

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: October 22, 2023

I begin with a question. When you were growing up did your church have an American flag in the sanctuary? I have seen many churches with the flag and sometimes the Vatican flag in the opposite corner. As I grew older, I started to question this practice. In time I realized that American Catholics, especially in the immigrant nineteenth century, felt a need to prove they were good Americans. The opposition to Al Smith in his presidential campaign of 1932 and the tirades of such writers as Paul Blanchard expressed a fear of Catholics and a prejudice against them. The Vatican didn't help. It wasn't until the Second Vatican Council in the sixties, and the teachings of the American Jesuit, John Courtney Murray, that the Church formally accepted the value of the separation of church and state. With the election of John F. Kennedy Catholics could stop proving they were really Americans. Some would say that from that time on the church no longer preserved its unique identity.

The separation of church and state is not what Jesus speaks about in the gospel. First century Roman Empire as well as the Jewish people could not conceive of such a separation. But today our American situation has changed. Separation of church and state is part of the common belief. What is more the situation today is the separation of God and culture. God is not to be mentioned and is even an embarrassment for many believers. Many of them vote not on the base of their religious beliefs but because they are Democrat or Republican, liberal or conservative.

"Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's," says Jesus. But God is not part of the picture. So the state and the economy have taken over our minds and hearts. It sounds so sophisticated and I believe leaves us starving for meaning.

How can you live without God when God is all around us, within us, is in the air we breathe? I am not necessarily talking about belonging to some organized religion which, of course, ought to help us to know and love this God. But I mean living, knowing, believing in a power beyond us, beyond our egos, beyond our culture. It means that, even in darkness, we know God is present and can be relied on to bring light out of darkness, order out of chaos, meaning out of impasse.

It is especially when we come to an impasse in our lives, whether personal or societal, that we look to the cross of Jesus and know God is present. Beyond our

comfort, our security there we know by faith, that God is present. Do you know what is the opposite of faith? It is not doubt. No, it is certainty. We think we can have all the answers and be in control of our lives. What foolishness.

Love the Lord, your God, with all of your heart and mind and strength. Not because God gives us certainty or security or a smooth life. But because God loves us and is drawing us to live in love, as well as in faith and hope.

There are times in life of personal impasses. There seems to be no way out. Death, terminal illness, rejection can all throw us into darkness and uncertainty. It is then that we really have to believe. It is then that we really have to hope. It is then that we really love.

And there are times of societal impasse. Could you live in the Ukraine and still believe with over a year of destruction and war? How do we live and believe in a world where Israelis and Palestinians are engaged in such violence, warfare and hatred? Do we run away and try to hide from it all? Or do we keep faith that God is in the midst of all the pain and chaos?

Thomas Merton did not run from the Vietnam War, the Cold War, the fight for civil rights. He faced them in love and prayer and in his writing. In one essay he wrote: "At the root of all war is fear: not so much the fear we have of one another as the fear we have of everything. It is not only our hatred of others that is dangerous but also and above all that hatred of ourselves: particularly that hatred of ourselves which is too deep and too powerful to be consciously faced. For it is this which makes us see our own evil in others and unable to see it in ourselves."

Later, in this same essay, Merton continues, "So instead of loving what you think is peace, love others and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed – but hate these things in yourself, not in another."

Pax Christi USA which advocates for just peace suggests a program of Prayer, Study and Action. Here are some excerpts from their prayer for peace:

God of comfort, send your Spirit to encompass all those whose lives are torn apart by violence and death... God of justice, give strength to those whose long work for a just peace seems fruitless now....

God of Love, we lift up Palestine and Israel, its people, its land, its creatures. Let love and compassion prevail

God of Hope, we lift up the cities of Gaza City and Tel Aviv, Ramallah and Ashkelon; breathe peace on your peoples... God of Mercy, even now work on the hearts of combatants....

God of the Nations, let not one more child or elder be sacrificed on the altars of political expediency. Keep safe all peoples....

And we are invited with Pope Francis and all Christians to fast this Friday, October 27th, for these people for whom we pray. Amen

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