

6th Sunday A Ordinary Time - Midshipman Annapolis

Introduction

A few days ago, I met with a physician who works in a Catholic hospital. We were discussing a document called *The Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care*, nicknamed the ERD's. It is published by the Bishops' Conference as a resource, to help bishops ensure that Catholic hospitals follow the Church's teaching on the sacredness of human life from conception until natural death.

Referring to the ERD's, my friend the doctor said: "Well, Archbishop, as far as I'm concerned, the ERD's are mostly arbitrary rules. I follow them because I don't want the Archbishop of Baltimore coming down on me like a ton of bricks!" I won't trouble you with the rest of the conversation but I'm happy to say that it got better.

If memory serves, you, as Navy midshipmen, take an oath of office and are subject to rules and regulations that can change without notice. You subscribe to a mission statement, follow academic regulations, and observe various customs dating back to time immemorial. Add to all that, the unwritten rules of the road. Every group, including your own, has its unwritten code, sometimes for weal and sometimes for woe.

I'm going to bet that the longer you're here, the more you tend to internalize these written and unwritten rules. I will also wager that your life here is productive and fulfilling to the extent that you really believe you are in a good place and called to prepare yourself for a good mission. Otherwise, your life might seem like a maze of rules and expectations that are meant mostly to interfere with your happiness.

The Commandments

Truth to tell, many people regard God's commandments as a maze of rules and regulations that mostly get in the way of their happiness. They chaff at most moral prohibitions, except perhaps those that pertain to public health and safety or those that support a favorite cause. Most people today emphatically reject moral prohibitions that concern the more intimate aspects of personal morality. Pope

Benedict recognized this very frankly in his encyclical letter, “God Is Love”. He acknowledged the long-standing criticism leveled against the Church for proclaiming the goodness of creation and a Gospel of love on the one hand, but rejecting various expressions of sexual love on the other. “Doesn’t [the Church] blow the whistle,” he asks, “just when the joy which is the Creator’s gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine?” (DCE, no. 3) In fact people sometimes think of the Church as a referee, blowing the whistle when we’re out-of-bounds.

Our first reading from the Book of Sirach, however, paints a very different picture. This work (attributed to a Jewish scribe who lived less than 200 years before Christ) tells us that the commandments are not arbitrary rules but rather reflections of the immense wisdom by which God made the world. As a result, the choice to follow or to violate his commandments is really a matter of life and death, good and evil. Following God’s commandments leads to a wise and well-lived life whereas breaking those commandments leads to emptiness and pain.

In the Gospel Jesus affirms Sirach’s regard for the commandments. He says he did not come to abolish the law & the prophets but rather to fulfill them. Indeed, Jesus does not relax the demands of the moral law – “thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not swear falsely...” On the contrary he seems to “up the ante”. Not only is it forbidden to kill, it is also forbidden to harbor anger.

Not only is it forbidden to commit adultery, it is forbidden to think lustful thoughts. Not only is it forbidden to swear a false oath but indeed to swear any oath at all!

So where does all this leave us? Is the New Law of the Gospel even stricter than the Old Law? Can any of us, myself included, hope to follow Jesus’ teaching? As the apostles once desperately asked Jesus, “Then, who can be saved?”

A New Creation

Well, the short answer is that *we* can be saved. But being saved, like following the commandments, is not merely a matter of adhering to the rules. On the contrary, it’s a matter of being transformed, of being profoundly changed, from the inside out.

Let me relate this to your situation and then explain it a bit further. If you find yourself here because you truly love your country and desire to serve it, then all the

discipline, all the rules, all the sacrifices make a lot more sense and you are internally motivated to do all that is required of you, heart and soul.

Something similar can and should happen in our lives of faith. When, in the power of God's grace, we open our hearts to Christ and allow his wisdom and love to permeate our mind and heart, then our view of the commandments begins to change, and to change radically. We no longer see them as a moral straightjacket but instead as a roadmap by which every aspect of our lives will come to resemble the goodness & beauty, the purity & truth, the wisdom & love, of Jesus Christ. As our conversion progresses, we reach a point of obeying the commandments not just externally, to avoid trouble, but indeed as *the outward sign of an inward love*.

Why is it we were baptized? Why do we confess our sins or go to Mass? Why read Scripture or make time during the day to pray privately? The answer is this: so that our hearts will be possessed in love by Christ, so that our membership in his Body the Church will be deepened, so that we'll be free enough to become the unique images of Christ's love we are meant to be! As St. Paul, quoting the prophet Isaiah, writes in today's second reading: "*What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him: this God revealed to us through the Spirit.*" Only when something of the beauty and awesomeness of God's love dawns on us, only when we realize how intent God the Father is on sharing that love with us, do we really start living as followers of Christ, as members of his Church, and become witnesses to his truth and love before the world.

Let me conclude by thanking you for your love for our country and for your readiness to serve it. I pray that your time at the Naval Academy will be both challenging & fulfilling and prove to be a blessing throughout your lives. May God bless you and keep you always in His love!