

Homily SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Life on this earth is battle. Would that it were not. But it is. And life in the Church is also a battle. Would that that were not so but it is so. Sometimes the battle is between the Catholic Church and the particular culture of our time and place. Sometimes the battle is within the heart of the church itself and sometimes it is within my own heart between me and God, battling over—me.

Recently, Pope Benedict, in one of his pastoral trips, traveled to the Island of Malta. There were a series of presentations and homilies from Our Holy Father but there were also remarks made to the pontiff by various people. One such person represented the young people not only of Malta but around the world. His remarks did not draw very much attention in the press coverage here but they are rather powerful. Here is part of what was said to the Holy Father.

“I wish to speak on behalf of those young people who, like me feel they are on the outskirts of the Church. We are the ones who do not fit comfortably into stereo-typed roles. This is due to various factors among them: either because we have experienced substance abuse; or because we are experiencing the misfortune of broken or dysfunctional families; or because we are of a different sexual orientation; among us are also our immigrant brothers and sisters, all of us in some way or another have encountered experiences that have estranged us from the Church. Other Catholics put us all in one basket. For them we are those “who claim to believe yet do not live up to the commitment of faith.”

To us, faith is a confusing reality and this causes us great suffering. We feel that not even the Church herself recognizes our worth. One of our deepest wounds stems from the fact that although the political forces are prepared to realize our desire for integration, the Church community still considers us to be a problem. It seems almost as if we are less readily accepted and treated with dignity by the Christian community than we are by all other members of society. We understand that our way of life puts the Church in an ambiguous position, yet we feel that we should be treated with more compassion – without being judged and with more love.

We are made to feel that we are living in error. This lack of comprehension on the part of other Christians causes us to entertain grave doubts, not only with regards to community life, but also regarding our personal relationship with God. How can we believe that God accepts us unconditionally when his own people reject us? Your Holiness, we wish to tell you that on a personal level – and some of us, even in our respective communities – are persevering to find ways in which we may remain united in Jesus, who we consider to be our salvation.

However, it is not that easy for us to proclaim God as our Father, a God who responds to all those who love him without prejudice. It is a contradiction in terms when we bless God’s Holy Name, whilst those around us make us feel that we are worth nothing to him. We feel emarginated, almost as if we had not been invited to the banquet. God has called to him all those who are in the squares and in the towns, those who are on the wayside and in the country side, however we feel he has bypassed our streets. Your Holiness, please tell us what exactly is Jesus’ call for us. We wish you to show to us and the rest of the Church just how valid is our faith, and whether our prayers are also heard.

We too wish to give our contribution to the Catholic community. Your Holiness, what must we do?

There are comments often made about how those in power never get to hear what real people think, that everyone is afraid to speak truth to power even in the Church. Well, it seems to me that there is no lack of courage here. This young man spoke words with which many people could identify and the Holy Father, at 83 is hard pressed to respond in a way that adequately addresses this young man's concerns. But at least the Holy Father heard. That is the necessary first step.

I shared these remarks with the Bible Study group last Sunday night because we were at the point in the Gospel of Saint Luke where Jesus tells the story of the king who gave a great banquet and sent out his invitations for people to come to the banquet. This invited had other things they wanted or felt they "had" to tend to—some new oxen, some new land, a new wife. They each had received a "better offer" and were pursuing it. The king does not want an empty banquet and so sends his people to bring in people from the margins and the highways and byways. He young man speaking to the Holy Father mentions that Jesus story and says that he and others feel as though the Master had bypassed where they live.

The young man asked what the voice of the Shepherd had to say to him and people like him, people on the fringe or living in the brokenness or as we used to say, living in sin. What is Christ's word to them? It is a propos today because the second reading from Revelation speaks of the Lord's effort to create a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem. But there is no magic wand that is waved and suddenly everything is fixed, everything is better. The King speaks of wiping tears from eyes. Where there are tears there is pain and suffering. Yes, the making of new heavens and new earth is no easy task. It is filled with blood, sweat and tears. It is a battle. The outcome is assured but the battle rages on nonetheless.

The first reading today from the Acts of the Apostles has Paul and Barnabas going around to the various Christian communities encouraging and exhorting the people to persevere and remain steadfast. You don't have to do that unless there is a danger of people losing their way, growing weary under the weight of the battle.

In the days when Jesus walked the face of the earth there were many people from the fringes who were drawn to him, and found life. There were many who were known as sinners or as living in sin who came to him and found life. It is not the case that Jesus simply accepted these people and endorsed their life style. That was not his way. But we must not forget that the dynamic at work with Jesus is that there must be a life-changing encounter with the Lord first. There must be an experience of God's love despite our sinfulness. Only after that encounter does the change of heart begin to take place. Rarely is it the case where a person changes his life and then meets Jesus. It is almost always the other way around. Only after the encounter does the person begin to think that they don't have to live their destructive life styles any longer but can embrace what Jesus holds out for us all.

But we must remember that sometimes we who are trying so hard to be faithful to Christ and to live his way can grow a bit exasperated at others who claim the name Catholic but do not seem to live the Catholic way of life. It bothers us and we bristle and sometimes we pass judgments in our minds. Sometimes we resent and the resentment

can become condemnation. We must remember that Mary Magdalen was once a woman from whom seven demons were cast out. She was addicted to each of the capital sins. She went from that to becoming Christ's foremost disciple the one to whom he first appeared after his resurrection.

We cannot presume that those who were baptized and raised as Catholics, who went through religious instruction or Catholic school have actually had a life-changing encounter with Christ. That may have happened or may not have happened yet. This young man, though, is the prodigal son. He does not have his act together. There is some truth in what he said, some misunderstanding in what he said, some immaturity in what he said. But isn't that the case with us ourselves even at this point in our lives? We have to ask ourselves whether we are going to react as the older brother or as the forgiving father. The change of heart comes only after the encounter, after he experiences the Lord's reaffirming love. Only then can the young man begin to draw close. Only then. So what is our task? How can we help others encounter the love of Christ? And then we must let the Lord worry about their conduct. Much like he's done with me—and you!