

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 17, 2013
Homily for the Anglican Use Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 8:1-11

When Pope Francis was elected on Wednesday, just hours before our 5:30 PM Mass here, I must admit that I knew next to nothing about him. Between now and this coming Wednesday I will learn much more and will try to give you an introduction to the man who will lead the Catholic Church for, we hope, the coming years. I invite you to learn more with me by listening to his words, reading his works and seeking out what faithful churchmen have to say about this native son of Argentina.

One place you should not look for information about our new Holy Father is from the left. I read a few days ago an accusation by an anti-clerical organization in Argentina that Pope Francis was somehow responsible for the death of two fellow Jesuit priests during the time that 30,000 Argentines died at the hands of government forces between 1976 and 1983. The Holy See in response took the extraordinary step of responding to this libel, pointing out that it has no merit and that the accusers have never produced any evidence to make such a claim. It can be put on the same shelf with the accusation that Pope Pius XII was responsible for the Holocaust and the AIDS worldwide epidemic is the fault of Pope Benedict XVI, other meritless accusations against former Vicars of Christ.

Our Gospel today gives us an idea why such defamatory statements are made. In the account of the woman caught in the act of adultery, St. John includes the additional comment that the Pharisees questioned Jesus about her to test our Lord, “that they might have some charge to bring against him.” This is not the only place in the Gospels where this takes place. Jesus’ ministry was marked by these impromptu tests, the concern of the inquisitors being not so much with finding out a genuine answer but rather with getting Jesus to say something that they can use against Him.

Pope Francis is now being tested. We shouldn’t imagine that the left cares a whit about these two Jesuits from Argentina’s dirty war of a generation ago, any more than the Pharisees actually cared about the woman they brought to Jesus. In both cases the object of their questions has to do with nailing the holy man, not with acquiring justice or showing mercy to the oppressed. The left wants to discredit our Holy Father, and the search for truth has nothing at all to do with it.

This, of course, raises another question, however. Why did the Pharisees wish to discredit Jesus? Why does the left today wish to attack and discredit Pope Francis, less than a week into his papacy? What is the point of such slander, especially when it is directed at someone who has devoted his life to caring for the poor, who took the name Francis, we found out yesterday, because of St. Francis of Assisi’s devotion to the poor.

We must understand the objective here is to silence the man of God. The adversaries disagree with how Pope Francis will better the lives of the poor, as certainly as the Pharisees disagreed with Jesus about how best to better the lives of the Jews; so they attempt to assert moral superiority in order to dismiss Jesus and His disciples. The basic idea is to get the world to say, “Pope Francis is a murderer. Why should we listen to him about faith and morals, when in fact he is a faithless and immoral hypocrite?” The left believes that if the loudest voice on behalf of the poor can be silenced, then the

world will be that much more ready to follow its radical agenda. The left will be able to enslave the poor, they expect, if they can just sweep aside the poor's most ardent advocate.

Jesus' response to the Pharisees is instructive here. Rather than enter into a discussion about adultery and how it should be punished, or even a discussion about the woman they have brought before them, Jesus challenges them for being so sanctimonious. Jesus knows they want to show the world that He is immoral, so our Lord gets the accusers to examine their own consciences. Jesus says, "Let's not talk about this woman's sin; let's talk about yours." Naturally the self-righteous crew is not up for a discussion that would be an embarrassment to them, so they leave alone with Jesus the woman they had used as their bait. They fled the scene to avoid confronting their own sin, but in doing so they also forswore the forgiveness Jesus would have readily offered them. We know this, of course, because forgiveness is what he gave to the woman after all her accusers had left. How different a scene it would have been if instead of leaving, the Pharisees had dropped to their knees and asked for the mercy the adulteress had been so happy to receive.

We see today, then, that our adversaries are not interested in forgiveness, either. They do not understand that the fundamental problem with man, his most pressing difficulty, is not material, but spiritual. The left, just like the Pharisees in today's Gospel, are always looking for external forms of oppression. They direct their ire at the rich, the Church, the powerful, and many other real and imagined forces of oppression. But they don't look inside, at the human heart that accuses a woman caught in the act of adultery, but forgets to bring her male partner along to the trial. They ignore the human heart that bewails the deaths of two Jesuits in 1976 (who actually did not even die), while at the same time excusing the deaths of millions under Stalin as the necessary price paid for progress.

In our Gospel today, Jesus puts the focus back where it should be, not on the sins of our neighbors, but on our own sins. Jesus understood that the means to purifying our society from the oppression of sin is to purify our hearts. What we need more than any material solution is the forgiveness that heals our souls and leads us in gratitude to share this forgiveness with others, a forgiveness so profound that it leads us, like the woman we met in today's Gospel, to go and sin no more. From the moment we encounter Christ's forgiveness, we set about reforming our lives, more than reforming the lives of others. We set about allowing God's grace to change us, in order that His grace may change the world.

We can be sure that this is the program of Pope Francis from a story I read about him, something he did years ago. When he was still the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Cardinal Bergoglio encountered the woman caught in the act of adultery. He found her in a hospice center full of AIDS patients. And, like, Jesus, he did not condemn those people. Instead, he girded himself with a towel, got down on his knees and washed and kissed their feet. Having himself been forgiven by Jesus, Pope Francis then showed them a love unlike any other, the Love whose message, in the face of all the world's sound and fury, will never be silenced.