

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Our Lady of Dallas

October 22, 2017

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Matthew 22:15-21

The subject of this Sunday's Gospel is the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees who want to trap him with a question about the tax to be paid to the Romans. The Pharisees devise a question which they think is without exit. Under the appearance of fidelity to the law of God or fidelity to the Roman emperor, they seek reasons to accuse Jesus. In his response, the wisdom of Jesus surpasses their cleverly composed trap. Jesus does not insult them or humiliate them, instead he teaches them – as the coin is stamped with Caesar's image, so our we made in the image of God. He also teaches that man lives a dual citizenship, he is a citizen of an earthly city and a heavenly city. In this world, citizens are bound to obey the legitimate political authority of their country. We also have the obligation help bring about true progress and aid the communities in which we live. With regard to our citizenship of heaven which takes priority, we owe God our gratitude, love, obedience and worship.

This dual citizenship can be seen in all aspects of our lives. In something as simple as introducing yourself to another person, it's natural for us to identify ourselves by our names, where we are from, maybe what we do. These aspects are connected with our earthly existence. But, our identity of who we are really goes much deeper than that. At the core of our being, each one of us has the identity of being a child of God, made in his image and likeness, redeemed by the blood of his Son, and destined to enjoy eternity with him in heaven.

This truth of the faith should not make us egocentric or the center of the world. It's not just that I'm made in God's image and likeness, but that every human person is as well, thus deserving of my respect. If we properly understand who we are in God's eyes, and in relation to other creatures and all of creation, we will sense that there are certain duties and obligations that simply flow from who we are.

Unfortunately, words like "obligation" and "duty" are somewhat frowned upon today. When we speak about duties and obligations, however, what we have to do as a Church is to

reclaim the fact that duties are not arbitrary. Obligations are not impositions. Instead, the duties and obligations that we have flow from who we are.

A woman who often spoke about our obligations and duties is Dorothy Day. In one of her biographies called “The Duty of Delight,” she explains that duty for her was not something imposed from the outside, a heavy burden laid upon her shoulders. It was a joy! So, her feeding of the poor was not a duty as in “I have to do this, because the Church tells me to.” It flowed from who she knew she was: a child of God created in his image and likeness. And who they were: people also created in the image and likeness of God.

Service and concern for others is one of the essential duties of a Christian. We are called to serve even those people who are very different than ourselves. There are will probably be unexpected situations that we will face, and it is important to act with wisdom, charity and in truth. Our words and actions should lead others to God or at least not get in the way of another person’s path to God.

One such situation that is new in our times is the prevalence of people with same sex attraction. On the one hand, it has occurred since ancient times. On the other hand, the novelty of our times is the openness and acceptance of many when people act on these attractions. Recently, I’ve had several conversations with parents whose son revealed to them that he had these attractions. I explained to one parent that most people do not choose this. It is usually something a person discovers in himself in adolescence. The discovery is usually accompanied with anxiety and fear. Another parent told me that his son described his situation as something he would never have chosen for himself, because it is has been so difficult to live with, and despite much praying, the attractions don’t go away.

The Church and we as Christians have the obligation to serve and help people that experience these attractions – the Church’s approach and our approach must be of loving concern to lead all people to God. With this pastoral concern, Joseph Ratzinger wrote a letter to bishops on this issue in 1986 when he was prefect of the Congregation for the doctrine of the faith. He reminds the reader that the human person, made in the image and likeness of God, cannot and should not be reduced to his or her sexual orientation. This is not the defining element of a person’s identity. Every one living on the face of the earth has personal problems and difficulties, but also strengths, talents and gifts as well. Today, the Church provides a badly needed context for the care of the

human person when she refuses to consider the person as a "heterosexual" or a "homosexual" and insists that every person has a fundamental Identity: the creature of God, and by grace, God's child and heir to eternal life.

The context which the Church provides for people experiencing same sex attraction is one imbued with concern and respect for the dignity of each person made in the image of God. The context includes an invitation to all to live chaste and holy lives. This does not mean that certain people are denied love. It is possible to experience love chastely in a celibate life in friendship, family, service to neighbor, communion with the saints and union with God.

Ratzinger also wrote in his letter that the inclination of same sex attraction is not a sin, acting on it is. If a friend or family member chooses to act on his same sex attraction, our approach should not be to kick him out of our lives. We must imitate Jesus' approach, solicitous concern for the person's conversion to chastity, patience based on love and hope, and a door that is always open for a prodigal son to return.