

April 28, 2024

Dear Friends,



God's blessings as we celebrate the 5th Sunday of Easter! Last weekend we heard about the beautiful image of the Good Shepherd. This week, another image from John's Gospel about the vine and the branches. What a great image of connectedness! How important for our lives! Perhaps we are thinking of the coming days when Mother's Day approaches, when First Communion is celebrated in our community, and when we reflect on the transition moments of life, such as graduation. We are connected. We are related. Most importantly, we are connected to our Lord, especially through the sacrament of Baptism and at the Eucharist. Once we are baptized, we can never be 'unbaptized'. It's the beginning of eternal connectedness! Family, parish, community, neighborhood, city, state, country, world – we are connected!

Fr. Rolheiser, my favorite writer on spiritual topics, has this to say. Hope it helps to give us a positive lesson in loving connections, especially close to Mother's Day:



THE REALITY OF GOD

God does not cease to exist just because we do not think about him. The author Ruth Burrows points this out by presenting us with the following image: "A baby in its mother's womb is in a relationship with her but is unaware of it and does not respond to the mother's intense love and desire to give herself to the child. The relationship with God on the human side can remain as minimal as that of the baby."

This image, a baby in its mother's womb though unaware of the mother, is a rich mine-field for prayer and reflection, especially in our time when our everyday consciousness tends to border on agnosticism and the challenges of incivility we see around us. The image is rich.



The first thing it tells us is that an atheistic consciousness does not negate the existence of God, even if our age seems to think so. The reality of God does not depend upon our conscious awareness of it. God does not cease to exist simply because we cease to think about him. God's reality is not threatened by our lack of awareness. Sadly, our culture often equates lack of awareness with lack of existence. We are tremendously impoverished by that notion.

More positively, this image can help us better understand something else, namely, the Christian doctrine of creation. Most of the time, almost all of us misunderstand this

doctrine. We believe that God created us (past tense) and that we now somehow have life and existence independent of God, tantamount to a toy that has been created by some craftsman. But that notion, common though it is, is false. The dogma of creation asks us to believe that God is actively creating us right now and is sustaining us in being right now. WE are connected. There is no past tense as regards creation. If God, even for a second, ceased creating and sustaining us, we would cease to be. We have no reality independent of God, no more than a baby in the womb is independent of its mother. The baby may not be aware of the mother but the mother's reality is what is massive, life giving, and life sustaining. That is also true in our relationship to God.



The great mystics and philosophers have always tried to teach that to us. I remember an encounter I once had with the great Belgian Dominican, Jan Walgrave. We had been talking about Etienne Gilson (a great philosopher and historian of philosophy who was once nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature) and Gilson's notion of existence. Walgrave asked me this question: "Do you ever sit on a park bench, look at a tree, wonder about its existence, and ask yourself: "Why is there something instead of nothing?"

I answered honestly: "No. Sometimes I wonder about things and sometimes I ask that question for other reasons, but, in all honesty, I don't think I have ever been so moved just looking at a tree that I asked myself why things existed as opposed to not existing."

His reply to me was gentle, but clear: "Then you aren't a true philosopher. You can study philosophy and it can help you, but you, yourself, are not a philosopher. A real philosopher will always ask that question. A real philosopher is unable to look at a tree and not ask why it is there. To see a tree, or anything else, is to see a dance ... and there can be no dance without a dancer dancing it. Everything that you see posits the question: 'Why is there something instead of nothing?' Every day, when I sit on a park bench, I ask myself: 'Why is there something instead of nothing?' At a deep level, nothing explains itself and nothing sustains itself. Gilson understood this, and this too is the Christian doctrine of creation. God is actively making the world, and it doesn't exist independent of that. Hence to see the world is to somehow see the reality beneath it, God". Connectedness.



His concept is more philosophical than Burrows' image, but it is essentially the same. We are the baby and God is the mother gestating us. Our lack of conscious awareness of that fact in no way diminishes its reality or its importance. God does not cease to exist because we cease to think about him. An atheistic or agnostic consciousness does not kill God, as Nietzsche thought, it simply impoverishes our self-understanding.

