

Make Disciples of All the Nations

August 20, 2017 – Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

By **Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J.**

Readings: Isaiah 56.1, 6-7; Romans 11.13-15, 29-32; Matthew 15.21-28

There is much talk about evangelization but often little action. The urgency of the task, however, is clear when we call to mind the instructions that Christ gave at his Ascension: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28.19). All three of the readings that the Church uses this Sunday speak to the issue of evangelization, each in its own way.

Today’s Readings

In the passage from Isaiah, for instance, we have something that is quite unusual in ancient Judaism but nonetheless important as an anticipation of the apostolic and missionary character of the Church. Throughout the Old Testament much is said about the need to keep the faith of Israel pure of any taint by pagan religions, but there is little sign of any inclination to convert others to Israel’s ways. The story of salvation history begins with God’s call to Abraham and the journey to the land he promised to him and his descendants. After the servitude of Egypt and the trials of the Sinai desert, it is a story of the reconquest of the Holy Land, the establishment of a kingdom, and the construction of the Temple. Later the story turns to the second exile, this time in Babylon, and eventually the return of the People to the promised land – humbled, impoverished, and chastened – to await the coming of the Messiah. Today’s passage from chapter 56 of Isaiah is highly exceptional in its mention of a set of conditions for accepting into the covenant those who come from foreign lands and want to serve the Lord.

The passage from the eleventh chapter of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans contains an idea that is more familiar to us, since most Christians today are of Gentile origin. It alludes to an issue that was difficult for the early Church: Did Gentiles have to become Jews (including submission to the rite of circumcision) in order to become Christians? After some struggle, the Church’s answer to this question was negative. No, one does not need circumcision, nor submission to all the statutes dealing with ritual purity. One needs Christian baptism and a readiness to keep the precepts of the Decalogue as well as the commandments that Our Lord himself gave. The larger issue here is whether Christianity would remain an ethnic religion or would become one that was truly universal, and thus “Catholic.”

Even so, this passage has an intriguing emphasis. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul explains that he glories in this ministry in order to make his own race jealous, and thereby he hopes to save some of them. Using a bit of evangelical psychology, he tries to get his own people to want something that they do not have but that others are obtaining. In alluding to the human tendency to presume that what we already have is enough, Paul addresses the presumption that being a member of the Chosen People ought to be enough for salvation. What he himself had to learn when knocked from his horse on the way to Damascus was that salvation comes only through Jesus Christ. In fact, the verses from chapter 11 not included in today’s reading are about the way the portion of Israel that does not accept Christ is like a branch that has been broken off and must be grafted back into the living olive tree. It needs to come to a living faith in Christ, the long promised Messiah (Rom 11.17-24).

Today's gospel text is perhaps the hardest of the three readings: the story of the Canaanite woman. Despite her plea to Jesus ("Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon") Jesus does not say a word in answer to her, presumably in order to elicit not only a request for a favor for her daughter but also a personal act of faith. Only after she refuses to leave and uses a clever turn of phrase ("Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters") does Jesus bestow the healing that she wanted. Although he would later send out his disciples to all the world, his own mission, he explains here, was to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Live and Let Live?

In today's context, a recurrent question troubles many people: Do we really need to undertake evangelization? Isn't it enough for people to live sincerely and well according to their own lights, whether they are people of our faith, of some other faith, or of no faith at all? Our instincts might well encourage us to live and let live. Politically, our pluralistic proclivities might explain why there is so little action in the area of evangelization. It is easy to rationalize our lack of evangelical initiative as a kind of politeness. For even to hint that others might really need Christ and that merely being thought to be good in one's own way is not enough seems to risk giving offense. Whatever the merits of the notion of "anonymous Christians," a misunderstanding of the phrase risks sapping our missionary zeal and our evangelical energy. We may dislike the scandal of particularity, but it is an ineradicable part of the Christian faith that we must believe that Christ and no one else is the savior of mankind, sent by his Father for every nation and every people.

To be sure, those who evangelize should never be arrogant or presumptuous. We will win more people to the side of Christ by charity and good example than by contentious debates. But there is need to face the question about whether we should evangelize at all. For this, it may be helpful to consider three short but important paragraphs from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. There we find a clear statement of a point of Catholic doctrine that some people today find especially difficult: "Outside the Church there is no salvation." Some might even be surprised to know that the Church still holds this position. Misunderstood, it could well give offense. To clarify its meaning, these paragraphs quote some relevant passages from the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The text reads:

846 How are we to understand this affirmation, often repeated by the Church Fathers? Re-formulated positively, it means that all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body:

Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition, the Council teaches that the Church, a pilgrim now on earth, is necessary for salvation: the one Christ is the mediator and the way of salvation; he is present to us in his body which is the Church. He himself explicitly asserted the necessity of faith and Baptism, and thereby affirmed at the same time the necessity of the Church which men enter through Baptism as through a door. Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it (Lumen Gentium 14).

