



Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time A October 25, 2020

Reflections on the Great Commandment to Love

The following reflections on today's first reading and Gospel are by Fr. Flor McCarthy.

Once there was an abbot by the name of Moses who had a great reputation for holiness. Easter was approaching, so the monks met to see what they should do to prepare for it. They decided to fast the entire length of Holy Week. Having come to the decision, each monk went off to his cell, there to fast and pray.

However, about the middle of the week, two itinerant monks came to visit Abbot Moses. Seeing that they were starving, he cooked a little vegetable stew for them. To make them feel at ease he took a little of it himself.

The other monks saw the smoke rising from their abbot's cell. This could mean only one thing—he had lit a fire to cook some food, which meant he had broken the solemn fast. They were shocked. In a body they went to confront him.

Seeing judgement in their eyes, he asked, “What crime have I committed that makes you look at me like this?”

“You have broken the solemn fast,” they answered.

“So I have,” he replied. “I have broken the commandment of men, but in sharing my food with these brothers of ours, I have kept the commandment of God that we should love one another.”

On hearing this, the monks grew silent, and went away humbled but wiser.

There is a terrible sterility about the lives of those who claim to love God, but who dispense themselves from the obligation to love other people. Such people have at best got only half of the Gospel.

There are others who go to the opposite extreme. They exhaust themselves in working for a better world, but never think of God or pray to him. Even though the latter may be on firmer ground, they too have only half

of the Gospel—the half believers sometimes throw away.

Christ showed us how to live the total Gospel, that is, how to love God and to love our neighbor as well. He didn't say they were the same thing, but that we can't have one without the other. We can see then why the emphasis on love became for Christians the identifying characteristic of their religion.

“If you have no love in your heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble” (Bob Hope).

Love your neighbour as yourself

Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are: “You must love the Lord your God ... and you must love your neighbour as yourself.” Undoubtedly, it is the second commandment that causes us most trouble. Notice that Jesus says, “You must love your neighbour as yourself.” Only when we love ourselves, will we be able to love other people as the Lord commanded.

Those who are filled with self-loathing and self-hatred are not going to be able to love others. They will project these feelings onto others. They will blame and castigate others for what they do not like in themselves.

An old man was sitting on a bench at the edge of town when a stranger approached. “What are the people in this town like?” the stranger asked.

“What were they like in your last town?” replied the old man.

“They were kind and generous. They would do anything to help you if you were in trouble,” came the reply.

“Well, I think you will find them much the same in this town,” said the old man.

Sometime later a second stranger approached the old man and asked the same question: “What are the people in this town like?”

And the old man replied: “What were they like in the town you have come from?”

“It was a terrible place,” came the answer. “To tell you the truth, I was glad to get out of it. The people there were cruel and mean. They wouldn’t lift a finger to help you if you were in trouble.”

“I’m afraid,” said the old man, “you’ll find them much the same in this town.”

The point of this little story is this. We see other people, not as they are, but as we are. A loving person lives in a loving world. A hostile person lives in a hostile world. Everyone you meet is your own mirror.

Those whose hearts are filled with goodness gaze upon the world and see what is good in humanity. Those who look upon the world with the eyes of a cynic find only the image of themselves. If we see people in a bad light, it is a sign that we are ill at ease with ourselves. A man who is not at peace with himself spreads a contagion of conflict around him.

Unless we love ourselves, we cannot love others properly. There is an idea that love of self is wrong, even sinful. There is a form of self-love which is wrong. We call it selfishness or egoism. But there is a form of self-love which is healthy and good.

We can’t offer warmth to others if our own fireplace is cold. We can only love with the amount of love that is in us. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we do love others precisely as we love ourselves.

It’s very important, then, to have a healthy love and respect for ourselves. This is where love starts, but of course it is not meant to end there. All true love of self-overflows in the form of love of others and of God.

Remember that you were once strangers

We are often told to forget painful experiences. But how can we learn from them if we forget them? Memory of suffering can be used in a positive or negative way. It can be used to say, “We know what suffering is like, and therefore we have no excuse for allowing it to be inflicted on others.” Or it can be used to say, “We have suffered, therefore we have a right to inflict suffering.”

They say that compassion is not learned without suffering. Yet suffering doesn’t always help people to grow in compassion. Suffering can harden people, so that they end up inflicting on others the cruelties inflicted on them. And so the cycle goes on.

The time of enslavement in Egypt was undoubtedly the darkest time in the history of God’s people. It took them a long time to escape from there, and even longer to put it behind them. And yet they were told not to forget it but to remember it (First Reading). Why?

Because now things had changed for the better for them. They had a homeland of their own. They had a king of their own and an army of their own. However, there were many foreigners among them, as well as their own poor, especially orphans and widows. These people were very vulnerable.

