

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Mar 14th 2014

We encounter in today's gospel readings one of the experiences that moved people to remark that Jesus spoke with authority, not like their Scribes [Mk. 1:22]. The Scribes could only claim authority by quoting from the Scriptures. Jesus does quote from the same source now and then, yet daring to improve upon the text. Today's passage is typical in this respect: you have heard that it was said to your ancestors... But I say to you.... Their ancestors had been told: You shall not kill, which Jesus sees only as a bare minimum in relating to others. Anyone failing to meet that minimum will be condemned. But there is far more beyond that minimum and Jesus extends his teaching into that vast domain: if you speak unkindly to your brother, you will be condemned.

As he makes them aware of God's disapproval of such attitude, he draws for them a pertinent conclusion: If you bring your gift to the altar and there you recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother and then come and offer your gift. In a ritual way we do respond to his injunction at the beginning of Mass by admitting: I confess... to you, my brothers and sisters.... But the reciting of ritual formulae can easily slide past our lips coming from our memory without coming from our hearts.

I have at times felt the need to leave the altar at the time of the offertory and look for the brothers and sisters, who may have anything against me. Not the most practical desire, given that those brothers and sisters may not even be in church at that moment (not to mention the risk that, if everyone else took that injunction literally, I might be facing an empty church). But I feel grateful for the urge all the same, for it challenges me to take the Lord's words seriously and it commits me, at least for the immediate future, to make the effort not to give any brothers or sisters a reason to have anything against me.

But if they do have anything against me, do I really have to wait until offertory time to seek reconciliation? Are we not challenged by God to make every moment of our lives —death included— an offering to God? In Paul's understanding of the Christian's life, ...while we live, we live for the Lord; and when we die, it is also for the Lord that we die [Rom. 14:8]. Every moment of our lives being an offering to the Lord, we certainly do not have to wait for the liturgical offertory to seek reconciliation with our sisters and brothers.

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