They are upset over what we can call Jesus’ sudden “career change” from quiet village craftsman to itinerant teacher and healer. It is entirely understandable that they should want to corral him and find out

² Cf. St. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 17.

what was going on.

Informed that his mother and relatives, probably cousins, are outside asking for him, Jesus says, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who were sitting around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk 3:33-35).

This apparent slighting of Mary and the “sisters and brothers” seems – but only seems to be – an affront to the respect owed to members of one’s own family. In fact, of course, Jesus’ Mother, Mary, was the exemplar (cf. Lk 11:27-28), the very model of what it means to “do the will of God” as her “yes” to the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation makes clear.

Nonetheless, this is a truly startling pronouncement. Jesus redefines what it means to be “family.” More valuable than bonds of flesh and blood is ready obedience to the will of God: “whoever does the will of God.” Such people constitute Jesus’ new family.

This understanding was taken up by the early Church, and remains in our language of describing one another today as “brothers and sisters.” We know from St. Paul’s letters that the early Christians spontaneously used kinship language (“brother” and “sister”) to speak of the community that sprang from following Jesus.

In fact, those baptized into Christ become brother and sister with a

bond that is deeper than the natural kinship of family. This is a communion of persons that is deeper than blood ties.

Conclusion

In the Eucharist which we now continue to celebrate, the Lord Jesus once again invites us to that circle of his friends, those gathered around him as his brothers and sisters. Let us pray that this Mass will deepen our friendship with them, and with all those whom both he – and we – call our brothers and sisters.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
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