

“Tolerance”

Homily of October 1, 2006

by Fr. Brian Timoney

First, a very brief word on these last verses of the Gospel.... I was not, I was NOT trying to follow them literally when I cut myself shaving this morning. This is typical Semitic hyperbole, to drive home a point that nothing, nothing, nothing should come between us and God. In both the Book of Numbers and in the first verses of the gospel today we have a very strong plea for tolerance, and I think this is very, very relevant in the present day. Moses received the Spirit of God but, since there is plenty of the Spirit of God to go around, the seventy elders also received some. And there were two men who were not present at that time. They were on the list all right but maybe they were lazy or whatever. They didn't get up to the meeting place in time. But they also received the Spirit. And the others were jealous.

Then in the Gospel, you have a similar situation. A man was doing these exorcisms and he was using the name of Jesus to do the exorcism, and the disciples were outraged. How dare he.... use the name of Jesus?! He doesn't belong to us. How dare he?! But the answer Jesus gave was, (It kind of summed up what Moses taught when he said...) “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Tolerance. One of the great scandals of the world has been the divisions among Christians down through the centuries. It's not a recent phenomenon at all. You remember in the very early stage of the Church that Peter and Paul differed vehemently on a very important issue, that is, how much of the Jewish law would apply to Christians. It was quite a bitter division there.

Well, as far as the Catholic Church is concerned, I think we've taken a huge step forward since the Second Vatican Council. The Second Vatican Council passed an entire document on tolerance, on freedom of religion. And it declared that the human person has the right to religious freedom and this freedom means that all are immune from coercion on the part of an individual or social group or of any human power. No one is to be forced to act in a way contrary to one's beliefs. So, we've come a long, long way from the days when we burned heretics.

However, the Council did warn, in the use of all freedoms, the moral principle of personal and social responsibility is to be observed. Individuals and social groups are bound by the moral law to have respect both for the rights of others and for their own duties towards others and for the common welfare of all. And I believe that what the Council said about religious freedom can be applied to other matters, to other freedoms as well. Now, let me be very, very clear that tolerance does not mean that we accept everything that comes down the road. Far from it! We are not asked to approve of evil. We are asked to condemn evil, whenever we see it. But we are called

upon to respect other opinions, other cultures, other political views as long as these are in accordance with the moral law and that they, in turn, respect the rights of others and seek the common good of all. And I believe that the sentiments expressed by the Pope about Islam that got him into so much trouble should be looked upon from that point of view.

It is important for us to remember that we should all be seeking truth. Pilate's question is still very relevant. Isn't it? "What is truth?" I think I shared with you before the story of the Redemptorist priest, a very famous preacher in Ireland, Father Stephen Kenneally, who was asked to preach the opening homily for the University. It was in Gaelic, and he was a native Gaelic speaker from the Aran Islands. The bishop asked him to preach this opening homily and gave him the subject. The subject was Pilate's question, "What is truth?" So he came up to the seminary where I was at the time, in Galway, (This was the University in Galway that was to be opened.) to consult with the philosophy professors and so on about this big question "What is truth?" He was heard, as he roamed the corridors of the seminary, saying to himself, "What is truth? What is truth?" What do I know about truth?" And the wags at the seminary said, "That's the truest thing he ever said."

So, we are all seeking truth, but one thing we have to bear in mind is that truth is multi-faceted. No human being can possibly know all truth, especially all truth about God. And the list of apologies that you see on that bulletin today (A list of apologies that Popes had made...) shows you the truth of what I am saying. No one can grasp the fulness of truth about God. Our world is round. Two people can start from here and walk all the way, completely opposite directions, walk all the way around the world and they come to the same destination. Truth is an extraordinary thing, so many facets to it. We have to proclaim the truth as we see it, while allowing others to do the same. But we do not have to be always what in modern times is called "politically correct," because that sometimes obscures the truth. Truth must be spoken while acknowledging that the truth we speak may not always be, in fact rarely be, the fulness of truth.

Where do we Catholic Christians find truth? Well, obviously, in the teachings and the example of Jesus Christ, but also in the official teachings of our Church leadership, our Popes and our Bishops. We believe that the Holy Spirit, while given to all of God's people, is given in a special way to our leadership. And we pray that they may always speak the truth boldly, even when that truth does not conform to popular opinion, when it is not "politically correct." Was James being politically correct in his tirade today against the rich? Oh, no. Certainly not. But he was being truthful. The people he was speaking about had acquired their wealth unjustly and they were also irresponsible in the way that they were using their wealth. He was fearless. And we too should be fearless when we proclaim gospel values and Church teaching in matters that concern justice, fair labor practices, just wages, social responsibility, the plight of the poor, abortion, war, death penalty, environmental protection and other issues of our time. On some of these issues, good people differ. Good people differ. And we have to respect that. We may not agree with them, but our discourse should not be one of shouting and yelling and condemning and pointing fingers. Our discourse should be one of respect, of trying to understand other people's points of view. Our discourse should be Christian. But we do have to remember that every human endeavor,

every human endeavor, every human action or inaction has a moral component, and we are called upon to seek the truth of that moral component, and, in the process of seeking the truth, to give serious consideration to the guidance given us by our Church leadership.

Tolerance means constant, on-going seeking of truth, but never acquiescence in evil. Tolerance means the realization that truth is multi-faceted. Tolerance requires great humility and an acknowledgement that we need the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And so we pray for that guidance, for all of us, in our common search for truth. The Holy Spirit, which is given generously to the elders of our Church is also given generously to all of us. Let us pray for each other.