

On Sober Hope and Political Action

October 23, 2016
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By Rev. Michael McCarthy, S.J.

Readings: Sirach 35.12-14, 16-18; 2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18;
Luke 18.9-14

On the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we Americans find ourselves on the eve of a national election. Most pundits acknowledge there has been nothing ordinary about this particular cycle, and congregations across the political spectrum are liable to arrive at church this day tired of the campaigns and maybe even depressed.

Even those looking for triumph on November 8 can acknowledge what seem to be new lows in American politics. As we help our fellow Catholics form their consciences to exercise faithful citizenship, we must do so with a unique sensitivity. At this particular moment ministers of the gospel need to sow hope among a population whose affective state has frequently been dominated by fear, outrage, condemnation, and the temptation to despair. Our spirit must be different.

Fortunately, in today's gospel Jesus offers us an image that should give us a sober hope: the tax collector. Such hope derives not from any sense of triumph but from our real experience of God's mercy.

An Image of Sober Hope: The Tax Collector

Because the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector is such a good story, it is easy to miss the first line of this gospel passage from Luke. Jesus, we are told, directs this parable to a particular group, namely, "those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else." Even in 2016, for those of us hearing this gospel there is something of a trap here. Who is convinced of their own righteousness and tends to look down on others? Well, friend, that's you and me.

The logic of this gospel exposes us to the ubiquity of self-righteousness. Once in a theological debate among a group of very good people, I heard one party tell the other, "You are like that Pharisee who stands at the front of the temple trumpeting his own virtue and condemning the tax collector behind him." Of course, in leveling the accusation, the speaker was in fact convicting himself of the very attitudes Jesus was warning against. Nor (I am sorry to say) am I exempt from the subtle and pervasive reality of being so convinced of my own righteousness that, in the hidden and quiet places of my heart, I can look down on others, dismiss them, forget their basic goodness. Moreover, I am also not sure how many of my fellow citizens in our highly divided nation can claim total innocence in this regard.

The alternative Jesus presents does not require of us either self-loathing or the refusal to take a stand in a debate. Rather, it calls us to remember the priority of grace. We can imagine, for instance, that the Pharisee might have given more credit to God's mercy, which allowed him to pursue a virtuous life. He may still have thanked God for the same qualities he mentioned. A more profound awareness of God's grace, moreover, together with less self-congratulation, would have made him a very different man. A man with a more capacious conscience; a man who would not be personally capable of dismissing the tax collector as the Pharisee in our gospel did.

It is in the tax collector, after all, that we all have an image of sober hope. As a member of a most despised profession, he knew what a sinner he was. Nor could he ever forget it. Presumably he felt deep sorrow and compunction. The beating of his breast is not a show, and his sense of unworthiness even to lift up his eyes must be real. But when Jesus says that he went home justified, I suspect it was because the tax collector's prayer centered on God, not himself.

Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and tax collector suggests that the French essayist Charles Péguy was right when he wrote that "the sinner is at the very heart of Christianity." Pope Francis seemed to be aware of this insight when he was asked in an early interview who he was. Adverting to Matthew the tax collector, the pope replied: "I am a sinner upon whom the Lord has turned his gaze."

Examination of Conscience

The history of Christian spirituality continually reflects on the importance of knowing our sins, but often what Catholics call the "examination of conscience" amounts to a checklist of what we have done right and what we have done wrong, so that we can go to confession. Such a practice is important, but we have great examples that suggest we are called to be more than spiritual accountants. The seventh-century ascetic St. Isaac of Nineveh noted that "one who knows his sins is greater than one who raises a corpse to life."

Why should there be such emphasis paid on knowing ourselves as sinners? Because in knowing ourselves as sinners we come to know God, who turns his merciful gaze on us and loves us. We know this merciful God as we come to know ourselves, and we know ourselves as we come to know this merciful God. There is a great mystery here.

Most profoundly, the Christian tradition does not regard repentance as a matter of seeking acquittal from our guilt, so that we may then know God. Rather, knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves happens simultaneously. In other words, in approaching God in humility, we come to know the one St. Augustine called "more intimate to me than I am to myself."

