

FROM THE PASTOR'S



21st Sunday in Ordinary Time – August 26, 2007 C

“HOW MANY WILL BE SAVED LORD?”

In today’s gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he will give his life for the salvation of all. As he travels, someone asked him, “*Lord, will only a few be saved?*” Jesus answered: “*Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I tell you, will attempt to enter but will not be strong enough.*”

One person commenting on the above words said: “I wish he hadn’t said that.” And then he continues. The “narrow door” stuff makes us uneasy. We prefer a gentler, kinder Jesus! But, what you see is what you get. We cannot be selective in our listening to Jesus. In fact, we can learn more about God’s will for us lives in the “uncomfortable passages” in the Bible than in the “nicer” ones. Because it is in those tough passages that we feel the growing pains of becoming more Christlike.

Some scholars believe that the narrow door is Jesus himself—for he is the Way, the Truth and the Life for all seeking everlasting life. However, a mere passing acquaintance with Jesus is not sufficient, nor is a faith that is professed but not lived. To those who said “Lord, open us, we ate and drank your company, we preached in your streets”, Jesus says “*I do not know where you are from. Depart from me you evildoers.*” Ouch, tough words. Again, don’t we wish he didn’t say that. Those are not nice words.

Even though we do say that salvation is *gift* and *not earned* by good works, it nevertheless demands our full cooperation. Take the gift of education that parents offer to their children and we will take the example of a Catholic school setting. Parents, like Jesus freely offer this gift to their children, a gift which costs them much sacrifice. But if children do not apply themselves to their studies they will not they will not appreciate to themselves the free gift. It will be wasted on them. While the gift of education is free, it must, in a certain sense, be earned if it is going to have real impact on our lives.

So it is with our salvation. It is freely offered to us. We don’t save ourselves. But if the free gift is to transform our lives, then we must work hard at cooperating with God’s transforming grace. In today’s gospel, Jesus says “Keep on striving to enter.” So on our part, effort is demanded. The athlete doesn’t become a great athlete without working hard at his sport. So we can say that while our salvation depends on the mercy of God, it also demands of us honest efforts to follow his ways some of

which can be very demanding e.g. carrying painful crosses, detaching ourselves from material possessions, forgiving life’s hurts etc. Daily we are challenged to *become* what we are.

So who will be saved? And how many will be saved? Jesus does not get into the ‘arithmetic of salvation’. Instead he talks about entering through the “narrow gate”. There has been much discussion amongst scholars what Jesus means by the “narrow gate”. Many believe that the “narrow gate” refers to Jesus himself. If we keep our eyes on Jesus and seek to follow his ways we can trust we will be saved. Since none of us follows Jesus’ ways perfectly, we might wonder if there is a cutoff point. To what extent must we follow Jesus’ ways? And which ways are the most important? This last question is the easiest one to answer. The most important way of Jesus is the way of love. Following Jesus way of love fulfills the whole law. We know we are on the right path when we follow the way of love, love of God, others and self.

THE VATICAN STATEMENT ABOUT THE CATHOLIC CHURCH BEING THE ONE TRUE CHURCH

On July 10, 2007 the Vatican issued a brief document called *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Aspects of the doctrine of the Church*.

The statement caused quite a stir amongst not only amongst non-Catholics, but also among Catholics. Some if not many, in both groups found the statement to be offensive in an age when we are trying to be ecumenical and build unity among all religions.

Intention of the Statement

The intention of the Statement was not to offend even if many found it offensive. The intention was to reiterate what the Catholic Church has believed for 2,000 years, namely, that the Church, willed by Christ as a visible and spiritual community, continues to exist in the Catholic Church as a continual concrete historical reality. Perhaps many believe that the one true church can only be found in all of the Christians churches joined together. The Catholic Church does not believe this.

“Protestant churches not churches in the strict sense.”