The commandment to love one’s neighbour occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible, and it referred only to one’s fellow Israelites. But the commandment to love the stranger occurs 37 times—making it the most frequently cited moral injunction of ancient Judaism.

The Jews were reminded continually that they themselves were once strangers and exiles in Egypt, depending on the kindness of others. Now that they are settled, they have a duty to be kind to the stranger in their midst.

God commanded his people to remember so that history would not repeat itself. He wanted them never to forget the experience of being a minority without power in Egypt. They must not oppress the stranger, because they were once strangers themselves. They must plead the cause of the underprivileged, because they were once underprivileged themselves. Having felt the pain of injustice and oppression themselves, they must never inflict that pain on others.

Hermann Cohen believed that the biblical commandments protecting the stranger represent the beginning of true religion. He said, “The stranger was to be protected, although he was not a member of one’s family, clan, religion, community, or people. He was to be protected simply because he was a fellow human being.”

The saying of God, “I will kill you by the sword,” sounds shocking. However, it is not to be taken literally. God does not act like this. What the prophet wants to convey is just how abominable it is in God’s eyes when we mistreat anyone, especially the defenseless.

It’s easy to forget where we have come from. There are signs that this is happening to American Catholics. Many of them seem to have forgotten that not so long ago they were strangers in a strange land, where they were subjected to economic and social discrimination.

Increasingly they vote for candidates who spread rancor against the poor and the foreigner. In so doing, they encourage people with twisted minds to take the next step—violent action against the stranger and outsider.

The health of a society can be measured by the way it treats such people. It's not good enough to give them charity. What they need is justice. If you say you love someone, then treat him justly. Charity is no substitute for real loving.

Story

There is a short but telling parable that goes like this.

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Finally, they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.

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Love in Practice—An Amazing Example of Loving the Stranger

In his wonderful book *Blessed Among Us*, Robert Ellsberg writes about Mary Clarke who became Mother Antonia Brenner.

Mother Antonia Brenner, who died on October 17, 2013, spent nearly thirty years in prison, though she had committed no crime. Instead, responding to a call from God, she had abandoned her life in Beverly Hills, taken religious vows, and voluntarily entered the La Mesa prison in Tijuana, Mexico, to live there as an inmate and to minister to those behind bars.

She was born Mary Clarke to a very different life. Twice married and divorced, she raised seven children. In 1969, after Jesus appeared to her in a dream, she determined to devote her life to his service. While going through her second divorce, a priest had invited her to help in his prison ministry at La Mesa—an overcrowded prison that housed eight thousand inmates.

After years of visiting the prison and performing small acts of charity, she felt that God was calling her to something more. As no religious order would accept a fifty-year-old divorced woman, she sewed her own habit and took private religious vows. Eventually, she received permission to move into a cell in the women's section of the prison. "I felt as if I'd come home," she said. In the prison she walked freely among murderers, gang members, and other desperate criminals. Her

loving presence often quelled violence. She was known as the "Prison Angel," or simply Mama.

"Happiness does not depend on where you are. I live in prison. And I have not had a day of depression in 25 years. I have been upset, angry. I have been sad. But never depressed. I have a reason for my being."

-Mother Antonia Brenner

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Kindness, Encouragement and Challenge

The following reflection is by Fr. John Powell, S.J.

In the process of loving there are three important stages or moments: (1) *Kindness*: a warm assurance that "I am on your side. I care about you." (2) *Encouragement*: a strong reassurance of your own strength and self-sufficiency. (3) *Challenge*: a loving but firm exhortation to action. "Go for it."

Just as an artist-painter uses canvas and oils to achieve certain desired effects, so the artist-lover must try to sense when the need of the loved one is for more kindness, more encouragement, or more challenge. It is never easy to know.

Kindness. Someone has wisely said that "people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care." To build a relationship on any foundation other than kindness is to build on sand. I have to know that you really want my happiness and my growth, that you really are "for me," or I won't open at all to your influence.

Encouragement. What all people need most is to believe in themselves. They need confidence in their own ability to take on the problems and opportunities of life. To "encourage" means to put courage in. Encouragement instills into the recipient a new and fuller awareness of his or her own powers. Encouragement says: You can do it!

Challenge. If encouragement makes the one loved aware of his or her strength, challenge is the loving push to use this strength: "Try. Stretch. Do it. If you succeed, I will be in the front row clapping my hands off. If you fail, I will be sitting right at your side. You won't be alone. Go ahead now. Give it your best shot. Go for it!"

(Copyright © John Powell, S.J., *Through Seasons of the Heart*, 1986 Tabor Publishing, Allen, Texas p. 321.)

Have a blessed week,

