

Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity
October 26, 2014
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Matthew 22:34-40

If you've been to church here more than a few times, then you've noticed that I recite a good portion of today's Gospel at the beginning of every Mass. The commandments to love God and neighbor are so important that our liturgy includes their recitation to serve as a reminder of what we are called to do, that is, how we are to live. But they also tell us why we worship: we offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass out of our love for God and at the same time to benefit our neighbors, whom we also love. For every Mass we offer to the glory of God there is an intention, our supplication to benefit the living and the dead.

So the Mass is the first way we fulfill the requirements of the first and great commandment and the second, which is like unto it. By assisting at Mass, we demonstrate our love for Him who poured Himself out for us upon the altar of the cross. But we also demonstrate our love for our neighbor whom we pray for, desiring that the graces that flow from this act of love will be applied to those whose intentions we hold up before the throne of grace. So here I remind you that each person at Mass should have an intention going in, either for the living or the dead, that we recite silently in those pauses in the canon of the Mass. If your intention is for the living, the pause is at the beginning; and if your intention is for the dead, the pause for your prayer is towards the end of the canon. Use these opportunities for private prayer in order to fulfill the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. And if your intention is for yourself, be sure that what you intend is to the glory of God; and so you may benefit your neighbor.

The Mass, then, is first, but the Epistle also gives us an idea of how we personally can fulfill this commandment to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. St. Paul rejoices with the Thessalonian Church that they "turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come." We tend to think of the idols St. Paul references here as false gods associated with pagan cults. Those aren't a danger for most of us; but an idol, we must remember, is anything to which we are devoted in place of God, anything that draws us away from God as we attach ourselves to it.

Therefore, I thought about the idols that we as Americans are particularly prone to worship, so that we might highlight them in order to recognize how to avoid idolatry. And if we are already guilty, we can use this list to begin altering the way we live, so as better to serve our Lord and Savior.

Interestingly, the Old Testament lesson points to some of the same things we struggle with in America today. And the first offense against God that constitutes idolatry is a radical autonomy that does not take the lawgiver into account. The lesson from Exodus today is part of the giving of the law to Moses, part of the six hundred and thirteen commandments that constitute the law of the Jews. A radical autonomy that tends to idolatry ignores any authority outside of oneself; so the laws given to Moses by God would be viewed as recommendations we can take or leave. We often refer to autonomy as independence, and in this case we would mean independence from any restriction that might inhibit my prerogative to do whatever I choose.

The laws of God and men are meant to counter this tendency to autonomy that led to the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve. God gave them only one restriction, but they transgressed this commandment, unwilling to believe that the consequences of their disobedience would actually apply to them. In doing so, they introduced death into the world; and the idol “autonomy” has the same effect: to the degree we do not recognize our dependence upon God and our fellow man, we will make decisions that offend God and hurt our neighbor. In being self-referential, we ignore the Lord and harm those for whom Christ died. We would be better to follow the teachings of the Church, embracing the perspectives won over the course of millennia.

A second potential idol for Americans is security. By this I mean both our physical security and our financial security, independent of what God would have us do. So, for example, our Old Testament lesson rails against charging interest and taking overnight a neighbor’s garment in pledge. Such practices were adopted in the interest of security, attempts to ensure that one would not be cheated or to ensure that one’s money is working, even as it is lent out for borrowing. We ought to ask ourselves whether our desire for security is inhibiting our ability to love God and serve our neighbors in need. How big do our savings have to be until we feel secure? How much must we turn our residence into a fortress - how far must we live from danger - to feel secure? And do these inhibit our service to God and men?

The third potential idol is comfort. Americans tend to be quite averse to experiencing discomfort, and we have devised many means to avoid discomfort and inconvenience. The means used by the Israelites to live in comfort is one we utilize as well, the exploitation of the foreigner. From moving industries overseas and paying Asians slave wages so we can save money and live better, to employing illegal immigrants in our own country so we can pay them less to keep down the price of our produce, we are often guilty of wronging the stranger and oppressing him.

Our desire for comfort manifests itself in more personal ways, as well. We have drive-throughs for everything—banks, fast food, pharmacies, coffee, and now even beer distributors. It is as though an ideal existence is to isolate ourselves from our neighbors, so we need not experience the inconvenience of interaction with fellow human beings. If we aren’t handicapped or don’t have sleeping babies in the car, we can better love our neighbors if we park, get out, and run our errands, while greeting the people God created and who, like us, are made in His image. Convenience in this way is related to autonomy. Even as we rely on others to wait on us, we neglect the necessity of our service to them, the spiritual component of daily interactions that account for more than utilitarian considerations. Security may also be at play, as we often feel safer behind the wheel than we do face to face.

The Mass is the answer to the banishment of all three of these idols. In that we receive our Lord’s Body and Blood as a pledge that we will die for Him as He died for us, while at the same time receiving the graces to be able to do so, we reject the autonomy that denies our need for God. But we also say at the same time we will take risks, even risks that threaten our lives, in order that our neighbors might live. That willingness to die means we embrace the discomfort of the cross and we accept the inconvenience of God’s intrusion into our daily lives, because by our sacrifices we may just bring others closer to Him.