

Twentieth Sunday of the Year (C) – August 18, 2019

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons and daughters of God”, said Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount. “Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division,” to quote Jesus from today’s gospel. The first statement seems to stand in opposition to the second; in the first Jesus is promoting peace, in the second it seems division. But when one looks more closely, and reflects more deeply, you discover that they are not in opposition to each other, but actually complement each other. I may have mentioned before that when I was in seminary there were a couple of students whose parents had rejected them because of their decision to discern a vocation to the priesthood which had caused division within their families. In one case the young man had come from a family of atheists, and the fact he had found true meaning and purpose to life in the person of Jesus Christ, confessing Him as Lord and Savior, meant he could no longer be part of their household or remain under their roof. He did not go out of his way to create division within the family he loved, but neither could he deny the truth, the eternal truth, he had found in a living and personal relationship with Jesus Christ in the community of the Church, a decision which led him on the path to the priesthood.

We can create division within our families for the right reasons (standing up for truth and justice) and for the wrong reasons, dividing for the sake of it, turning the knife rather than turning one’s cheek. Jesus went to the Cross because he caused division through his words and actions: he healed on the Sabbath, welcomed the most notorious sinners to his table, forgave sins, claimed to be God, made it clear we had to love our enemies and not hate them.....the list goes on and on! He did not go out of his way to cause division, after all he came among us to reconcile us to one another and to the Father, but the consequence of being true to who he is, of being true to the Gospel he lived and proclaimed, meant he was hunted, hounded, stripped, beaten and nailed to a tree, the result of living the commandment he gave us: Love one another as I have loved you.

Yes, it does seem ironical that the consequence of such love was division, love so amazing, so divine. If we truly lived the Gospel in the way Christ asks us to, we are going to experience rejection because it leads us to say things many do not want to hear, and to embrace those whom others may believe are beyond redemption. If any of us feel comfortable after hearing any Gospel passage, then we probably have not listened.

Cafeteria Catholics was a term which appeared a few years ago, which basically means we have the tendency to embrace the parts of Catholic teaching which fit our own lifestyle and don't make us feel uncomfortable. But faith is meant to make us feel uncomfortable.

When a President or Prime Minister say one thing about immigration, or the refugee crisis and Pope Francis says the opposite who do we think is right? Of course, Pope Francis believes every country has a right to protect its borders, but it's how we do it, and the way we treat those who arrive at them which is so important to him. Do we simply reject the position, or person, we don't like in favor of the one we do, or do we see it as an opportunity to reflect more deeply on what is being said, pray about it, and ask ourselves in the presence of our God, which view, opinion, solution, is in tune with the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, and the teaching of Christ's Church? I am focusing on the immigration issue only because it has become such a major one not only here but across the Western World, especially since the refugee crisis arising from the conflicts in such places as Syria, Libya and Somalia, just to name three.

My family, like any other I am sure, obviously has different views, beliefs, opinions when it comes to politics and religion. On many occasions when we gathered together around the dinner table someone would say that we were not going to discuss either politics or religion, which invariably meant we did. But we did so in a way that did not cause us to despise each other at the end of it, which I think has become more prevalent today because we have become so polarized and seem unwilling to meet in the middle and find common ground; everyone is going to extremes and unfortunately it can also be so within the Church.

Once Pope Francis began to talk more and more about social issues, to stir our hearts and consciences, and created more openness within the Church, the more threatened some within the Church became because they said he was compromising the teachings of the Church. But Pope Francis has not compromised one Church teaching, what he has done is to make us more aware of the mercy of God which breaks through, or should be able to break through, the hardness of any heart. We don't break people, we heal them, we don't isolate but embrace. We can all have our pet topics even within the Church, we can also be tempted to be selective even when it comes to issues, values and truths which should be upheld by us all, this can be so when it comes to Life Issues. We are never going to be Pro-Abortion because we believe in the value, dignity, beauty, of every human life from the moment of conception until natural death.

But this does not mean we don't understand the agony a mother/father must go through when contemplating such a decision or will reject someone who has been through it and is searching for healing and peace. Understanding, mercy and compassion do not compromise the truth but complement it. And while we can argue that the taking of innocent life cannot be compared to taking the life of one who has committed a heinous crime, our Church no longer believes, under any circumstance, in the death penalty, stating it undermines and is contrary to a consistent ethic of the sanctity of human life and therefore should never be used or seen as a means of justice. Over the last couple of weeks a number of our Bishops have declared gun control to also be a life issue.

I bring these issues up, not to cause division among us because I know there already is from the letters I receive, or when I am collared (pardon the pun) at a coffee shop. There are issues that makes us hot under the collar, cause division within our communities and families. But when we don't agree with one another, or what the Church teaches, or Pope Francis says, or what our Grandmas tell us, we must always ask ourselves: Why? Why does it make me feel uncomfortable? Why do I disagree? Where can I find common ground? Or is a change required of me, so that my life and the life, teachings and truth of Jesus Christ are in accord, harmony, with one another? Because when I compromise the truth of the Gospel, I usually end up compromising my own soul, and I don't want to be divided from my Savior, a decision that lies solely in my hands. Amen!