

Reflections on Sunday's Readings: August 4, 2019



Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Ecclesiastes 1:2-2:23

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience

Introduction

As many of you know, this past week I was participating in our Franciscan “Chapter of Mats” in Denver, Colorado. There were about 400 of us friars gathered together from across the United States to take another step in our preparations for the union of six of our US provinces into one province in 2023.

Much of our gathering involved fraternal conversations with friars we have worked with or known from various committees and the meeting of new friars and hearing their stories also. We also spoke about our mission as friars and what we feel we are being called to be and do for the Church and for our country in these times. There were also some playful times as we enjoyed a session based on the “Family Feud” show where our provincial ministers and our vicar provincials tried to guess how 100 friars responded to various questions put before them. We even enjoyed a fun afternoon where some of us went to the Rockies-Dodgers baseball game, and others went to see various sites in and around Denver.

Movie on Pope Francis

One experience that stood out for me was our watching together a new movie about Pope Francis called “Call Me Francis.” We watched two segments on Tuesday evening and then another two segments on Thursday evening. The movie helped fill in the story of Francis’s life from what I have read about our present pope. The segment about his struggles as a young provincial superior in the midst of the oppression of the Pinochet regime deeply touched me.

Francis was walking a fine line as he tried to help people escape persecution and speak up for those being held by the government. Several of his Jesuits were killed and tortured during this time, and he also lost several very close women friends who were tortured and then killed by the regime.

In one scene that echoes Jesus's words to us today, Francis was speaking to a group of affluent Argentinians asking them to help meet the needs of those with less, especially in this difficult time. He said to them that he had never seen a "u-haul" attached to a hearse or pockets sewn into a person's burial shroud. The movie helped me see new sides to Pope Francis's story, and it also challenged me to want to be a better religious.

An Inspired Homily

Another significant moment for me was a homily given by a friar who lives in Arizona. He shared with us that what he sees happening in our country with its present-day divisions, violence, greed, and disregard for human dignity, calls for us to speak up about our values as Catholics and Franciscans. If our country continues on the track it is going, there will likely be resistance to the Gospel values we try to live by and witness to. We will be understood by some, but likely not understood by others; and there may be resistance to our Gospel witness even to the point of blood-letting. This was sobering for us to hear, but it also rang true.

Jesus in the Gospel

Jesus came to us to reveal the **deep love that is at the heart of our God**, that the Trinity is all about the loving relationships flowing among God, our Creator, Jesus, the Son and Word, and the Holy Spirit, who is the love flowing through the Trinity and throughout all of creation.

Jesus knows that here in the heart of the Trinity is the fullness of compassion, understanding and acceptance, and healing. There is no punishment in the heart of our God. This is what Jesus wants us to know. All of life, our beautiful cosmos, flows from this love of the Trinity. As the Scriptures explain, God has given us this paradise, if we have but eyes to see and hearts to receive. We often, though, "**ease-God-out**" of our lives with our self-centeredness. This is often a description for the "**ego.**" We need a certain amount of identity that comes to us from the ego; but when we focus on ourselves more and more, we can "ease-God-out" of our lives. This "easing-God-out" happens when we become caught up in greed, fear, possessiveness, or power; when we are not attune to God in our lives and lose our awareness that we belong to God. This happens also in our communal systems, in our institutions, in our Church, and in our government.

Disciples of Christ

We are called as disciples of Christ, as ones deeply touched by the love of God in Jesus the Christ, to grow in the outlook of Christ toward the world. We are called to help the world "name" the selfishness and evil working counter to the good of the human family and all of creation, and to promote the common good God desires for us all to enjoy together.

Our Religious Vows

Our religious vows, which the knots on our cords signify ... of poverty, chastity, and obedience ... are not just nice virtues for us friars to live by. They are to be “pointers” for the Church and the world that deep life, true life, is to be found in **simplicity of life**, in having enough and being content with our needs being met and having some reserve for needs in the future; but not in becoming avaricious or greedy for more and more goods, more and more power, or more and more prestige.

I remember a story about Mother Teresa in Calcutta, India. A person came by with a plate of steaming rice, and they wanted to give it to the sisters. Mother Teresa thanked the person and said she knew of someone who would greatly appreciate this plate of rice. Mother Teresa took the plate to her neighbor, and the woman thanked Mother Teresa and explained that she knew of someone who would greatly appreciate this food also. So the neighbor divided the plate of rice in half and took the other half to her neighbor nearby.

We are called to be respectful of all with the sharing of our goods and with our affective and sexual energies. This is the gift and virtue of **chastity**. We are called to see the beauty of those around us and to respect this beauty and goodness and not try to possess it or grasp it for ourselves. When we do this, we see more deeply the inner beauty of the person before us: the beauty of their character and their life story. We see them and appreciate them for the whole persons they are, and this keeps us from trying to control them or possess them. Instead we see them as our sisters and brothers.

The real meaning of the word “**obedience**” is listening, to listen to one another. Here we are called to take each other seriously and to receive what the other has to offer and to say. We will find our way forward here by listening intently to one another’s words and hearts. We will not lord it over another, if we are practicing obedience.

I ask you then to pray for our conversion as Franciscans, that we will live our vows, not for ourselves, but for the good of the Church and of our world. I have been living these vows for a while now, but I feel like I am just beginning to want to live them more wholeheartedly and single-heartedly. Hopefully, as we Franciscans and other religious live our vows genuinely, we can invite others into these **Gospel values** and this “Gospel project.” Together we can en flesh the good news of these values and virtues and begin to shape a world around them. We can help one another and our world to leave behind the places where we have “edged God out” of our lives and our common life.

Conclusion

One of my favorite quotes is from Pope Paul VI. He spoke once that it is good to have “teachers” in the Church. We need good teachers of our faith and our life, but even more, he said, we need “**witnesses**” to our faith and life. We need persons who “en flesh” the Gospel values embodied in Christ.

Let us pray for one another that we may grow stronger in our vocations to follow Christ and to en flesh for our Church and for our world the deeper values of life, the values that have ultimate meaning. These values have to do with **our relationships, our friendships, about forgiveness and compassion**. This is what we will take with us into the next life. May we grow in trust that these values of God are worth living together for the good of our Church and of our world.

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