

Pentecost X

Dearly beloved,

The Gospel for today brings forward the perennial question which Our Holy Father has made a point of asking many times in his pontificate, Who is a Pharisee? The Pharisees of Our Lord's time were a class of Jews, careful adherents to the law of Moses, political rebels hoping for the overthrow of the Roman government. Jesus often upbraided them for two things: they added to the Mosaic Law when it suited their interests though it often led to omitting actual items of the Law itself, and they ostracized all who did not adhere to their opinions and practice. Thus the elect were to be found among the Pharisees' sect and nowhere else.

The publican, in contrast, was in essence a public sinner. They collected taxes from Jews on behalf of the Roman government, and often used their position to make themselves wealthy, charging the Jews more than was actually due. Though most publicans were Jews, they were considered enemies of their own people and were ostracized by their fellow Jews as much as Roman law allowed, pushed to the fringes of society.

Whom does Pope Francis consider to be the Pharisee and the publican in today's world? The Pharisee is the one who has a moral system in place and operates only within that moral system, not making reasonable exceptions and extending mercy only to the pure according to such standards. Because of this, they also hate those who extend mercy to others and forget that the most practical way to help a sinner is to associate with them in the same way that Christ did when he walked the earth. Oftentimes they live according to fear: fear that if the status quo is overturned, the security they feel in their religion will be lost.

The publican, in contrast, is anyone who finds himself shut out from the Church due to some visible social sin in his life: usually the Pope points to those with marital irregularities such as divorce and remarriage or cohabitation, or to those with homosexual tendencies.

His point is that Pharisees, whether of Our Lord's time or of today, construct a religious system so they can have clear standards of right and wrong and then believe that by doing the right things, one is saved. Thus the moral life is based solely on externals and it has a Pelagian flavor to it: one man saves himself by doing the right things; another man condemns himself by doing the wrong things; the grace of God does not even enter into the question. As St. Augustine says, "In all the Pharisee's words seek out for any one thing that he asked of God, and you will find nothing. He went up to pray: he had no mind to pray to God, but to laud himself. ... More than this he even mocked him that did pray... Let now those ungodly babblers, whosoever they be, who presume on their own strength, let them hear and see these things: let them hear who say, God made me a man, I make myself just."

Pope Francis has tried to further his point by making comments that seem to encourage relativism; saying that we cannot judge exteriors. In July of 2013, he famously said, "When I meet a gay person, I have to distinguish between their being gay and being part of a lobby. If they accept the Lord and have goodwill, who am I to judge them? They shouldn't be marginalized. The tendency (to homosexuality) is not the problem." If you heard this reported in the media, you, like me, perhaps only heard a condensed

version, which amounted to “If they accept the Lord and have goodwill, who I am to judge a gay person?” The statement is more nuanced than that, but still is problematic.

He first says that we must distinguish between a gay person and the gay lobby, and that is a very good point. In this very town, there are some who are gay and live that life quietly, and there are some who are part of a vociferous party that strives for social change. They must be treated differently; the one should be kindly received and then spoken to about the truth; the other should be challenged in the public sphere and not allowed to make a mockery of Christ or His Church. It is parallel to someone who struggles with the vice of pornography and someone who promotes and disseminates it. We must make distinctions; it is the mark of error that it simplifies the truth and allows for no nuances or difficulties, whereas truth is open to the full spectrum of reality, and where human morality is concerned, there is much at play.

The Pope goes on to say that if a gay person accepts the Lord and has goodwill, it is not his job to judge him. This is also true, if judge is properly understood. We cannot judge the interior life of a person because we usually have no knowledge of their motivations, and almost always we have no knowledge of how their past has shaped their present. Sexual vice and perversion often has its root in emotional abuse and neglect suffered during childhood and adolescence, and so all the more we cannot put together the reasons why a person is drawn toward disordered sexuality, as it is too complex to explain and becomes part of the nexus that St. Paul speaks when he says in Romans, “That which I wish, that I do not do, but that which I wish not, that I do.”

But we should also ask, What does it mean for a person to accept the Lord and have goodwill? In his excellent book on sexual virtue, Paul Gondreau, professor of theology at Providence College, makes the point that many young men in college are not struggling with incontinence; rather, they are simply unchaste. They have no intention to live an upright moral life in regard to sexuality, and so they should not be considered as repentant sinners. We do have a right and even a duty to judge such behavior as destructive of both individuals and society. Promiscuity of whatever variety never serves the person or the common good.

