

On the Divisiveness of Christianity

August 14, 2016
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Jeremiah 38.4-6, 8-10;
Hebrews 12.1-4;
Luke 12.49-53

By Rev. James V. Schall, S.J.

Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? I assure you the contrary is true; I have come for division. – Luke 12.51

The very structure of the World Empire seems to bring with it, as a kind of negative opportunity, the likelihood that the public position of the Church will change, as though by an automatic redirection of current. The possibility of penetrating and moulding public orders from the spiritual sphere will cease to exist; but a coercive power at the highest level of intensity, and not restricted by any bonds of intensity, will confront the Church in her role of ecclesia martyrum. – Josef Pieper, The End of Time (1980)

In chapter 38 of Jeremiah, the prophet warns the people what evils can befall them if they remain in Jerusalem. They are told to flee to the Chaldeans where they will be protected. For bringing this inconvenient instruction to abandon the city, Jeremiah is accused of being a traitor worthy of death. They capture and lower him in a muddy cistern for that purpose. But, later, he is let out by a Cushite on orders of the king, who had second thoughts. It might be wiser to obey the Lord than men.

This passage about the persecution of prophets by the chosen people is often recalled in scripture as the classic example of what happens at the hands of men to the faithful followers of the Lord's commands. Thus, we read in Luke (11.50-51): "The wisdom of God has said: 'I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of these they will persecute and kill; so this generation will have to account for the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world. Their guilt stretches from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who met his death between the altar and the sanctuary.'"

The lesson is sobering and counterintuitive. It implies that, when the good news arrives, it will not be accepted by many, especially not by the powerful or by those in office. Indeed, those who maintain and bring the good news will be persecuted because it is not the news that people want to hear. Still, we know that, later on, some kings, chancellors, rich men and women do become saints.

We like to think, no doubt, that, if we are "nice," if we are good people minding our own business, helping out when we can, then everyone will love us and we will prosper. The Church is a place of love, mercy, peace, even a sanctuary. The better we are, the more people will flock to us and like us. "See how they love one another." It is not just a question of good manners, but of genuine goodness.

The trouble with this view is that both experience and scripture give us little reason to think that this happy picture will be the reality. The thief, in a famous quip, when asked why he robbed in the prosperous part of town, replied, "Because that is where the money is." Behind any decent public society lies some degree of careful coercion to provide protection and to prevent injustices.

The Cost of Peace and Joy

In the gospels, we are often told that the world will hate us, even that there will be dissention in our own families over what Christ tells us. Both in scripture and in history, the good who follow Christ often provoke hatred, not kindness. No one likes to admit it, but truth and goodness in fact cause dissention and opposition. “Why is this so?” we wonder. Few, including often our religious leaders, talk to us about this reaction.

In Hebrews (12.1-4), we are said to be “surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.” This “cloud” refers to those who are already with God, the saints of every sort. To be with them ourselves, we must now “put aside every encumbrance of sin.” We are to look at Jesus. He suffered the shameful Cross “for the joy that lay before him.” He endured “the oppression of sinners.” But we are not to be “despondent” because of the struggle. In our “fight against sin, we have not resisted to the point of shedding blood.”

This passage is a striking reminder of something central to Christianity. The “joy” of the “cloud of witnesses” has to do with their not sinning. And the effort not to sin can cost us our lives. Here, peace and joy are gained only at a cost, at how we deal with our sins. This is a topic that we often avoid discussing or describing. But we do give “reasons” why we did what we should not have done and know that we should not have. We invent theories explaining why there is no order in the world, in order to justify what we do as all right.

In the First Letter of John, we read: “No need, then, brothers, to be surprised if the world hates you” (3.13). Yet, we are surprised. When we read the words – “Do you think that I have come to establish peace on earth?” – most of us would say, “Well, yes, that is what we did think.” The text goes on: “I assure you that the contrary is true: I have come for division.” This passage, among others, makes it quite clear Christ does not fit his directives to our sentiments but to the abiding truth of what he is sent to proclaim among us. If it is not received, so be it. The lesson is not that we should modify what Christ says so that we will not be hated, or that we can agree with those who deny the truth of what Christ stands for.

“I Have Come for Division”

What are these divisions that Christ’s Word causes when it is made known among the nations? In John, we read: “The world is incapable of hating you, but it does hate me because of the evidence I bring against it that what it does is evil” (7.7). It is not that John does not also tell us that God loves us, that forgiveness and repentance are possible. But this love and forgiveness have a definite content. Most sins are committed under the aura of love. Many things that we do make love impossible. These things are listed in the Commandments, in the experience of man. The endeavor to make the things we do that are contrary to the Commandments to be good is what we see aggressively taking place in our time. As such, it is the work of the devil, not Christ.

In the beginning, I cited a passage from Josef Pieper’s *The End of Time*. In it, he speaks of a time when we are no longer able to speak of the things Christ warned us about in public. We are already in that time. We cannot really speak frankly in public or in the schools of certain basic sins – divorce, abortion, euthanasia, infanticide, contraception, active gay life, pornography, and many other things. To do so is classified and enforced as “hate language.” We can hardly speak of the well-known consequences of many of these aberrations, their effect on health and well-being.

In this light, it is more than interesting that Christ, in John, tells us that the world will hate us because of the “evidence” that what it does is “evil” – no abstractions here. It is not as if somehow these practices, now become individual “rights” and public policy, have no evidence against them. It is that we refuse to accept the evidence. We insist on doing what is forbidden. If this is the case, we should not be surprised that Christ’s teachings bring division, not peace, among us. It could not be otherwise unless, as the world itself understands, we get rid of what Christ teaches by calling it evil.

Of course, to affirm as “right” what Christ forbids simply ends with greater human degradation now claimed to be a new “humanism.” The only rules and laws are those we provide for ourselves. We want them that way. One thing the world must not allow is the continued presence of Christ’s unsettling words among us. The “coercive power at the highest level,” as Pieper put it, will make us a world of martyrs.

If the experience of the Christian martyrs in the Middle East is any indication, only one thing needs to be added: they will not be recognized as martyrs, for to grant that would imply an order of good exists that the public order must itself recognize. This is why persecuted Christians are “victims” or enemies of modern “rights,” not martyrs. What the world hates most, what divides it most, is the distinction affirming that sin is sin. Those who are killed or persecuted for affirming it are martyrs, not victims who can be treated by public policy or private medicine as if what they stood for was meaningless.

About the Author

Fr. James Schall is a prolific author and professor emeritus of government at Georgetown University.

FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, Angelus (August 19, 2007), available at:

http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/angelus/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_ang_20070819.html

Rev. John Echert, “Not to Bring Peace,” available at:

<http://www.ewtn.com/v/experts/showmessage.asp?number=348740&Pg=&Pgnu=&recnu>

Rev. Reginald Martin, “Jesus Came to Divide?” Our Sunday Visitor (November 26, 2015), available at:

<https://www.osv.com/Magazines/TheCatholicAnswer>

Carl E. Olson, “The Purifying Fire of Dividing, Divine Love,” Catholic World Report (August 17, 2013), available at:

http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/2507/the_purifying_fire_of_dividing_divine_love.aspx

IN SHORT . . .

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- ***To affirm as “right” what Christ forbids simply ends with greater human degradation now claimed to be a new “humanism.”***
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