

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle A
August 31, 2008

People all come at the world with different points of view, formed by all of our different experiences and vantage points of life. In today's Gospel passage from Matthew, Peter is approaching the prospect of Jesus' impending death from the vantage point of a disciple, and a friend. But Jesus says to Peter "get behind me Satan; you are thinking not as God does but as human beings do." On the surface, our Lord's statement might seem patently obvious: of course Peter is thinking as human beings do, he's a human being; sort of like telling a five-year old that he thinks like a child—I suppose he does. But in saying that, our Lord begins to make clear that there is a human mindset, and there is a divine mindset; a human vantage point from which we look at the world, and a divine vantage point from which God sees, and one of the things which we are challenged to do, as followers of Christ, is to shed the merely human way of seeing things and try instead to approach the world, as best we can, from God's way of looking at things. It's not hard to imagine Peter saying to Jesus after Jesus predicted his own death, "God forbid, Lord! No such thing shall ever happen to you." Consider how Peter would have viewed this death of Jesus. Jesus said that he would suffer greatly at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and the scribes, and then be killed. So it is first of all a death which is patently unfair: Jesus, the totally righteous man, put to death by men whom he has been revealing to be wholly unrighteous; Peter is understandably put off by the unfairness of it. Second, it would be a painful death. Peter is understandably empathetic: we don't like pain, we shouldn't like to see pain inflicted on others, especially those whom we care about. Third: if Jesus dies, he won't be there anymore with Peter and the others; his death would mean separation from each other. It would mean Peter losing his teacher and his friend; he, not surprisingly, isn't ready to say "good-bye" to Jesus. Fourth: it would end Jesus' ministry of teaching and preaching; Peter sees that there are still conversions which need to take place before the world has embraced the kingdom which Christ came to inaugurate. But Jesus bluntly challenges Peter to lose the human way of thinking—steeped in love and compassion and empathy though it was—and to adopt God's mindset instead.

Many of our actions and our decisions come down to making a cost/benefit analysis. I hate getting that little shot of Novocain at the dentist's—love the Novocain, actually, but I hate the pinch of that shot. But I can sure endure it more than I could having a tooth drilled on without it. So, I allow the lesser pain for the greater benefit. While Peter could only see the unfairness of such a death for Christ, the Father saw the gain for mankind:

the reconciliation it would effect. Peter envisioned the pain of the cross for Jesus: God saw the pains of hell awaiting man if he were never redeemed. Peter saw immediate separation from his friend; God saw a potential unity between Savior and saved which would last eternally. Peter saw the end of Jesus' teaching; God saw the beginning of Jesus teaching new members of his faithful through his Church, headed by Peter and his successors. Peter was on the verge of becoming a stumbling block and frankly, an agent of Satan doing Satan's will, not because his view was so off-kilter, but because it was so limited. As a follower of Christ, it was time to adopt God's mindset, and see a much bigger picture than is envisioned by man.

This year, the Church is observing the 40th anniversary of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae: Of Human Life*. Most people think of it as a great big admonishment, to get us to obey the Church's teaching on artificial birth control, but it's so much more than that. We certainly are expected to follow the Church's teaching, but even beyond a call to obedience, the encyclical is a call to adopt God's mindset towards marriage, and towards the beginning and the nature of human life. Artificial contraception truly encapsulates a manifestation of a worldly viewpoint regarding marriage, relationships, and life; and that view is, that if something exists which is pleasurable then it exists primarily for pleasure, and other aspects of it are unintended or undesirable side effects. It makes a statement about the nature of the marriage bond: that this relationship is not about giving myself away, in a love so profoundly generous that it carries the potential to generate life, but rather is about what brings me pleasure. It declares that there's a flaw in God's design, but low and behold, man found a way to fix the flaw. But there is no flaw in God's design, in fact it's positively ingenious that he designed man and woman the way he did, to be fertile, and capable of cooperating with him in the creation of new life but to not be constantly fertile, but rather only periodically; so no, there's no flaw in the design, but there is one in man: because of the effects of original sin, his desires are oftentimes driven by a disordered love of pleasure; he makes decisions too easily based on what feels good right now, rather than what is truly good for him.

Humane Vitae, then, invites us to look at marriage and human life from God's mindset. God sees a relationship which, by its nature, should be committed and enduring, that finds it's meaning not in pleasure, but in unity and generativity; for God himself is not a pleasure-seeker, he is a unifying force and he is the Creator who generates all life. He sees that holiness is never achieved through self-indulgence, but rather through self-denial, whether on-going, as for priests and single people, or periodic, as for most

married couples. And more than anything, he sees something sacred in a relationship which the world has reduced to being only for pleasure, or to be a mere public expression of affection. Saint Paul wrote to the Romans: offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. The opposite of sacrifice is unrestrained indulgence; and so Paul reminds us that all of us, in every walk of life, are called to deny ourselves in some way if we are to imitate the Savior who denied himself completely, even to the point of death. And through the magisterium of the Church, and through *Humanae Vitae*, he has told us that this is a critical component of our becoming holy and pleasing to God: by being obedient to teachings which have been constantly and consistently held by his Church, a Church which has changed and evolved and grown so much since its infant days, but which has unwaveringly held to her principles and doctrines throughout the centuries.

At communion, the communicant approaches the minister who says “the Body of Christ,” and the communicant responds “amen,” which means “I believe.” Imagine someone approaching the Eucharist, being presented with the Body of Christ, but saying in response “I doubt that.” Or “well, it’s probably just bread, really.” Such a one should never be given our Lord in communion, and would be incapable of receiving the graces of the sacrament anyway. In marriage, and only in marriage, do two people, a husband and a wife, proper matter for the sacrament, give themselves away and to each other; and indeed, if someone said at the time of their vows “I take you ... for my good, not for yours ... for my pleasure, not God’s plan...” no bond would be created. One of the most cautionary lines in the entire Bible occurs in the passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans which we just heard: Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. We live in an age now where human sexuality is treated as a joke, as a punchline on sitcoms; as something which should never be restrained, never be denied, and never be delayed. As Christians, we want to get away from a human mindset and adopt a Godly one: one that values chastity, self-sacrifice, obedience, and faithfulness to God. Forty years ago, *Humanae Vitae* challenged the world to see the generation of life through God’s viewpoint. And God sees in marriage, in the relationship between man and woman, something sacred and with the potential for bringing about life, and great holiness. May we, on our part, never reduce it to anything less.

Copyright © 2008