

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jul 15th 2016

Memorial of Saint Bonaventure, Bishop and Doctor of the Church

Walking through standing grain rings a bell in my experience, a reminiscence of childhood walks along still green wheat fields with my dad and brother. We were not hungry, but we picked heads of wheat for the fun of it, for the taste of the still milky grains. Jesus' situation was different. He was an itinerant rabbi without income, depending on people's goodness of heart and at times both he and his disciples were hungry, as the gospel reading tells us was the case today. So they helped themselves to a few heads of grain.

No, no one accused my brother and me of stealing: what is a few heads in a wheat field? Actually stealing was not the point of the Pharisees' reproach either. What raised their hackles was the violation of a norm of behavior and that is precisely what Jesus rejects: the absolutizing of norms, placing norms above people.

I still have in my memory an absurd and also ridiculous situation that resulted from the absolutizing of an otherwise reasonable norm. In one of the Jesuit houses of study where I lived there were about ninety of us students and the house had three cars. One car was for the use of the Rector only. Another car was for use of the house Minister and he alone would use it except in a case of emergency and this was not an unreasonable norm. The third car was for us students to use as needed. On one occasion one of our young students fractured a leg playing basketball and, since the students' car was gone, some fellow students requested permission to use the Minister's car to take the injured student to the hospital. Unbelievably they were denied permission, because "that car had to be there for emergencies." The norm itself was reasonable, but it had been absolutized.

We need to remain aware that the Sabbath is for people and not people for the Sabbath. Norms are for people, not vice versa. I think we could diffuse much of the tension present in today's Church, if we remained aware of the Lord's position.

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