Marist Family Mass - Fourth Sunday of Easter

April 30, 2023

Every time we gather as a faith community to celebrate any of the sacraments and especially on Sundays when we celebrate the Eucharist, the very first liturgical act that you and I do is to make the sign of the cross. When we do that, we are making a statement. You are probably saying to yourselves I didn't know that and exactly what statement I am making. Thank you for asking.

Most of us were baptized as infants. One of the very first acts of the baptismal rite that the priest or deacon, the parents, and godparents perform is to trace the sign of the cross on the foreheads of the infant. Listen to the words that the priest or deacon prays as he performs that action. "…the Christian community welcomes you with great joy. In its name, I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of his cross. I now trace the cross on your forehead and invite your parents and godparents to do the same."

Whenever we make the sign of the cross, we make a statement that we belong to Christ. We declare that we no longer live for ourselves but for Him. We are pledging to configure our lives to his, which means they will take the shape of the cross.

Let me give you an example of what that can look like. Our students who participate in the Bearing Witness and travel with Mr. Brendan Murphy to visit the Holocaust Concentration Camps in Poland and Germany will appreciate this story. It is about a Jewish Tailor. It was told to me by Fr. Ray Carey, a priest for the Diocese of Portland, Oregon. Fr. Carey's travels regularly brought him to Toronto, Canada. There he became friends with a Jewish tailor, Mendel Goode, who had been a victim of the Holocaust. From time to time, Mendel would be invited to speak about his horrendous experience to various groups so that future generations would not forget or deny the horrors of that terrible evil.

One day, he was asked to speak to a group of neo-Nazis. These young men are the sheep that are meant to belong to Christ but who were stolen from him. They listened to the voices of thieves disguised as shepherds and followed them, walking in their ways of hatred, cruelty, and violence. Those are the thieves and robbers Jesus refers to in today's Gospel.

The court had ordered this group of skinheads to participate in a program to sensitize them to the pain their hatred causes others. The hope was that this would change their hearts and their behavior.

At Marist, we take the same approach by teaching our students to empathize with and be compassionate toward the most vulnerable. We want our students to step out of their shoes and into those whose life experiences differ from theirs. That includes teaching our students to empathize with and respond compassionately to those in pain from racist comments or behaviors. That includes bullying in all its forms.

Returning to Mendel Goode, he waited outside the courtroom to speak and wondered what good his words could do for these tough, hardened young men. When he was finally called to talk to the group, one of them walked up to Mendel and shook his hand. On each of his knuckles were tattooed swastikas, which are a mockery of the cross of Christ. This was no gesture of welcome. The young man gripped Mendel's hand and squeezed it like a vice, hoping to break Mendel's hand if he could. To the surprise of this young neo-Nazi, Mendel's grip tightened. It became apparent that Mendel would not be such an easy mark. While fixing his eyes on those of this embittered youth, Mendel said to him, "You are filled with so much hatred. I choose not to hate you. This evil stops with me."

There is something wonderfully defiant and powerful in those words of that Jewish tailor. For me, they speak eloquently about the statement Jesus made while hanging on the cross. In the definitive confrontation with the forces of sin and death, Jesus looked evil in the eye and absorbed its horror into his flesh and blood, only to have it stop with him. He refused to answer evil with evil. I can easily imagine Jesus speaking from the cross the same words as Mendel the tailor "This evil stops with me!"

That is what St. Peter is talking about in today's second reading. "Beloved, if you are patient when you suffer for doing what is good, this is a grace before God. You have been called because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps…When he was insulted, he returned no insult; when he suffered, he did not threaten…" St. Peter is saying that we who follow Jesus will not repay evil with evil. Instead, we will say, "This evil stops with me."

The last act we perform at the conclusion of Mass is to bless ourselves by making the sign of the cross. Remember the statement we are making when we do that. We are making a public declaration that we belong to Christ. Relying on his help, we pledge not to answer whatever evil will befall us this week with more evil. Like him, we will not respond to insults, hatred, and violence with more insults, hatred, and violence. We will not add to the evil in the world by lying, cheating, stealing, and the many other ways that evil finds expression. Instead, we rely on the power of the cross. That power is on full display when we realize we can draw strength by uniting ourselves with Jesus on the cross and saying with him, "This evil stops with me."

After making the sign of the cross at the end of Mass, we will sing a hymn similar to what soldiers do when they are marching. They sing a song to help them to walk in unison and to lift their spirits as they march into battle. We, too, are spiritual warriors though we do not fight with the weapons of this world. As the Mass ends, we also sing a hymn to lift our spirits as we process or march out of the Church to love and serve the Lord where we live and work.

We do that after blessing ourselves with the sign of the cross that reminds us we belong to Christ. The celebrant says, "Go in peace," to which we say, "Thanks be to God." Those words come from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, where he says, "Thanks be to God. He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15: 57). That is the Good News, which we have been called to proclaim to the world. We do that every time we join our voices to his, now risen from the dead, and say, "This evil stops with me."

Mary, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.