

February 17, 2019

Sixth Sunday in ordinary Time

Responsorial Psalm (#1): "Blessed the man who follows not the counsel of the wicked, nor walks in the path of sinners, nor sits in the company of the insolent"

*If Christ has not been raised in us, our faith is vain;
we are still in our sins*

From the beginning of the Jewish tradition in 2000 B.C. up through our own Christian tradition, we hear a constant drumbeat admonishing us "*to avoid the counsel of the wicked, of walking in the path of sinners, and of sitting in the company of the insolent.*" This is not just true of religion, it is throughout all human history - "*Look out, see them over there, see what they are doing! Avoid them, for they are wicked and must be destroyed!*"

Now I'm going to come in through the back door on this. I'm not going to talk about the wicked, I'm going to talk about the "just!" It's interesting, isn't it. The wicked - the sinner - the insolent - typically refer to the other person, the other group, the other religion, the other nation. And sometimes it's true, but as often as not, we have to admit as Pogo famously said, "*I have seen the enemy, and they is me!*"

I was led to this consideration when I read this past week a reflection by Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr titled, "***Jesus and the Cross: The Scapegoat Mechanism.***" This is what he says:

"The scapegoating ritual is described in Leviticus 6 of the Old Testament. On the 'Day of Atonement,' the high priest, Aaron, was instructed to symbolically lay all the sins of the people on one unfortunate goat, and the people would then beat the animal until it fled into the desert. It was a vivid symbolic act that helped to unite and free the children of Israel. Instead of owning their faults, this ritual allowed people to export them elsewhere—in this case onto an innocent animal.

"The image of the scapegoat powerfully mirrors the universal, but largely unconscious, human need to transfer our guilt onto something or someone else by singling that other out for unmerited negative treatment. French philosopher and historian René Girard (1923–2015) demonstrated that the scapegoat mechanism is foundational for the formation of most social groups and cultures. We need another group to be against to form our group! This pattern is seen in many facets of our society and our private, inner lives—so much so that we might call it '*the sin of the world*'.

"We humans largely hate or blame almost anything else rather than recognize our own weaknesses and negativity. '*She made me do it.*' '*He is guilty.*' '*He deserves it.*' '*They are the problem.*' '*They are evil*', and on and on. We seldom consciously know that we are scapegoating

or projecting. It's automatic, ingrained, and unconscious. As Jesus said, people literally '*do not know what they are doing.*' (Luke 23:34)

"Yet Jesus revealed the pattern two thousand years ago, '*When anyone kills you, they will think they are doing a holy duty for God.*' (Jn. 16:2) Jesus came precisely to '*take away*' our capacity to commit sin—by exposing the lie for all to see. Jesus stood as the fully innocent one who was condemned by the highest authorities of both “church and state” (Jerusalem and Rome), an act that should create healthy suspicion about how wrong even the highest powers of our time can be. Much of Christianity shames individuals for private sins while lauding public figures in spite of their pride, greed, gluttony, lying, killing, or narcissism. This is what Jesus exposes and defeats on the cross. He did not come to change God's mind about us, he came to change our minds about God—and about ourselves—and about where goodness and evil really lie." End of article.

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We in the Catholic Church are no different from anyone else. We too have a history of practicing scapegoating. I am referring specifically to the current issue of child abuse in the Church. There is a lot of blame going around for the failure of the bishops to report what was going on, a lot of it broadly implying that their failure to do so was all due to bad will and self-protection. In some cases that had to be true. But all of them - equally?

Attitudes and understanding about this issue have changed a lot over the past few decades. You know some of them, one being that pedophilia can be cured, the other now requiring religious superiors to report such instances to the local bishop.

I know of two Jesuits who got caught in this - one not knowing someone was doing this he was responsible for, and the other not reporting such to the local bishop which was not required then. They have both been removed from ministry.

I'm not talking about those who have committed these horrible crimes, or the bishops who did not report them. I'm not defending these two Jesuits, I'm talking about us - how quick we are to believe that all bishops and religious who didn't report was due to their bad will and their own self-protection - "*wanting to believe*" that their failure to report was due simply to their bad will and self-promotion.

I'm talking about us - you and "me". I've stood up here and done precisely that. What is it in us that makes us want to believe in their guilt, in anyone else's guilt. Rene Girard says it comes out of our unconscious, human need to transfer our guilt onto something or someone else. We largely hate or blame almost anyone or anything else rather than recognize our own weaknesses and negativity. Scapegoating - the sin that Jesus came to take away from the world.

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We may well ask ourselves:

Where am I doing this? Whom have I been scapegoating:

† in my family?

† among my associates and friends?

† in my government?

† in my Church?