

26th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (September 26, 2021)

Today we conclude our series of readings from the New Testament letter of St. James, and we have heard him speak of our moral duty as followers of Christ to help those in need:

- he referred to ‘pure religion’ as caring for widows and orphans
- he warned against currying favor with the rich while ignoring the needs of the poor
- he declared that faith without the works of charity (like feeding the hungry) is dead.

And today we hear his strongest language of all—he comes down very hard on the rich in language that is not at all subtle: “weep and wail over your impending miseries.” James is not condemning wealth itself or the rich simply because they have wealth. Rather, he condemns them because of their selfishness and their unjust treatment of others: “Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvest your fields are crying aloud; and the cries...have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.”

These readings from James provide a good opportunity to remind ourselves about the basics of the Church’s social teaching. I know that some people may get a little nervous when they hear ‘social teaching’ or ‘social justice’; they fear the Church may be getting too involved in politics. One weekend some years ago in another parish I preached about this subject—and someone came up to me after Mass and was very upset about the homily, saying that’s what people like George Soros are all about. I’m well aware that some have used ‘social justice’ language to promote particular agendas on government actions that are not in line with or required by Church teaching. And let me assure you: I have no time whatsoever for George Soros—he is dangerously wrong on so many issues, especially regarding human life and sexuality.

So what do we mean by ‘social justice’? Our Catechism does an excellent job of describing this basic principle of Catholic moral teaching: it is all about “the respect for the human person and the rights which flow from human dignity and guarantee it”. At its root, in other words, social justice is founded first and foremost on the fundamental dignity of the human person who is made in the image and likeness of God. As St. John Paul II said: “What is at stake is the dignity of the human person, whose defense and promotion have been entrusted to us by the Creator” (CCC 1929). Every person has that God-given dignity simply by virtue of being a human being. Thus, every person’s life is sacred and his rights to what is needed for living that life with dignity must be protected and promoted. Again from the Catechism: “Society must provide the conditions that allow people to obtain what is their due, according to their nature and vocation.” This is especially true, of course, for the poor and the marginalized.

It’s impossible to do a full treatment of this subject in just one homily; I can only give the broad outline today. The U.S. bishops a few years ago put out a very good overview of Catholic social teaching that they summarized in seven overall themes; I’ll be putting these in my bulletin column over the next several weeks beginning next weekend. For now, just a few points that are important to keep in mind in this area:

The Church must be involved in teaching and advocating in these matters of justice, of what is required to protect and promote the life and dignity of every person—especially those who are most vulnerable. These are not only ‘political’ matters—they go to the heart of who and what we are as human beings made in God’s image and likeness. Jesus was absolutely clear about the

fact that how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned and everyone else is directly related to the question of our eternal destiny—see chapter 25 of Matthew’s gospel if you need a reminder.

Does this mean that the Church can or should be directly involved in crafting specific legislation and proposals on tax rates, the minimum wage, health insurance and everything else? The Catechism is clear: “It is not the role of the Pastors of the Church to intervene directly in the political structuring and organization of social life. This task is part of the vocation of the lay faithful...” (n. 2442). There can be legitimate disagreement on how best to promote and work for specific goals, but the Church has the important duty of keeping before our eyes the basic principles of what justice requires for the protection and flourishing of human life and dignity.

One local example of that process in action is the Iowa Catholic Conference—the four bishops of Iowa together with representatives of the laity, religious and priests from our four dioceses. I am the priest representative for the Archdiocese of Dubuque, and it has been very interesting and actually inspiring to see how the bishops (together with the conference director and his staff) connect with Governor Reynolds and members of the Iowa Legislature to make known the Church’s views and concerns about issues that touch on moral and justice issues of all kinds. The meetings of the conference board have been most interesting (yes, meetings can actually be interesting...sometimes...), and you shouldn’t be surprised to learn that there is not always total agreement on how best to present our concerns and proposals. But it is important to know that the Church does have a voice in these debates, and she has the right and the duty to use that voice to promote human life and dignity in accord with our faith. That also happens, as it needs to, on the national level with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

One other brief point: when you think about it, there really should be no controversy or disagreement regarding social justice—who could disagree about the need to protect and promote human life and dignity? Who could say that society has no duty to help those who cannot help themselves? Sadly, we know there is no such agreement on even the basics of Catholic social teaching. Even worse, there are too many examples of people who have been attacked and even killed...simply because they stood up for the poor who were being oppressed and victimized by those wanting to protect their privileged status. I want to remind you of an opportunity that you have to learn about one such individual—Fr. Stanley Rother, an Oklahoma priest who was killed in Guatemala 40 years ago in 1981 and who was beatified in 2017 and is now known as Blessed Stanley Rother. Sue Sweeney, a member of St. Peter’s in New Haven, is a relative of Fr. Rother, and she will be giving a presentation about him this morning in New Haven after the 10:45 Mass there. I encourage you to attend; Fr. Rother’s story is fascinating, sobering, and most of all inspiring.

The Church’s social teaching is at the heart of our faith; it isn’t just an add-on or an option. Jesus spoke often enough and clearly enough about our moral obligation to be not only mindful but also responsive to the dignity and the need of others, especially those in most need. It’s a matter of human life and a matter of human dignity, both of which are ours by God’s grace and generous love. May we live out that teaching with ever greater gratitude, generosity, and dedication.

