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All Saints Parish

Rev. Fred Daley

Finding the 'Common Good'

This story comes from Anthony DeMello:

When the Bishop's ship stopped at a remote island for a day, he disembarked to use the day as profitably as possible. He strolled along the seashore and came across three fishermen mending their nets. In pidgin English they explained to him that centuries before they had been Christianized by missionaries. 'We Christians!' they said proudly pointing to themselves.

The Bishop was impressed. Did they know the Lord's Prayer? They had never heard of it. The bishop was shocked. How could these men claim to be Christians when they did not know something as elementary as the Lord's Prayer?

'What do you say, then, when you pray?'

'We lift eyes in heaven. We pray, "We are three, you are three, have mercy on us." The bishop was appalled at the primitive, the downright heretical nature of their prayer. So he spent the whole day teaching them how to say the Lord's Prayer. The fishermen were poor learners, but they gave it all they had and before the bishop sailed away next day he had the satisfaction of hearing them go through the whole formula without a fault.

Months later the bishop's ship happened to pass by these islands and the bishop, as he paced the deck saying his evening prayers, recalled with pleasure the fact that on that distant island were three men who were now able to pray correctly, thanks to his patient efforts. While he was lost in thought he happened to look up and noticed a spot of light in the east. The light kept approaching the ship and, as the bishop gazed in wonder, he saw three figures walking on the water toward the boat. The captain stopped the boat and all the sailors leaned over the rails to see this amazing sight.

When they were within speaking distance, the bishop recognized his three friends, the fishermen. 'Bishop!' they explained, 'We so glad met you. We hear your boat go past island and came hurry hurry meet you.'

'What is it you want?' asked the bishop in awe.

'Bishop,' they said, 'We so, so sorry. We forget lovely prayer. We say: Our Father in heaven, holy be your name, your kingdom come... then we forget. Please tell us whole prayer again.'

The bishop felt humbled. 'Go back to your homes, my good men,' he said, 'and each time you pray, say, 'We are three, you are three, have mercy on us!''

"You are three, we are three, have mercy on us!"

My sisters and brothers, one of the occupational hazards of religion is the myth that we have it all; ...we know it all. God is with us - so certainly, can't be with them... The Bishop in the story was scandalized because the three islanders' ritual was different, heretical, blasphemy! This attitude holds that 'outside *our* group, *our* church, there is no salvation; ...we've got it and they don't...!

We see this attitude in our first Reading from the Book of Numbers in the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses gathered the 70 elders in prayer, and the Spirit came to rest on them and they began to prophesy.... But, a young man came running up the Moses and said: "You know those two guys: Eldred and Medad - they weren't present when the Spirit came down on the elders and yet they're prophesying in the camp! Moses' aide, Joshua, said: "Stop them, they're not one elders who were at the prayer service; how could they ever have the Spirit?" But Moses said: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people were prophets! Wouldn't that be great? What a wonderful world it would be!"

We see the same attitude in today's Gospel from Mark; the Apostle John comes up to Jesus and says: "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him because he's not one of us.. [Now, we have to remember that earlier in this Gospel, there's mention that the Disciples tried to drive our demons from someone and they couldn't, so there could be a little bit of jealousy and envy going on too...] But Jesus

said: "Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in my name who can at the same time speak ill of me. *For whoever is not against us, is for us!*"

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My brothers and sisters, we don't have to go back to the time of Moses or the time of Jesus to discover the "us versus them" attitude. Look at how polarized our Church and society are today; and so often each side *knows* they are *absolutely* right and the other side is *absolutely* wrong.

Let's look at the very difficult issue of the valuing of human life. The Church through the ages has developed a beautiful and evolving seamless garment approach to human life that emphasizes two critical points:

#1: Every human being has a right to life and whatever threatens or eliminates that human life from its beginning to its natural end is considered immoral: abortion, war, capital punishment, murder, terrorism, the absence of responsible gun control, assisted suicide ... the list goes on.

#2: Every human being has a right to live a fully human life and anything that diminishes the capacity for one to fully live that life is immoral; every person has a right to the necessities of life - food, clothing, shelter, clothing, health care, education, the list goes on....; every person has a right to be treated with dignity and to participate in their own destiny: therefore sexism, racism, homophobia are immoral; every person has a right to use their gifts and talents that God has given them to build-up the reign of God; ... the list goes on.

The reality is that people of good will struggle with these issues and come to conclusions that, in conscience, might be different than mine, or yours or the official Church teaching: some may consider war in certain circumstances to be moral; someone else may think that capital punishment is a legitimate means to minimize violent crime; someone might consider abortion to be a moral choice in certain circumstances or debate just when human life begins...; another may believe that it's not the State's obligation to ensure universal health care and some may think that food-stamps are contributing to a welfare state and the list goes on. (And if you haven't disagreed with something I've said - you probably haven't been listening!)

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My sisters and brothers, to demonize the other side (the side that differs from us), to refuse to listen to the other side, to refuse to respect the conscience of the other side accomplishes nothing and allows polarization and dysfunction and paralysis to continue.

In a pluralistic society it's medley of beliefs and values and ways of life - we get much farther ahead if, rather than demonizing the other... we struggle to find a common ground where we can work together for the common good, understanding that through history together we are becoming more human and more humane - little by little.

Remember, at one time, slavery was considered moral by the Catholic Church; hopefully there will be a day when war will be considered by all to be an immoral, evil, inhumane way of solving problems; there will be a day when women and men will be seen as equal - not only in the world, but in the Church too!

Let me share a personal experience from my days in Utica...

In our inner city Parish, we joined with people of many different faiths: Christian, Jew, Muslim, Buddhist, people of no faith - to accompany the poor and work to improve their lives. Working together we established a soup kitchen, health clinic, furniture store, refugee center, day care center.... I worked with many Religious leaders and experienced their deep faith, love and desire to serve.

Once a year, the Bishop and a number of priests of the Diocese working to end abortion, would march to Planned Parenthood and Vigil. Across the street would be a group of people, including other Religious leaders, conducting a Pro-Choice Demonstration. I know how good and charitable the leaders on *both* the pro-life *and* the pro-choice sides are. I know that Planned Parenthood provides wonderful services for young women, that they cannot get anywhere else... In my heart I couldn't demonize either side... Everyone agreed that minimizing abortion is a good thing... and we know that the more educated and economically secure an individual, the less likely they are to have an abortion... How could we find common ground to strive for our common goal?

Working together, members of both camps - pro-choice and pro-life - founded New Horizons, a home for homeless teens, many of who were addicted to drugs or alcohol. They were provided with the services, support and education necessary to straighten out their lives. If they were pregnant, they were given the support and services needed for a healthy birth and if they decided to keep the child, they were helped to get established in an apartment with the items and services needed to care for a baby. If they chose to place the baby for adoption, they were helped with appropriate services. We had found a common ground - where we could work together for the common good.

Closer to home: In the four years that we have been working to build our All Saints Parish, committed to be a welcoming, diverse, inclusive community, some may say that we've trended toward the "progressive" side of things...(!) But: to truly realize our Mission, we must be open as well to welcome more traditional, more conservative Catholics; we must remain committed to listen, to dialogue with, to respect and to learn from all our sisters and brothers.

I'll close with another of Anthony DeMello's stories:

A tourist says to his guide, 'You have a right to be proud of your town. I was especially impressed with the number of Churches in it. Surely the people here must love the Lord.'

'Well,' replied the cynical guide, 'they may love the Lord, but they sure as hell hate each other.'

It reminds me of the little girl who was asked, 'Who are pagans?'
She replied, 'Pagans are people who do not quarrel about religion.'

Amen!