The above assertion by the Vatican document did cause much offense. What does the Vatican mean? Commenting on this part of the Vatican document, our bishop, Thomas

Wenski writes:

Most Catholics, including the Pope, would not deny that the myriad of denominations that have emerged in the almost 500 years since the Protestant Reformation are indeed “churches” according to the popular (i.e., sociological) idiom in which people speak today. But we do say, as did the Second Vatican council, they are not Churches—as Catholic theology understands “Church.” In fact, most Protestants, especially those who hold that Jesus did not found a visible hierarchical structure with apostolic succession and a Petrine office as Catholics do, would readily agree. They believe themselves to be churches, but they do not believe themselves to be Churches in the Catholic sense. Our understandings of “Church” simply differ.

(Florida Catholic, Aug 17, 2007)

In other words, if we usually define church as a ‘community of believers in Jesus’, then thousands of Christian communities can be rightly called churches. But if we define church, as the Catholic church does as a Body of Christ with a visible hierarchical structure with apostolic succession and a Petrine office (a reference to the Pope as the successor of St. Peter, Then as Bishop Wenski states above, even Protestants would not see themselves as churches in that sense.

Protestant Churches as ‘instruments of Salvation.’

Having stated why the Catholic church does not recognize Protestant churches as churches in the way that the Catholic church defines church, the document goes on to say, (quoting Vatican II) that these separated churches and communities are deprived neither of significance nor importance in the mystery of salvation. In fact the Spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as instruments of salvation, whose value derives from that fullness of grace and of truth that has been entrusted to the Catholic Church.

Does the Vatican Statement Hurt Ecumenical Dialogue?

Responding to this question in his *Florida Catholic* column, Bishop Wenski writes:

Dialogue, in the ecumenical and interfaith context, should not mean “splitting the differences” or soft-pedaling the real differences that exist. Many religious communities, most Baptists, for example, shun such dialogues because they believe that this is precisely what is implied.

To dialogue—and to forge from dialogue relationships based on mutual trust and understanding—cannot mean setting aside of bracketing how one’s own tradition understands the truth. Ecumenical dialogue is aimed at restoring unity to the Body of Christ but such unity is built on truth, not at the expense of truth. Dialogue is not about

undermining one another’s truth claims but understanding them. The Catholic-Lutheran dialogue in recent years on “justification by faith” is one very good example of such honest and, therefore, fruitful dialogue.

A few weeks ago, the Sunday magazine of the New York Times, profiled Robert Novak, the noted journalist and news pundit—and recent convert to the Catholic Faith. Asked why he converted from Judaism, he answered the same way that the Pope would. It is the same answer the every well-catechized Catholic would give: “I believe that the Catholic Church is the one true Church.” Such a statement is never meant to be a conversation stopper; it is, however, an invitation to further dialogue.

The Discipline of the Lord

Today’s second reading points out to us that a part of being a dedicated follower of the Lord is one’s willingness to accept the discipline of the Lord.

In the reading, we listened to the following challenging words:

*My children, do not disdain the discipline of the Lord.
For, whom the Lord loves, he disciplines;
He scourges every son and daughter he receives.
Endure your trials as the discipline of God.*

What can we say about this word of the Lord which can easily leave us with the feeling that God sends us bad things to ‘straighten us out?’

The ‘discipline of the Lord’ may come to us in many ways: financial setbacks, loss of health or a loved one, rejection by others, harsh conditions or treatment in the marketplace, persecution for one’s beliefs etc. Such crosses can make us or break us, can make us better or bitter. It all depends on how *we respond*. As one of my favorite sayings states:

“It is not the circumstances of our
Lives that will make us or break us.
Rather it is our *response* to the circumstances.”

With a quote from Proverbs 3:5-6 and allusion to their own experiences of parental discipline as children, the ancient author encourages his readers to use the harsh realities of daily life as a way to grow and build character.