The task of prayer is precisely to make us more consciously aware of that relationship of creation, providence, and love that exists between God and ourselves, prior to our consciously knowing it. God is gestating us, whether we know it or not. To pray

is to learn that and to pray even more deeply is to learn, as Burrows puts it, the intense love and desire of that Mother, God, to give God's self to us. – *Fr. Ron Rolheiser, OMI*



We are all connected, created by God. What a great thought in this post-pandemic time when we don't always see much connectedness! Here are a few more thoughts on this last weekend of April about being connected to the vine:

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER—CYCLE B

CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW? Text: John 15:1-8



In 2002 a phone company sought a way to promote to the buying public their tireless effort to expand the reliability of cell phone coverage in America. This company was not the least expensive cell phone service provider at the time, nor the most aggressive with sales and promotional discounts. They had no celebrity spokesmodels like their competitors. But its market share of the cell phone business needed a real boost if the company was to be profitable enough to pay for their investment in the infrastructure that provided their now-famous coast-to-coast coverage. So they decided to seek a television ad spokesperson who was not a celebrity, but an "everyman" who would represent the company's actual 50 crews of technicians who each traveled 100,000 miles annually in specially equipped trucks checking the range and reliability of the cell phone towers and coverage across America.

After an audition of over 1000 applicants for the job, they hired a 34-year old actor from New York to play the part of the pitchman for the company's ads, in which he, with his iconic black horn-rimmed glasses and quirky smile, simply repeated over and over, in different places around the country, the now-famous tag line, "Can you hear me now?" As you know, the rest is history. Within the first two years, the company's market share surged a whopping 25%. What they had tapped into was the cell phone public's huge twin frustrations with the cell phone industry — dropped calls, and areas with no service. Customers perceived that this was the company most committed to helping cell phone users avoid these two technological hazards. Of course, for the actor, that one television gig made his career, as he has continued to be the spokesperson for these ubiquitous ads over the years, most recently standing in front of a mass of company personnel and equipment to represent the company's claim to outstanding support in addition to outstanding coverage. In the current ads the actor does not even have to say his famous line anymore, he just stands there as the embodiment of the promise. We just see his face, and somehow we hear the echo of the line, "Can you hear me now?" And the implied silent answer in our minds is always the same, "Yes. I can hear you. We are connected just fine."

Connections are so very vital to all of us. And it is not just communication companies that care about this. We are all seeking some form of authentic community, where we are

known as we really are, and where we can share our gifts of laughter, of food, of memories, and support. In fact this has been one of the lamentable shortfalls of our technological age. With our plethora of communication devices, and for all their claim of connecting people into virtual communities, many people feel more alienated and alone than ever before. We have cell phones and Blackberries, instant email and GPS on our PDA's, blogs and X, FaceBook and Snapchat — but many times these “virtual and instant connections” get in the way of authentic connection instead of assisting it. Not so long ago people used to actually look at each other when they spoke face to face, teachers looked at student's faces during lectures, people riding in a car actually spoke to each other, and families actually sat a table together during meals. Many know that sounds preposterous and archaic, but it really happened! These days everyone seems buried in the own private iPhone world, or tapping out email on their device, or hidden behind their laptop screen surfing the web. But when does anyone actually talk and listen face to face anymore? As a writer wrote in Forbes magazine a few years ago, “people today have never been more connected — or more alienated.”



God knows we all need some real community. He hard-wired that need into us when He created us. From the Garden of Eden forward God created humankind in relationship, male and female, because, as God said it, “it is not good for humankind to be alone.” The first curse inflicted upon humanity was the exile of Cain after he killed his brother Abel. There could be few worse punishments—to be placed outside of community. With all due respect to Simon and Garfunkle's famous lyrics, humans are not at their best when we sing, “I am a rock. I am an island. I've built walls, a fortress deep and mighty, that none may penetrate. I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain . . . I touch no one, and no one touches me . . . I am a rock. I am an island.” We were made to be connected. None us can make it on our own, we were not meant to. We learn best when we can exchange ideas and challenge each other's thinking. We need help to recover when we are too weak to manage on our own. We need the strength and companionship of shared joys and sorrows. We need a work and purpose in life that is bigger than we could accomplish all by ourselves.

