

HOMILY 5 SEPT 2010 SUN 23C HT-W/XII-PC

The family as we know it is passing through a time of crisis. The reality of broken homes and the high incidence of divorce is old news by now. At this point, the problem has reached such proportions that the once common image of the family, namely, a man and a woman surrounded by their children, is being supplanted by such novelties as companionate marriages, trial marriages, and homosexual unions. Really, it wouldn't surprise me if sometime in the future polygamy were proposed as yet another alternative arrangement.

And so the gospel today seems to come at an inopportune moment. We hear the Lord's words: If anyone comes to me w/o hating his parents, his wife and children, his siblings, he cannot be my disciple. This apparent recipe for familial disintegration doesn't set well. And so it tends to get filtered out. We Catholics like to think that the traditional family and religious faith go together hand and glove. Church, family values, marriage, having children, honoring parents, all are inseparably associated w/ one another in the popular Catholic imagination. .

But if we review the Scriptures, we find this hard saying has parallels elsewhere. Earlier in Luke's gospel, the Lord commanded a man to follow him w/o stopping to kiss his parents goodbye; another fellow was ordered to relinquish the filial duty of burying his parents—let the dead bury their dead, Jesus said. In still other passages the Lord tells his audience that he has come to set relatives against one another—a mother against daughter and a father against son. Indeed, in times of intense persecution he predicts that his followers will find enemies within their own household. Of course, before we conclude that Jesus was some sort of home wrecker, we must weigh other passages where he commends love of one another and especially of one's parents. The New Testament teaching on family life is a rather complicated matter that requires some historical study for proper interpretation.

When the Lord Jesus practiced his public ministry, he got a mixed reception. Granted, he drew crowds: a lot of people came to hear his words and watch his miracles. Nonetheless, there were divisions among his hearers, often over sayings like this one—the Lord didn't have a spin doctor. Some believed and followed, others were offended and drew back. And the fact of the matter is that opinions on Jesus divided families. The man born blind became his disciple; his parents did not. Paul went from being a persecutor to an evangelist, and found himself disowned by many of his people. Even some of Jesus' own relatives thought he was crazy.

Discipleship, that is following Jesus, has big consequences for family dynamics. Discipleship transcends and relativizes the bonds of flesh and blood. Those who believe in Jesus become a new family, a community called Church; God is their Father; in Christ, all are brothers and sisters. It is not that family is bad; quite the contrary. But the family for all its goodness is meant to be a sign of a much greater and more enduring reality, namely, the Church, that is that great communion of love of which is God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and all those blessed people who are drawn into the mystery of God's life. For good reason then the family is called the domestic church. If human families are to survive and thrive, their members must allow themselves to be enlightened by faith and converted by love. In our era, when the influence of the Christian religion has waned considerably, it should not surprise that the family has also become fragmented to the point that the very meaning of the term has become obscured.

In the fond memory of some elder parishioners, of course, there was a time when faith was a galvanizing factor for families: it was almost as though Catholicism had become part of their DNA. But it was not always so; nor is it so today. The Jesus question has again become a bone of contention within many modern households. So what? What do we do about it? What of the painful tensions that ensue? My brothers and sisters, they are part of the cross that we disciples must bear if we are to be true disciples. This is no easy resolution to the crisis in the contemporary family. But this cross which our family-unfriendly age imposes can be a force for redemption, as every cross can be. The sufferings of those of us wounded by the broken vows and severed ties of fractured families are united in a special way to the passion of the Crucified One. And these sufferings bear fruit for the salvation of the world. May this Eucharist help us all to bear our crosses and rediscover our identity as God's children, united as brothers and sisters in the church of Christ, the family of God.