

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Jan 28th 2014

“Here are my mother and my brothers.

For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Jesus stuns the crowd, and probably his family, by identifying with - as family - those who do the will of God. Upon reflection, it seems so easy to understand. For Jesus, who would be the closest to him, who would be family to him? It would be those who place themselves next to his heart. To say it another way, we can't be close to Jesus while opposing God's action in our lives. Jesus is inviting us to surrender to God's love for us. He tells us, of course, that if we want to find ourselves - and our happiness and our purpose - we have to lose ourselves, in loving others the way we have been loved..

Jesus says what he desires for us so clearly when he says, in Luke's Gospel, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." [Luke 6:36] I have spent a lot of my life trying to be in relationship with God, and in service of others, without always being merciful. It is not easy to forgive when we've been hurt - sometimes even when we've been slighted. We tend to hold on to memories of what we have against others. We can ask God to forgive us, over and over again, and we can celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation many times, and still struggle with forgiving someone close to us. Jesus is asking us to be with him and like him in letting go of all of that.

It is in this light that I was delighted to read what Pope Francis said about St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching on mercy as "the greatest of all virtues." And, I love to hear that mercy "overcomes the defects of our devotion and sacrifice." On St. Thomas' feast, it is great to recall these words.

"Saint Thomas Aquinas taught that the Church's moral teaching has its own 'hierarchy,' in the virtues and in the acts which proceed from them.[Cf. S. Th., I-II, q. 66, a. 4-6] What counts above all else is "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). Works of love directed to one's neighbour are the most perfect external manifestation of the interior grace of the Spirit: 'The foundation of the New Law is in the grace of the Holy Spirit, who is manifested in the faith which works through love'.[S. Th., I-II, q. 108, a. 1.] Thomas thus explains that, as far as external works are concerned, mercy is the greatest of all the virtues: 'In itself mercy is the greatest of the virtues, since all the others revolve around it and, more than this, it makes up for their deficiencies. This is particular to the superior virtue, and as such it is proper to God to have mercy, through which his omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree'.[41]" [The Joy of the Gospel, #37] ["For him, mercy, which overcomes the defects of our devotion and sacrifice, is the sacrifice which is most pleasing, because it is mercy which above all seeks the good of one's neighbour" S. Th., II-II, q. 30, a. 4, ad 1.]

All of us want to be close to Jesus - to be together in his family. But, we can get off track and lose a sense of human, compassionate love at the heart of intimacy with Jesus.

In the America Magazine interview, Pope Francis referred to the "brilliance" of Thomas Aquinas and warns about the decline which can result of taking great ideas and losing the heart, the spirit, the human, the merciful side of our following of Jesus.

“Humans are in search of themselves, and, of course, in this search they can also make mistakes. The church has experienced times of brilliance, like that of Thomas Aquinas. But the church has lived also times of decline in its ability to think. For example, we must not confuse the genius of Thomas Aquinas with the age of decadent Thomist commentaries. Unfortunately, I studied philosophy from textbooks that came from decadent or largely bankrupt Thomism. In thinking of the human being, therefore, the church should strive for genius and not for decadence.

“When does a formulation of thought cease to be valid? When it loses sight of the human or even when it is afraid of the human or deluded about itself. ... The thinking of the church must recover genius and better understand how human beings understand themselves today, in order to develop and deepen the church’s teaching.” [AMERICA magazine interview]

Dear Jesus, fill us with your love and your mercy, the greatest of all virtues. Let us stand at the foot of your Cross, deeply grateful for your freeing me from sin and death. Please let me be humbly side by side with my brothers and sisters beneath your Cross. We are a community of loved sinners. How can I dare to judge others who also fail, fall short, give in to selfishness?! You forgive us all because you love us all. In that love, we are your brothers and sisters, and brothers and sisters of one another. Please allow this compassion into my heart, and so into my relationships and into my family. Let your healing peace soften me and my attitudes and ways, so that others may experience your love, in me, reaching out to them, through me. Amen.

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