

## 23d SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (2009)

In last week's second reading we began a series of readings from the New Testament letter of St. James—the only writing we have from this apostle of Jesus. And even though this letter is rather short (only five chapters), James gives us a lot of food for spiritual and moral thought and reflection. Today's excerpt is a powerful example of that as he urges his fellow Christians to show no partiality to anyone at the expense of another. And his illustration is rather blunt—showing special favor to the man wearing gold rings and rich, fine clothing while looking with disdain at the poor one who is shabbily dressed. Perhaps St. James hits a little too close to home: how often have we seen someone on the street or in the checkout line at the store who looks or acts different from us and we think 'oh, one of those...'.

This passage and others from James and from many other books in the Bible remind us that God plays no favorites, that Jesus died and rose from the dead to redeem the entire human race (no one excluded). These passages, in turn, are crucial building blocks in the Church's teaching on social justice—a body of teaching to which Pope Benedict recently contributed in his new encyclical *Caritas in veritate* ("charity in truth"). I introduced this to you a few weeks ago; this reading from St. James is an opportunity to learn and reflect a little more about it.

First, a brief comment about this idea of 'social justice.' Some people may hear that phrase and start seeing red flags waving: "oh, there goes the Church again—sticking its nose into politics where it doesn't belong!" While some may indeed use that phrase to promote a certain political program or agenda, the Church is and must be about the business of teaching and preaching social justice—what Benedict XVI describes as 'the proclamation of the truth of Christ's love in society.' Jesus spoke so often and so clearly on the obligation to see and respond to the genuine needs of others that we simply cannot ignore those words. The Church is neither liberal nor conservative, neither Republican nor Democrat. Rather, the Church is simply the means by which Jesus proclaims and reaffirms the truth that he is and that he proclaimed. It's up to us, then, to know and live and witness to those truths and principles in our private and public discussions and debates.

Early on in his encyclical, the pope reminds us of one of the bedrock principles of Catholic moral and social teaching: 'the unconditional value of the human person.' And this means every person: born or unborn, young or old, healthy or terminally ill, male or female, native-born or immigrant—and every other classification you can imagine. That value, that dignity is inherent to every person because he or she is made in the image and likeness of God. 'Justice', therefore (in the pope's words), involves the 'recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples'; it 'prompts us to give the other what is 'his', what is due to him' precisely because of his personhood. Charity, on the other hand, is related to justice but in fact goes beyond justice; again from the Holy Father: "to love is to give, to offer what is 'mine' to the other". Charity is love given and received; it is love in action—given in a particular way to a particular person (or group of persons) in a particular circumstance. Charity (or love) is no mere warm-fuzzy or feeling of closeness—it is that which, by the grace of God, leads us to action, to 'getting our hands dirty' for the sake of someone else.

Pope Benedict goes on to mention some other general principles that shape Catholic social teaching. One is the idea of the common good. The virtues of justice and charity certainly lead us to promote the good of individuals, but there is also the good or the benefit and worth that comes from living in society—i.e. the common good. We are affected not only by the circumstances of our own personal lives, but also by those larger structures and realities that affect our families, communities, nations and the world overall. Catholic social teaching will therefore and necessarily contribute to responding to issues of war and peace, hunger and poverty, the sanctity of all human life, and the need to be careful stewards of the world God has given us. This is where the related principle of solidarity comes into play—'a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone.' This does not mean that you or I or any

one person can solve all problems or needs that exists—that, of course, is impossible. But it does mean that we are all part of the one family of God; we are all in this together and we are called—by those virtues of justice and charity—to do what we can.

Indeed, some issues of justice have to be handled to a large degree on the societal or national scale; for example, a nation's defense and tax policies. Some concerns, however, are best handled on a more local level. That is where the Catholic principle of subsidiarity comes into play—governments should help individuals and local communities as needed but without assuming total control. Individuals are better able to assume at least some level of responsibility for themselves and others; in the pope's words, "subsidiarity is the most effective antidote against any form of [an] all-encompassing welfare state."

These are just a few of the general principles of the Church's social teaching that Pope Benedict touches on in his encyclical. He also makes it clear that the Church is not in the business of pushing specific proposals in response to large-scale problems; "she does, however, have a mission of truth to accomplish." Regarding the current debates about health care reform, for example, the Catholic Church in this country strongly affirms the importance of access to quality and affordable health care for everyone. The Church also strongly opposes any attempt to in any way to require any federal funding of abortion or any other assaults against innocent human life that some may propose to include in these bills. But the Church will not propose a detailed plan for health care coverage nationwide. That's the task our elected representatives are charged with; that's what the current debates are all about, and we certainly have the right and the responsibility to inform ourselves and participate in that process.

Jesus in his teachings, St. James in his letter, the Church in her teachings make it crystal clear that a concern for and a response to the need of others is part and parcel of Catholic moral teaching—just as much as are her teachings on sexual morality and the right to life from conception to natural death. As the Holy Father says: "while the poor of the world continue knocking on the doors of the rich, the world of affluence runs the risk of no longer hearing those knocks on account of a conscience that can no longer distinguish what is human." God grant us the desire and the resolve to fully embrace that social teaching, that charity in truth ('caritas in veritate'), so that we may respond to the needs of others with that same charity in truth.