And thus to accept the Lord must mean to turn from sin; to have goodwill must mean openness to the truth about human nature and the change of life that truth asks of us. Just as we make the distinction between a repentant sinner who struggles to overcome his habitual sin and a man who has no intention to change, so can we speak of gay persons who accept the Lord and His call to conversion, even if they still fall into sin, and those who consider their tendencies and actions inherently good and thus pleasing to God. Thus to say, “God made you like this...God loves you like this” not only goes against the best studies on the origin of homosexual tendencies—it is most certainly nurture that produces it, and not nature—it also elevates human tendencies to a divine level, for they are all good. If human sexuality has no purpose and no boundaries to its expression, it is meaningless; the only thing that is open to all determinations is prime matter, and that has no existence of itself.

This, then, is the theory that underlies the Church’s teaching on human sexuality, which is nothing more than the careful consideration of the way God made the human being and the truths that flow from his nature as both rational and animal. Besides adhering to these truths and prayerfully pondering them, being ready to share them with those who have ears to hear, what else can we do? There are two very practical things I will mention, but first it must be said that Pope Francis’ call against marginalization is

harder than he makes it seem. It is a worthy notion to have as much social interaction as possible with active homosexuals, for conversion almost always happens through human contact and expressions of kindness and charity. But if they are open about their lifestyle, it is an agent of corruption for society. Just as we would not interface with other sinners who tell us openly of their vices, so it is not as simple as living side by side with those who wish to make their lifestyle known to all. The only way it works, it seems, is if we say up front that we disapprove of their way of life, but we wish to be their friends for the love of God and to save their souls. If such honesty is well received, God be praised. But in most cases it seems such words would be badly taken.

So since social marginalization is often the prudent and the most practical response given the circumstances, our action lies in the realm of prayer. First of all, prayer for the sinner. St. Francis de Sales, in commenting on today's Gospel, praises the publican for his prayer and recommends the frequent use of short prayers imitating his prayer, asking for mercy. We can make these prayers not only for ourselves, but also for others. Therefore when we see couples in public, we should pray for them as soon as we see them. Let us stop what we are doing, quiet our other thoughts, and pray. Lord, have mercy on them. Though we may have to avoid such persons in our social behavior to protect our children or avoid the impression that we approve of their lifestyle, still we will not be ostracizing them in the spiritual realm, for we will be asking God's mercy and favor upon them. And when we return home, we can have a Mass said for them, or make a spiritual Communion for them, or fast one day for their conversion. The Pharisee loathes the sinner and wishes to be rid of him; the Christian sees him as a person in need of mercy just as he himself needs God's mercy.

The second thing we can do again is pray for courageous men and women to preach to the sinners. In the epistle for today, St. Paul speaks of the many gifts the Spirit gives to the Church. Today we need good souls, laity and clergy alike, who are given a charism to minister to practicing homosexuals, and so we should pray that the Lord would send laborers into His harvest, especially invoking the Sacred Heart. Of the promises Our Lord made known to St. Margaret Mary, the tenth is that to priests who are devoted to the Heart of Jesus, He will grant the power of touching the most hardened hearts. And the way for touching such hearts is often made possible by the work of the laity, who gently but firmly share the truth with those they meet at work and in the world. Let us pray for the Holy Spirit to strengthen some hearts to take on this work, and beg God to raise up priests to perfect it; for these prayers are the utmost expression of charity towards sinners. Again, the Pharisee wants that some people be wholly excluded from mercy, for their sins are too great or foul; the Christian realizes that were it not for the grace of God and His Providence, I too could be weighed down by the same confusion and immorality.

And so, on this tenth Sunday after Pentecost, may the Lord, the creator of human nature and the bestower of the grace that elevates and perfects that nature, wounded by original sin, may the Lord give us strength to continue to pursue the truth in charity. During this Mass, let us ask His grace especially upon hardened sinners, and also upon those who strive to follow the Church's teachings even though it means a great deal of loneliness and heartbreak for them. May the Lord, through our prayers and sacrifices, console them interiorly and grant them the strength to persevere and thus gain a glorious crown, that all of us, at the end of time, may rejoice to look together upon the face of Christ, and be filled with His love and mercy unto the ages of ages.