Context! Context! Context!

The Society of Mary and Social Justice – Part 1

I want to begin by recognizing that this topic is one of the more controversial ones. Why is that?

Many adult Catholics are unfamiliar with the history of Catholic social thought. If it was taught, it was probably quickly forgotten. Once students get to college, they may never study it in a secular university, and in a Catholic university, it may be offered only as an elective. Many parishes will provide adult education classes on Catholic social thought, but, unfortunately, those are poorly attended.

Consequently, Catholics, in general, are ill-informed about its place and importance in the grand scheme of Catholic teaching. That might explain why some argue that the Church should stay out of politics and concentrate only on religious matters. They don't know any different.

So, how do we begin talking about this? Let's start with an analogy. When purchasing land for a business, the mantra is location, location, location! When considering Catholic social thought, the mantra is context, context, context! I want to suggest that for many Catholics, the political party or ideology that holds their allegiance provides the context with which they hear and evaluate the Church's social teachings. The party platform becomes the *de facto* gospel and is used to critique the Church. Ironically, the role of the Gospel is to affirm and critique the social policies of political parties and even the Church herself.

It has been said that a Catholic cannot feel completely at home with any political party because neither will be at home with the social teachings and beliefs of the Church. For example, consider the Church's positions on the right to life, same-sex marriage, contraception, and her stance on immigration, the death penalty, and the environment. Neither party reflects the Church's position on all these issues. Some Catholics and Christians, though, adopt the positions of political parties and promote them with an evangelical zeal that can become their mission in life.

In this series of meditations, I want to propose a different mission for the laity to embrace and one that is divinely inspired. They received it when they were baptized, and it is worth devoting their lives to its pursuit. What is it, you may ask?

In baptism, Christ has chosen us to be united to him and given us the vocation to conform our lives to his. We are to think, judge, feel and act like him in all things, with the goal being to say with St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live in me but Christ." That is the fundamental vocation of the baptized. The primary mission of the baptized is to advance the reign of God. Both involve proclaiming Jesus Christ is Lord and not me, my plans, my country, or my political party.

As an aside, I want to suggest that when people disagree and argue with the Church, they *may be* disagreeing with Christ. Recall the discussion with his own disciples about the necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. They were so scandalized that many of his disciples drew back and no longer walked with him. (Jn 6:66)

His disciples also reacted negatively toward this teaching of Jesus: "Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and said, "Who then can be saved?" (Matt 19: 23-24)

I am concerned about the modern tendency to domesticate Jesus. Yes, he is the embodiment of divine compassion and mercy, but C.S. Lewis nailed it in his book, *The Problem of Pain*, when he observed, "We want not so much a Father but a grandfather in heaven, a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, 'What does it matter so long as they are contented?'"[1] Another way of saying the same thing is to believe we can do what we want because we will be forgiven. That, by the way, is the sin of presumption.[2] God does forgive us. All we have to do is to accept this grace. However, this grace will lead us on the road to a conversion of mind and heart and not leave us mired in our sinfulness. The interaction between Jesus and Zacchaeus is one example of this dynamic on full display.

Jesus challenged people by preaching the need for repentance or conversion. To that end, he said things that got under their skin. Remember, his critics accused him of asserting he was greater than Caesar. That was intended to get under the skin of Pilate, which it did. Go back and look at the Sermon on the Mount and parables such as the Workers in the Field or Jesus' reply to Martha's criticism of Mary or his teaching about divorce. Those got under the skin of his disciples. Many parables also criticized the Scribes and Pharisees and were meant to “get under their skin”. Jesus was not crucified for being kind, merciful, or a "nice guy." He claimed to be divine and a king whose kingdom was not of this world, associated with sinners, and criticized the religiosity of his time. He "got under the skin" of the religious and political leaders, which is why he was crucified.

So, the next time it feels as though a social teaching of the Church "gets under our skin" and causes a visceral, adverse reaction, maybe, just maybe, "our beef" is with Jesus himself. Admitting that possibility is the first step toward spiritual growth, which will always involve conversion (repentance) if we are serious about conforming ourselves to Christ.

If you want to know how Jesus will react to such criticism of him, note his reaction to Thomas, who doubted he rose from the dead. Jesus appears again when Thomas and the other disciples are present and greets them, "Peace be with you." Then Jesus invited Thomas to "put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe." (John 20:27) Notice that Jesus did not ignore Thomas' complaint and took his criticism seriously. So does Jesus with us. Remember, though, that Jesus is the teacher, and we will always remain his disciples.

If Christ doesn't get under our skin, meaning disturb and bother us at some point in our lives and throw them upside down, the danger is our commitment to him may be superficial. How else does a doctor perform surgery other than by getting under our skin with the scalpel? How else can Christ, the divine physician, perform spiritual surgery other than by figuratively getting under our skin and exposing how much we are invested in the values and mindset of a fallen, sinful world, the old order Christ has overcome? That applies to conservatives and liberals alike.

That will signal the start of the wrestling match with the Lord. You will recall that in Genesis 32: 22-32 there is that enigmatic passage that describes Jacob wrestling with the Lord or an angel all night. When morning came, Jacob had suffered a hip injury but also asked to receive a blessing. The angel replied, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." (Gen. 32:28)

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[1] https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/175780-we-want-not-so-much-a-father-but-a-grandfather

[2] Presumption is a sin against the Holy Spirit inasmuch as one presumes he can save himself apart from the grace of the Holy Spirit or that God will save him without conversion (cf. Catechism, no. 2092). Impenitence clearly resists the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing us to conversion and repentance (cf. Catechism, nos. 1430-33).

In the Bible, a name change indicates a new relationship with God and a new mission. The Church calls herself the new Israel. The baptized, who comprise the Church, should expect at some point in their lives to be so angry, frustrated, and disappointed with God that they will wrestle with him, perhaps for months and years, over some experience or teaching. Those who take their relationship with God that seriously are assured that a blessing awaits them no matter how long in coming.

The Lord has already blessed us in baptism. We are united with him, given a share in the divine life, a new name, Christian, and a mission or purpose in life. It is two-fold. First, we are to welcome Christ into the depths of our being where he can transform us so that one day we will say with St. Paul, "I live no longer I, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

There is a second aspect of the mission given to us in baptism. We are to become like Christ in all things, not solely for our personal benefit (salvation) but also for the benefit (salvation) of the world. Christ sends the baptized to engage in his mission to sanctify (save) the world by advancing the reign of God.

I will say more about that in the following meditation.