

HOM 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday B 2021 Sept 26

Living our Catholic faith has some formidable challenges. Three of these can be discerned in today's Scripture readings. Two of them are explicit and the third one follows from the other two and is implied. These are the three challenges to which I refer: 1) the challenge to overcome sin, first of all, mortal or deadly sin -- and especially that which causes scandal and that which is sacrilegious -- but also venial sins; 2) the challenge to recognize that God desires the salvation of every person and so extends His Holy Spirit to all the willing, through the sacraments most especially but also otherwise, both directly and through those who are filled with the Holy Spirit; and 3) the challenge to persevere in prayerful and sacramental communion with Jesus in order to overcome sin and to communicate the Holy Spirit to others.

The first challenge to overcome sin is referred to in our Gospel reading where, speaking metaphorically, and using pedagogical hyperbole to make His point, Jesus teaches His disciples to do whatever it takes to avoid mortal sins -- if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut them off; if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out.

Sins of the eyes refer to lust, including in our day the viewing of pornography, but also to envy. Recall that expression about a person's eyes being green with envy -- being filled with rage and sickness at the good fortune of another person. Sins of the hand could also refer to sexual sins, but also to stealing in any of its many forms, including the kind of greed or love of money described in our second reading that deprives workers of a just and living family wage, that is indifferent to the burden of the poor, and that contributes to the suffering and death of Christ -- the Righteous One -- who identifies Himself with the poor.

Sins of the foot can be understood, for example, as going to a liquor store or a bar to indulge one's alcoholism, or as walking away from one's religious or marriage vows, or as entering an abortion facility to end the life of one's unborn baby. It can be understood further as "*power walking*" down the cultural highway to Hell -- choosing political correctness instead of denying oneself to live the Gospel message and walking in the footsteps of Jesus the narrow way to the Father's House.

Our Lord could have extended this teaching further, to mortal sins of the tongue, like gossip, detraction, malicious lying, words of anger or degradation, deliberate distortion and false reporting, or even silence, when speaking the truths of our faith with love and courage is required, but will bring derision. He could have, and in Matthew's Gospel account, does indeed, warn against grave sins of the mind and heart by such as intentional hatred or mental adultery.

All of these deadly sins and more, especially those which scandalize others -- above all little ones -- leading them to sin, Jesus sternly warned against and admonished that we must decisively, and with all-out determination, turn away from them.

Words from our Responsorial Psalm speak to this: "*From wanton sin especially restrain your servant; let it not rule over me. Then shall I be blameless and innocent of serious sin.*"

But even lesser or venial sins and faults are to be overcome. Listen also to these words from the Responsorial Psalm: "*Cleanse me from my unknown faults.*" These do not separate us from Christ unto Gehenna, but they keep us from being conformed to Him in whose image we were created and must be restored in order to share His glory.

The second explicit challenge to living our Catholic faith -- to recognize that God desires the salvation of every person and so extends His Holy Spirit to all the willing, through the sacraments most especially but

also otherwise, both directly, and finally, through those who are filled with the Holy Spirit – is found in our first reading and Gospel reading. The context of the first reading from the Book of Numbers is that Moses finds himself overburdened by the complaints and demands of God’s people who are looking back with longing to the abundant fresh, tasty foods they had in Egypt despite the oppression – the slavery -- that went with it. They also had endless disputes among themselves that required adjudication by Moses, whose father-in-law, Jethro, suggested that he name assistants to help him with this.

So, Moses does this, and appointing seventy good men to help him, summoned them to his tent where the Lord poured out upon them the same spirit with whom He had anointed Moses. The chosen men then began to prophesy or speak for the Lord. As they neared the end of their lives, or terms, they appointed other reputable men as replacements by the laying on of hands. This group of seventy thus became the authoritative governing body for God’s people, eventually called the Sanhedrin in apostolic times.

Getting back to our first reading, however, we heard that two of the seventy men originally appointed by Moses were not present at his tent when the Lord anointed the others with the Spirit. Nevertheless, the two – Eldad and Medad – were prophesying. A young man reported this to Moses and Joshua, his assistant, tells Moses to stop them. Instead, Moses – recognizing that the two, even though not present for the gathering at his tent, have been anointed -- tells Joshua: “*Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all.*” This was a prophetic utterance, partially fulfilled in the New Testament by way of the sacrament of Baptism which imbues the baptized person with the Holy Spirit. But it is also yet to be fully accomplished through us – the faithful of the Church.