Having said the above, we must not think that God sends us bad things (cancer, losses of various kinds) to ‘straighten us out’. Closer to the truth, is that bad things happen because we live in an *evolving* and *imperfect* world. Because medicine is an evolving science, not all sickness can be healed *now*. Because we are imperfect people, we do terrible things to each other. While God does not directly cause these bad things, he does want to use them to build character and teach us valuable lessons,

which draw us closer to him. Usually, the finest people in our world are those who have grown through suffering, e.g., Pope John Paul II, Nelson Mandela.

Nine Discipline Tips for Parents

Surely one of the most challenging tasks that face parents is how to discipline children in a way that is not overly strict or too lax. The following nine tips were written by Valerie Dillon, Family Life Director for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis.

Worn out from the fights at the dinner table? Tired of a teen who never cleans his/her room? Beginning to feel like a police officer instead of a parent?

Take heart. These are the days you'll recall nostalgically 15 years from now! As for today, it's good to remember that when you wisely discipline your children, you help them grow in self-esteem, confidence and Christian values. Here are some tips for effective discipline:

1. Be explicit, not implicit. *Be sure your children really understand the rules. We often carry "oughts" and "shoulds" in our heads, but never actually say them. Don't assume Billy knows he must call if he misses the school bus. Don't think Stephanie understands that you never want her to borrow your diamond stud earrings. Don't be sure the kids know the refrigerator cake is off-limits. Verbalize.*

2. Be consistent. *Nothing confuses and scares kids more than a parent who smiles one time and screams the next for the very same act. Be aware that your own mood and stress-level may cause an over-reaction. And if you warn a child that disobedience will bring a certain consequence - be sure it does or he won't take you seriously next time.*

3. Make the punishment fit the crime. *Consider first the child's intent. Failure to obey, sassiness, destructive behavior all can have many causes and some may lessen the guilt. Listen to a youngster's explanation before you declare house arrest. Seek his/her motivation; understand his developmental stage. If they're teens, count to 25 before you impose a penalty you can't enforce. Better yet, let the punishment flow out of the deed as its natural negative consequence.*

4. Model the behavior you want. *If you want children who are gentle and patient, where will they learn it except from you? If you preach that smoking and alcohol threatens a teenager's health, can you do less than to set an example of abstinence or moderation? Values aren't taught, they are caught.*

5. Hate the behavior, not the child. *Don't let your wayward kid think you love him less because he erred.*

Admonish, correct, punish as you must, but sent the clear-cut message. We still love you, no matter what.

6. Don't let your children divide and conquer. *Children seem born with an uncanny gift for playing one parent against another. They ask permission from Dad (maybe he doesn't know the score). If that fails, they hit on Mom. The result: Inconsistency, conflict between parents and a child who can manipulate his/her folks. Instead, together agree on household rules, always check: "What did Mom/Dad say?" and whenever possible, support each other's decisions.*

7. Be flexible. *Think twice before you say "no". Sometimes circumstances call for a different response than usual. Staying up till 11:00 every night would be bad for 10-year-old Jimmy. But it's fine if a beloved big brother is visiting. Don't be rigid. Expect rules to change as children mature. And recognize, too, that different kids may need different kinds of discipline.*

8. Use Action for tots, Clarity for kids, Reason for teens. *Non-verbal language - a tight hug, a firm grasp, a warm pat—is best understood by tiny tots when restraint or approval is intended. School kids have a law-and-order mentality and want explicit rules and clear consequences. You might want to put it in writing for those literal-minded souls. Adolescents need to know "why", preferably in "I-messages" about why it matters to you. State the values behind the rules and don't worry if the teen disagrees. Reminder: A family is not a democracy and life isn't always fair.*

9. Know that love and discipline are opposite sides of the same coin. *Ask a wayward youngster what went wrong and his probable response: My folks let me do anything I wanted. All kids need parents who cared enough to instruct, discipline, and trust in balanced measure. It's a crucial part of loving.*

Have a blessed week,

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