847 This affirmation is not aimed at those who, through no fault of their own, do not know Christ and his Church:

Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation (Lumen Gentium 16),

848 "Although in ways known to himself God can lead those who, through no fault of their own, are ignorant of the Gospel, to that faith without which it is impossible to please him, the Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men" (Ad Gentes 7).

Three Important Points

Paragraph 846 reasserts the crucial point that it is only the death and resurrection of Christ, accomplished once and for all by the sacrifice on Calvary, that redeems the whole human race throughout the whole of time. Not only does the text make clear that a deliberate rejection of Christ and the Church by anyone who truly knows who Christ is and what he did would cause exclusion from salvation, but also it affirms an indispensable role of the Church in salvation history. What may not be so generally known is that the Church attempts to honor the command of Christ at every liturgy. In every Mass, at some point in the Eucharistic prayer, the Church prays for the salvation of all. The third Eucharistic prayer, for instance, reads: “May this Sacrifice of our reconciliation, we pray, O Lord, advance the peace and salvation of all the world.”

Paragraph 847 deals with the case of those who, through no fault of their own, have not known Christ. By saying that those “who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation,” this text certainly allows that God, who alone can read hearts and consciences, could choose to save individuals who are not baptized. God, one might say, is not bound by the law that he has given to the Church. Even so, it is important to note that what this text says is not that all those who do not know Christ or his Church *will* be saved, but only that they *may* achieve eternal salvation. Just as we Christians dare not presume that we will be saved merely by being Christian without reference to our choices, our conduct, and our repentance for our sins, so too we dare not presume that those who are not Christians will be condemned. What this text does is simply to counter any form of presumption.

Paragraph 848 then turns us back to the need for vigorous evangelization by saying: “the Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men.” What the sacraments, beginning with Baptism, give us are the most reliable possible means for our sanctification, and thus they are invaluable aids to our salvation. The sacrament of Baptism brings about membership in the Church, but it is also our spiritual regeneration, the washing away of any sin committed before our baptism, and the beginnings of our healing from the effects of the Fall. What the sacrament of Reconciliation and Penance gives us is the assurance of forgiveness for actual sins and a restoration of our friendship with God. What the Eucharist gives us is not merely a symbol by which to remember a ritual that Jesus once performed but also actual communion with Jesus in our very bodies and thereby the nourishment and strength to live in him and to become more like him. Similarly in Confirmation and Matrimony, in Holy Orders and the Anointing of the Sick, each of the sacraments in its own way brings about the grace it signifies.

The texts that the Church sets before us this Sunday give us much fruit for our meditation. We do well to pray for the grace to carry out the command of Christ to teach all nations, and for the grace to be good teachers who find the ways to make his saving message clear and interesting and attractive to those entrusted to our care.

About the Author

Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J. teaches philosophy at Fordham University. Among his recent publications is An Introduction to Medieval Philosophy: Some Basic Concepts (2009). He has produced lecture courses on Aristotle's Ethics, on Natural Law and Human Nature, and most recently on Biblical Wisdom Literature for The Teaching Company, and courses on Spiritual Theology and on John Paul II's Veritatis splendor for the International Catholic University.

FOR FURTHER READING

Catechism of the Catholic Church, ## 811-870

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, [Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization](#)

St. John Paul II, [Redemptoris Missio](#)

Regis Martin, ["Pope Francis Calls All Catholics to Evangelize"](#)

IN SHORT . . .

- *We may think it is enough for people to live sincerely and well according to their own lights, whether they are people of our faith, of some other faith, or of no faith at all.*
- *But only the death and resurrection of Christ, accomplished once and for all by the sacrifice on Calvary, redeems the whole human race throughout the whole of time.*
- *God alone can read hearts and consciences and could choose to save individuals who are not baptized.*
- *Not all those who do not know Christ or his Church will be saved, but through God's will they may achieve eternal salvation.*
- *"The Church still has the obligation and also the sacred right to evangelize all men," for the sacraments are the most reliable means for sanctification and thus invaluable aids to salvation.*