Back to the Gospel, the apostle John tries to stop some non-Christians from doing exorcisms in Jesus’ name because they are not disciples of Jesus. Perhaps they are Jews or pagan Romans. But Jesus tells him not to prevent this because they are doing a good deed while recognizing Jesus as the author of that good. He adds that anyone who is not against Him and His disciples is a friend and any act of friendship or kindness on their part will be rewarded. In other words, true goodness, which is of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, can be found outside the Church because the Holy Spirit blows where He wills in search of hearts open to Him, and the followers of Jesus, the members of His Church, should affirm and encourage such goodness wherever it is found. It is, after all, God’s will that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of truth, and in the prophetic words of Moses ...*be filled with the Holy Spirit.*

This brings us to the third challenge in living our Catholic faith, a challenge that stems from the first two, namely, to persevere in prayerful and sacramental communion with Jesus in order to overcome sin and to communicate the Holy Spirit to others, which in turn, is necessary for overcoming sin. Without genuine daily prayer, we cannot live in communion with Jesus, nor can the sacraments be fully fruitful in our lives, bringing our communion with Jesus to perfection. We need both of these – genuine daily prayer and the sacraments properly received -- to overcome sin.

For grave sins committed after baptism, we must use the Sacrament of Reconciliation – confession. And we must use it again and again as needed, even optionally for help with overcoming venial sins. That’s why we have confessions here before every Mass, and that’s why its such a blessing that nearby St. Vincent Basilica has confessions daily – Monday through Saturday – Noon to 1 PM. – usually with lines of penitents (which I’m in often enough).

Also, normally, we should not receive Holy Communion without confession and the absolution of grave sins. To do so otherwise can be a sacrilege that compounds the sin. Today, there are many sacrilegious communions that scandalize people. For the good of the communicant and to prevent scandalizing others, Church Law, Canon 915, obliges bishops to deny Holy Communion to those who defiantly persist in

grave public sin such as the promotion of legal abortion, same sex marriage, or transgenderism. This is an act of mercy to help them avoid sacrilege and turn away from deadly sin.

On the other hand, prayer and the reception of Holy Communion properly disposed is also needed for us to communicate the Holy Spirit to others who may be estranged from the sacraments or outside the Church. When we pray for someone to return to the sacraments or to become a Catholic or simply to get to heaven, we are asking the Holy Spirit to pound on the door of their hearts shouting *LET ME IN...so that I can help you to do God's will in oneness with Jesus*. When we add sacrifices of self-denial or acts of mercy to this, we are, so to speak, increasing the intensity of the workings of the Holy Spirit in this regard.

And when we offer ourselves – deliberately, freely, and without reservation – to and with Jesus in Holy Communion to the Father unto the Cross of obedience and love for this, we do the most we can, and we are filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit and we communicate a superabundance of this grace to those for whom we offer ourselves. To do this and live it out is truly the greatest challenge of living our Catholic faith, along with overcoming sin, but the two of these go hand in hand in bring about their good purposes. And the Blessed Mother will help us with this, along with St. Joseph, first of all by enabling us to get to Mass despite the pandemic, even as we do our part to protect others from the virus.

If we have not been naturally immunized by having had the virus, then as Pope Francis said, vaccination is an act of charity. And if for medical or other good reasons, one does not get vaccinated, and is not COVID-immune, then the charitable thing to do to mitigate the risk of passing the virus on to others is masking, distancing, and/ or frequent testing. In any case, our Church teaches that vaccination should not be compulsory or mandatory, just as the obligation to attend Mass is not compulsory in the sense of being enforced with canonical penalties, but instead, is morally obligatory i.e., deemed to be spiritually necessary under ordinary circumstances to maintain and perfect our oneness with Christ.

So, in closing, I invite you to join me in silently and sincerely praying these words at Holy Communion as we offer ourselves to and with Jesus for the life of the world -- the salvation of all the willing -- beginning with ourselves and those we hold dear: **I AM ALL YOURS O MOST LOVING JESUS THROUGH MARY YOUR MOTHER, WITH THE HELP OF ST. JOSEPH.**