In their publication on "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," therefore, the bishops of the United States rightly characterize conscience as "the voice of God resounding in the human heart." In the surprising economy of grace, the humbled heart knows mercy, who is God, so that "the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18.14).

The USCCB document does an excellent job of outlining principles that Catholics and people of good will would do well to employ as they face their civic duty to vote. Perhaps most importantly, the bishops offer a rationale for Catholic citizens to enact their faith in the public sphere. They discuss key tenets from Catholic social teaching, including the primacy of regard for the dignity of the human person, the practice of subsidiarity, the concern for the common good, and the commitment to solidarity.

Throughout the document the bishops raise a wide range of concerns that should be especially important to Catholics – on issues of life, family, economy, race, religious liberty, world migration, and others. Many of these issues could be discussed in relation to key themes in this Sunday's readings. The first reading, for instance, reminds us that "the Lord is not deaf to the wail of the orphan nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint." The prayer of the most vulnerable – whether the unborn or the immigrant – "pierces the clouds" – and the refrain from Psalm 34 reaffirms that "the Lord hears the cry of the poor."

Many Catholics who will be entering the polls within a couple of weeks, however, will find themselves in a complex situation. While their faith commitments may be clear and their consciences well formed, how they may exercise the virtue of prudence may be far from clear. The bishops quote the Catechism when they describe prudence as enabling us "'to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it' (CCC 1806). Prudence shapes and informs our ability to deliberate over available alternatives, to determine what is most fitting to a specific context, and to act decisively."

Perhaps more than at other moments in history, choosing the “true good” may be especially difficult now. Ministers of the gospel would do well to admit that, to honor the freedom of the faithful to carry this burden, and respectfully to encourage them.

An Image of Sober Political Action: Augustine’s Judge

An image from Augustine may be of some use. In book 19 of his *City of God*, Augustine discusses the dangers of social life in the human city, and he notes how fallible human judgment often is when deliberating over hard cases. He gives the example of a judge who sits over a trial and must act, even though all the facts are uncertain. Augustine asks:

In view of this darkness that attends the life of human society, will our wise man take his seat at the judge’s bench, or will he not have the heart to do so? Obviously he will sit; for the claims of human society constrain him and draw him to this duty; and it is unthinkable to him that he should shirk it.

The judge, like all Christians acting out their civic duty, exercises prudence in conditions that are hardly ideal. He is constrained by necessities that he himself may hate, and yet he must act and take responsibility for action. Augustine asserts that a mature Christian in public life must sometimes, out of constraint, surrender the idealized portraits of social order that the Roman Empire is famous for. Rather, he is mature “when he hates that necessity in his own action and when, if he has the wisdom of devotion, he cries out to God ‘Deliver me from my necessities’” (cf. Ps. 25.17).

Salvation from sin, whether from our own personal sinfulness or from more collective sinfulness, comes from the Lord. As Paul acknowledges in today’s second reading, it is only the Lord who is the just judge. Only when he returns can we know fully what righteousness is. In the meantime we find ourselves in sweaty competition, running the race, as Paul did, and keeping the faith as best we can. We trust in a merciful God to bring us safely to his kingdom. “To him be glory forever and ever. Amen” (2 Tm 4.18).

About the Author

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FOR FURTHER READING

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##1803-1845, available at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/

Rev. John A. Hardon, S.J., “Examination of Conscience,” available at: <http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/>

“The Pharisee and the Tax Collector,” available at: <http://www.cuf.org/2007/10/>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship,” available at: <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/faithful-citizenship/>

IN SHORT . . .

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- ***The alternative Jesus presents does not require either self-loathing or the refusal to take a stand in a debate, but instead calls us to remember the priority of grace.***
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- ***While our faith commitments may be clear and our consciences well formed, how we exercise the virtue of prudence may be far from clear.***
- ***“Prudence shapes and informs our ability to deliberate over available alternatives, to determine what is most fitting to a specific context, and to act decisively.”***
- ***Only when the Lord returns can we know fully what righteousness is, and in the meantime we keep the faith as best we can and trust in God to bring us safely to his kingdom.***