

MY ENEMY, THE CHURCH

7th Sunday in O.T., Year A
Mt 5:38-48

You hear Jesus' words, "Let your light shine before others. Do not resist evil. If somebody strikes you on the right cheek, you're to turn and offer him the left."

If they ask for your shirt, you give the coat. If they press you for one mile, you're supposed to go two.

"Give to those who beg from you, and love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you."

In a word, "we are to be perfect," Jesus says, "as the very God himself."

And when you hear words like this you just wonder how serious Jesus could be. In a Broadway play, a woman says, "God never made a better woman than I am, but somehow I just can't seem to live up to it."

And all those stories that we hear that are supposed to exemplify the ideal. The old story, for example, of the ancient Chinese warlord who ordered his general to go to a city and take the city and destroy all the enemies, no quarter, no nothing. About a week later the warlord went to the city and saw that the city gates were open, but when he went in he saw his general and the other soldiers having a banquet with all the natives there.

And furious, he asked about his order, about destroying the enemies, and of course the response was, "But I did. As you can see, they are now our friends."

Or there's the story about the man who once bought a farm and was walking the bounds of his new property when he met his new next-door neighbor.

And the new neighbor said to him, "Don't look now, but when you bought this piece of ground you also bought a lawsuit with it because your fence is ten feet on my property."

And the new owner smiled and said, "I thought I'd find some friendly neighbors here, and I'm going to. And you're going to help me. You move the fence over to where you want it and send me the bill, and we'll both be happy."

These are the kinds of stories that seem to translate this impossible dream of Jesus'. And still, on the other hand, in everyday flesh and blood life, beyond the stories, it is hard to love your enemy, particularly when you have been hurt deeply and, perhaps, in a most personal way.

Now imagine that your enemy is the church. Just think of all the headlines that have been in the papers the last few years. Think of what you've heard about the church on radio and television. The official church, what has it done to, say, Archbishop Hunthausen in Seattle? Were they right? Were they wrong? Did they deal justly with him? Didn't they kind of defang him? Didn't they give his power to another, embarrassing them both?

Or you have the monsignor in St. Patrick Cathedral who denied a wedding to a young man who has AIDS. Or you have the diocese of California which in preparation for the pope's visit decided to sell off television time, much to the horror of everybody because news is supposed to be unbiased and free, not sold.

You have those who may have been hurt by the laws on divorce and remarriage. Or the headline grabbers: John Paul v. Hans Küng. Charles Curran, in Washington, D.C., arm-wrestling with Cardinal Ratzinger of the Vatican. This is the church that spawned Andy Greeley and Phil Donahue, Mother Teresa and, believe it or not, Madonna.

Or there are the news stories we hear about priests, stories that make some people angry or hostile. Any time you hear some gossip or bad news about a priest, then it is elevated to the entire Roman Catholic church.

I remember a story of Dorothy Day who had just attended Mass with a friend in New York. The priest was indeed a very poor liturgist. He had no sense of reverence, and his sermon was extraordinarily boring.

It was just a terrible experience. On the way home the friend was wondering how Dorothy Day would react. After walking a bit in silence, Dorothy Day simply said, "If the church can survive priests like that, it just goes to prove that God must be with it."

I remember one of my own experiences in the last parish I was in (and you know how it is sometimes, those of you who teach or do any kind of public thing). This one Sunday everything that you could possibly imagine went wrong: the organist didn't show up, the lector was poor, the homily was terrible. The whole liturgy was a terrible disaster, just one of those bad days that we all have. And after the liturgy, as is the custom, I stood out in front of the church and hoped that I wouldn't get pillaged as the people went by. This one lady was known for her charity, and when I saw her coming, I said to myself, "If she says one nice thing about that liturgy, I'll know she's insincere." So she came up to me and shook my hand and she said, "Father, your vestments are beautiful."

So when we talk about the church being our enemy, we always tend to think of the pope and the bishops and the priests and even Monsignors. But the fact is they are only a very insignificant and numerically small part of the church. Because after all, we are the church, all of us who are a part of it. And sometimes we give poor examples. Sometimes after looking at us and our behavior, people say: "Well, if that's what Catholicism is about, I want no part of it."

And yet, on the other hand, what we have to remember is this: with all of our too human faults, which popes and priests and every other member of God's church have, there is always something more than meets the eye. In spite of family faults (like our own families), there is a presence, and there is a reality, and there is a bonding, and there is love.

What I'm saying is that for all of the humanness and mistakes and even sinfulness of those of us who are the church, we always have to have confidence that the bottom-line reality is Jesus Christ. That he works his grace through us individually and collectively, imperfect and fractured as we are. There is a grace and there is a spirit that just are above us all.

