

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

A few weeks ago, when we were taking our explanatory walk through the Mass, our Gospel came from the 6th chapter of John, what we call The Bread of Life Discourse, in which Jesus says, “For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” The directness of this statement shocked the disciples, as we heard, causing many of them to respond, “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” Similarly, in our 2nd reading today from the Letter of James, we hear the admonition: “Show no partiality as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ”, for if we treat a poor person as less than a wealthy person we’ve become judges with evil designs. Another hard saying, because it can be so easy to selfishly discriminate.

Now, in both of these cases, some of the listeners no doubt rejected God’s clear teaching, because they were hard to swallow. A “hard saying” is any teaching of Christ or the Church that we find difficult to accept or live by; and these are often the moral teachings – many topics which touch on family life, like abortion, contraception, and same-sex marriage. In our day, it’s true that Catholics often respond to hard sayings in one of five ways: 1) They obey the teaching without understanding it and so suffer some degree of frustration. 2) They remain in the Church but do not obey the teaching. 3) They remain in the Church and actively try to get the Church to change the teaching. 4) They leave the Church. 5) They learn the reasons behind the teaching in order to see its goodness; and in this way live more fully according to the teaching, benefiting greatly from it. Well, when it comes to these hard sayings, one of the purposes of the upcoming World Meeting of Families, happening in Philadelphia at the end of this month, is to help bring all of us closer to that fifth response.

But, why is the Church so adamant about such teachings regarding moral issues that seem so “old-fashioned” at times? Well, for one, because the Church, in the wisdom that God has given her, knows the deep wounding such sins cause individuals, marriages, and families. In this way, the Church is then truly a home for the wounded heart. Or, in Pope Francis’ own words, the Church is “a field hospital after battle.” He said, “It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds...”

This past Saturday, I had a wedding here at the church, and I was reminded how the Scriptures reveal to us that at the heart of God’s creation is the creation of human beings as male and female, who are meant to become one flesh as husband and wife, and to raise up a family. Sexual activity outside of this context is not part of God’s plan. But within the context of marriage, spousal love, conjugal union and family life become a source of happiness – even amid the sufferings and trials of life – and a great and indispensable contribution to the goodness and health of society. Yet our society has been wounded deeply by a host of violations of the truth of God’s beautiful plan, including things like promiscuity, pornography, prostitution, human trafficking, divorce (exacerbated by no fault divorce laws), and numerous forms of sexual abuse. Therefore, Pope Francis’ description of the Church as a field hospital after battle certainly pertains to this tragic situation! The Pope has joined the themes of mercy and truth in a deeply helpful way. He wants us to experience God’s love and forgiveness if we have sinned in this area, and he wants us to experience God’s love and healing if we have been wounded by others in this area.

For this to happen, though, we must first heed the words of Pope Francis in his encyclical, *The Joy of the Gospel*: “I invite all Christians...at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord...”

My friends, God’s love never fails; He will never break his covenant with us. Because He is our Father, even when we abandon Him, God always perseveres in His love for us, patiently awaiting our return! And so, His love should give us confidence, joy and inner peace, and this in turn will give us the strength to strive for growth in our moral lives. There is objective truth in the realm of human sexuality. But, the Church understands that we grow in our ability to live according to that truth with effort over time.

All of this talk about morality sometimes makes some people snap, “The Church just says no, no no – no to this, no to that!” But, “behind every “no” in the difficult task of discerning between good and evil, there shines a great “yes” to the recognition of the dignity and inalienable value of every single and unique human being called into existence.” (*Dignitas Personae*).

And so, in closing, some of Jesus’ hardest sayings do deal with marriage, sexuality and family, yet the moral teachings of the Church are rooted in God’s loving plan for us, and they are a source of deep happiness and human flourishing. In order to live these teachings in a way that we experience their fruits, it’s very helpful to understand their rationale. And, above all, it is not possible to fully live the moral teachings of the Church without the grace of God and the warmth and practical support of Christian community. May God bless all our families, and together, our parish family. (Cited: Archdiocese of Philadelphia World Meeting of Families Preparatory Catechesis).