



Some reflections inspired by online copyrighted commentaries and homilies

February 19, 2023

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

"You have heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust." *Matthew 5:43–45*

Nowhere in the Old Testament does it say that we should hate our enemies. Note that Jesus did not say "It has been written..." Instead, He says, "You have heard that it was said..." So, who said this? Some traditions among the scribes and Pharisees held this erroneous belief. Because some held that position, Jesus addressed it. In this passage and in many others, Jesus calls us to a new depth of love that many thought impossible. In fact, even Jesus Himself acknowledged the height of His teaching when, at the conclusion of this passage, He says, "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect." Too often in life we settle for everything other than perfection. And though we may never achieve that level of holiness in this life, it must be our constant goal. In regard to our "enemies," perfect love for them must become our daily mission.

Who is your "enemy?" Though Jesus does not define this for us, we should consider it to be anyone with whom there is some form of tension or discord. Perhaps there is someone who hates or dislikes you and speaks ill of you or treats you poorly. Or perhaps there is someone whom you dislike and find yourself angry at or even judgmental toward. We begin by trying to identify anyone with whom you have a lack of perfect affection. In truth, there might be many more people on that list than on the list of those you "love. Once you identify those who fall into the category of enemy to one extent or another, consider whether you love them. One Church Father says that we love our enemy "when we are not sorrowful at their success or rejoice when they fall." This is a very helpful definition to consider. Ultimately, this is the definition of envy.

If someone whom you dislike succeeds in something praiseworthy, how do you react interiorly? If there is an immediate intuitive reaction or if you find yourself trying to figure out why they should be congratulated, then you might struggle with this sin. Or consider what you think, say, or feel if you hear that someone you dislike has some problem, gets into some trouble, or encounters some misfortune. The ideal response is empathy and a desire for their well-being. If this is not the response within you, then pay attention to that.

Jesus concludes His teaching by saying that His Father "makes his sun rise on the bad and the good and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust." In other words, God bestows His perfect love and mercy upon everyone equally, good and bad. The only difference is that some people choose to accept that mercy and others reject it. As for ourselves, just like our loving God, we must offer love and mercy to everyone equally and as completely as we can. And though some may reject that love, just as they reject the love of God, it must always be offered and never rescinded. This is love of neighbor and love of our enemies as well.

We are challenged to reflect today, upon those with whom you struggle to love to perfection. Perhaps that list is long. Start with those you encounter most often or those to whom you have a strong negative reaction. As you call them to mind, pray for them, for their good and for God's blessings upon them. Try to see some goodness in them. Try to thank God for them and try to remove any disordered feelings or thoughts you might have about them. This is the first step in your mission to fulfill Jesus' new command of Love.

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