

## **4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Cycle C, 2.3.19

Jeremiah 1:4-5,17-19/1Corinthians 12:31-13:13/Luke 4:21-30

### **SEEING THROUGH THE LENS OF LOVE**



Last Thursday, January 24<sup>th</sup>, was the feast of St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), the patron of my religious congregation, the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales. St. Francis has been named the Patron of Writers and Journalists. Throughout his ministry as a bishop he wrote several spiritual books and thousands of letters of advice and spiritual guidance to people. In the sixteenth century he would have written with a quill pen – a long feather with a sharpened point which he would have to dip in ink after every few words he wrote. His letters were thoughtful and took time to write. If he were alive today, I'd invoke St. Francis to be the Patron Saint of Twitters and Tweets, of Snapchat and Facebook.



Our modern modes of communication could use a saintly patron to prevent some of the misuse and abuse of those media. Unlike St. Francis' thoughtful and carefully written letters, our modern-day writing of

minimum characters is sent out hastily and often carelessly, without much forethought or consideration of their impact on others.

A couple weeks ago millions saw a Facebook video recorded in front of the Lincoln Memorial that went viral and sparked a torrent of online commentary. A group of Catholic school students from Covington Catholic High in Kentucky, wearing MAGA baseball caps, got caught in the crossfire of controversy. These students were in Washington, D.C. for the national March-for-Life to demonstrate their support for life of the unborn. That event coincided with the Indigenous Peoples March. Also, present was a small group of African American men affiliated with the Black Hebrew Israelites, black-nationalist street preachers who are a fixture at many large D.C. gatherings and who espouse many racist, homophobic, and bigoted views.

What people saw—or didn't see—and how they responded is part and parcel of fierce national debates over privilege, race, and identity. Tensions were running high that day in the nation's Capital between a radical group of Hebrew Israelites and the Covington students, when Nathan Phillips, a native American elder from the Omaha tribe, tried to get in between the students and the other group to diffuse the tension, drumming and chanting a native prayer song. A one-minute video clip of the encounter between the group of students and the native American elder, whom they surrounded and seemed to mimic and mock, went viral. It's telling that the word "viral" is the same root as *virus*, a poison that can quickly spread.



Media was immediately filled with early and incomplete reports, each side pointing fingers, giving their own accounts about feeling victimized and misunderstood. The next day, as fuller reports emerged with lengthier video footage of the clashes, apologies were issued by news channels and reporters.

Even Fr. James Martin, a well-respected Catholic commentator tweeted: *Dear friends: I regret wading into the Covington controversy this weekend. For it seems that we may never know what was going on inside the hearts of the students. So I would like to apologize to them for my judgment of them.* Rash or harsh judgement of others, that emotional response, felt or spoken without thinking, is something that we can all be guilty of at times. In today's gospel we observe the scene of Jesus' own hometown people judging him so harshly that they were ready to throw him off a cliff.



When we're feeling attacked or getting defensive, we can assume the worst about another person. Our thinking is cloudy or shallow and our vision of what is

true is incomplete. In his book the "Introduction to the Devout Life," a manual for authentic Christian living, St. Francis de Sales writes about Rash Judgment (Part 3, #28). He insists that we have to correct our rash judgments, and the causes are different for each person. He suggests that some hearts are bitter and harsh by nature; everything turns bitter under their touch. People like this should seek some wise spiritual guide, because this bitterness being natural to them, is hard to conquer. St. Francis says this is more of a personality flaw than a sin, but still it is very dangerous, because it gives rise to and fosters rash judgments and slander within the heart.

Others, he suggests, are guilty of rash judgments less out of a bitter spirit than from pride. They think that by disparaging others they make themselves look better. These are self-sufficient, presumptuous people, who think so highly of themselves that they despise everybody else as mean and worthless. Others take a little satisfaction in looking at what is wrong in others, in order to appreciate more fully what they believe to be their own superiority. It's a subtle flaw which a person can't easily recognize and needs to have it pointed out to him or her.

St. Francis observes that there are some who seek to excuse and justify themselves to their own conscience by assuming that others are guilty of the same faults. They think: *"Everybody else is doing it or saying it, so it's not so bad."* Others, again, give way to rash judgments merely because they just like to take people apart. St. Francis says: *"If by ill luck they every now and then happen to be right, their presumption and love of criticism strengthens almost incurably."*

You and I are complex creatures and our motivations and reactions are complicated. So, what can help us to be more aware of our own words and actions and less critical, less judgmental of others, especially in our twitters and tweets? our Instagram world of viral videos and Snapchat comments about others?



St. Paul offers us the best solution – he calls it the greatest gift of all. It's simply LOVE. But love isn't so simple, is it? It's challenging and demanding. St. Paul's list is inspiring, but it's daunting. Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn't want what it doesn't have. Love doesn't strut, doesn't have a swelled head, doesn't force itself on others, isn't always "me first," doesn't fly off the handle, doesn't keep score of the sins of others, doesn't revel when others grovel. Instead, love takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end.

Last year on the Feast of St. Francis de Sales, Pope Francis, who promotes what he has called a "Culture of Encounter" as he travels around the world to meet and dialogue with people of all cultures and every walk of life, said this about our contemporary style of communication: *A particular problem today is reporting about tragedies and human suffering in a way that almost turns the story into entertainment. What is needed is an open and creative style*

*of communication that never seeks to glamorize evil but instead to concentrate on solutions and to inspire a positive and responsible approach on the part of all our communication."*

May the teaching and example of St. Francis de Sales and Pope Francis inspire us to...

Look at the world through the eyes of **faith**—believing that there is good in the world...

Look at others with the eyes of **hope** – trusting that there is good in every human heart...

Look at yourself through the eyes of **love** – finding Jesus dwelling in your heart and in the hearts of all you encounter.



*John Kasper, OSFS*