Let me close by sharing with you a letter I got. The man's name is just Charles. I won't give you his last name. Apparently he came here on Christmas Eve, dropped in, and about a month later he sent me this letter. He says:

Dear Father Bausch:

Strange letter, but I'm an infidel, really Unitarian, who just happened to wander by your church on Christmas Evening at the request of a lonely Catholic widow who wished to pay her respects to God and her late-departed while being bolstered by some companionship en route. So I acted out the part, with doubts beforehand. You see, I had attended a Catholic Midnight Mass in my youth with another, younger lass, and had jumbled, rather distasteful

memories of high ritual, babblings in Latin, great ceremony, and very little in which I felt the slightest understanding or empathy.

And then came Christmas Evening at St. Mary's with what was billed a "folk Mass," a very human and direct sermon by Father Bausch sans mumbo-jumbo, with several allusions that brought a smile to my face and an unexpected lump to my throat. A batch of kids and not-quite-kids singing carols and psalms with evident joy and an extraordinary degree of sincere professionalism, with guitars and such for the background instead of a ponderous but uninspiring organ. And even the responsive prayers were simple, understandable, all in English, and obviously felt from both the lectern and the congregation. Strange--very strange.

On the evening of Christmas, 1986, a cynic, a man with a good scientific education and a very dim view of the future of homo sapiens, felt a resurgency of hope for the future of his children and a transient hope for the existence of a benign God, both snippets of wishful thinking effectively diminished by the front pages of the 1987 issues of The New York Times, as that venerable paper reported the mendacity of the leaders in government of the United States of America.

Although I don't believe (at least nowadays) in either God, or the so-called sanctity of my country, and therefore am undoubtedly an intellectual rogue, I want to thank you for that service and that hour. If there were many more of the same, and some substantial Vatican support in favor of this century's children, the status and future of the Catholic church and the efforts towards world peace would probably be far different than they appear to me today. My compliments and my respect.

You needn't bother answering this letter, really. I wrote it because I wanted to and hoped it would make a bright spot in your day. Besides, you're busy, and I'm incorrigible.

Thank you again,

Charles

Now he didn't have to write that. But you see it relates directly to what I've been saying: even though he came at Midnight Mass (or 10:30 Mass, or whenever it was), and even though the church was filled with imperfect people such as you and I are, he sensed something more than the sum total of our togetherness. He sensed spirit, prayer. Here's a cynic, an unbeliever, who has to confess that he was moved by the collective witness of the church, as imperfect as we are.

Though he said I needn't bother to answer his letter, I finally did, and I'd just like to read my reply and let it go at that:

Dear Charles:

As a sometimes infidel myself (faith's other side is doubt), I knew that, as you suggested, I needn't bother answering your letter. Then why do I find myself, exactly one month later, doing so? Many reasons, I guess.

First, I was moved by your charity to that lonely widow, charity that led you both to a Catholic church, something your instincts would not normally allow.

Second, I was moved by your being moved by words, children, joy, and mostly, I would guess, the boldness of a gathered people who would dare rejoice even while aware of notices of betrayal in high places, both church and state; and a bomb ever over our collective heads.

Finally, I was moved by your very act of communicating your presence and your feelings. Slowly, I began to feel like Graham Greene's Monsignor Quixote, strangely drawn to his communist friend, Sancho.

And interestingly enough, there were, unknown to you, others like you in that gathering-- and in our gatherings every weekend. Some of our choir are not Catholic. Some of our lectors have known the pain of divorce. Some are recovered cynics. Some are singles, like myself, who have found family. And some are just fellow journeyers who have come to the conclusion that if they do not know where the answer is, they know where it's not.

Not in technology alone, nor in the latest revolution, and certainly not in the salvations hawked by the media. Rather they sense that more of an answer, if there is one, will more likely be found in community, in caring, in celebrating; and for us that means gathering around the ancient wisdom of one who died for what he believed in.

Anyway, I'm taking the liberty, not knowing your tastes or journey, of sending you what I think might be an interesting book. You can return it read or unread. Meanwhile, you're an interesting fellow pilgrim. You comfort and tantalize at the same time. Something's moving in your life. Follow it. You have my wishes, and more than that, my love and prayers.

Father William Bausch

So here we are: the church of Jesus Christ. At times we are friendly, at times we are hostile. But still, we love each other.

The church: our mother, our friend, and our enemy.

*(In September 1986, after Vatican inquiries into his positions on matters such as homosexuality and abortion, Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle was directed to turn over some of his authority to an auxiliary bishop.)