And that is the very sense of community and connection Jesus offered to his disciples, and to all of us, as he spoke to them the night before his crucifixion. Using the metaphor of the vine, Jesus reminded us that he is the vine that holds the various branches together. He is the vine that streams the nutrient from the soil of our Maker into our branched lives. He is the source of our strength and life from which we derive the power to bloom and bear fruit. Without the vine the branches wither. Without the vine, the branches lose their connection to the soil and to each other. Without the vine the branches have no life, no future. Sure, all of the exciting action of the plant's life seems to be taking place out on the branches — waving leafy arms to the passing world, boasting colored flowers in the sun, holding up fat fruit for the harvest. And the branches are tempted to think that they are the real stars of the show, without much need for the ever-present but non-blooming vine. Woe to the foolish branch that forgets the vine! It is a short season in the sun for that self-made branch, and it usually ends up soon thereafter in a nearby fireplace.

Jesus would have us avoid the foolish branch's solitary end. If we stay connected to Christ, we will be connected to God and to each other in ways we could never deserve nor understand. And we will know the joy of real community, real connection, that all of our technological gizmos could only mimic. And what is the name for this community, where ordinary people can gather again at a table, where we can each know and be known as we really are? It is called Church. This is the place where we can call upon God and upon each other at any time, at any place, and ask, "Can you hear me now?" And the real answer is, "Yes. The connection is strong. And the coverage is complete."



Pope Francis seems to light up when he is with others, when he is connected. Watch a Youtube of him sometime and see how his face truly lights up when with others.

"Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit." According to Pope Francis, what is the fruit that we, the branches, need to bear, that might result from this mutual abiding? Here are the thoughts of our Holy Father:

... the branches can do nothing without the vine, they need sap to grow and to bear fruit. ... But Jesus needs us too, like the vine with the branches. Perhaps to say this may seem bold to us, and so let us ask ourselves: in what sense does Jesus need us?

He needs our witness. The fruit that as branches we must bear, is the witness of our lives as Christians. After Jesus ascended to the Father, it is the task of the disciples—it is our task—to continue to proclaim the Gospel in words and in deeds. And the disciples—we, Jesus' disciples—do so by bearing witness to his love: the fruit to be borne is love. Attached to Christ, we receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and thus we can do good to our neighbor, we can do good to society, to the Church. The tree is known by its fruit. A truly Christian life bears witness to Christ.

Here are some thoughts from Fr. Kavanaugh about "I am the vine, you are the branches." (Jn 15:5)

Radical Faith *What could be more personal, more intense, than to say, "You are my food and drink, you are my own very flesh and blood"?*



"Have you accepted Christ as your personal savior?" How do you respond to that question? Uneasily, if you are like me for much of my life. The question had seemed far too direct and intense. It also struck me as being a bit overdone on the emotional side. A little extreme.

“Personal savior” talk suggested the kind of display, seen in Billy Graham’s crusades, that sometimes makes other Christians, especially Catholics, rather uncomfortable. “Come forward as a witness that you are claiming Christ as your redeemer.” Then the long lines of men and women, coursing through the aisles like blood through arteries, drain down to the stage to make public their dependency on the Lord.

Lately it has become evident to me that such uneasiness is paradoxical. After all, Catholics are a people who have made a Sunday, if not a daily, ritual of leaving their pews, proceeding to the altar, and receiving the body and blood of Christ.



Perhaps we have gotten too familiar with it, but our sacramental Eucharist, our holy Communion, is a most radical, direct, and intense expression of the conviction that Christ is our personal savior. It is easy to overlook how extreme our dogma and ritual appear to others. Just look at the facts.

We have been so steadfast and insistent on the “real presence” in our traditions that this has often divided us from our brothers and sisters in faith who do not agree with the metaphysical category of transubstantiation. We cling to it because it is our way of saying that our Savior is most fully and truly found in the Eucharist.

Catholics believe that Jesus Christ, body and blood, soul and divinity, is really present under the appearances of bread and wine. We believe it is more than fellowship that we celebrate. It is more than commemoration and remembrance. Something far greater than our prayer and action is taking place.

We profess that we re-enact the saving mystery of the passion and death of Jesus, and this very mystery becomes our food. By receiving Communion we profess that Christ’s saving of us is our sustenance. We could not live or survive without it.



If we believe in the real presence, what then do we actually think takes place in the Eucharist? We hold that the full reality of Jesus Christ enters our body. He is our food. He actually becomes part of us and we a part of him. We are thereby reenacting the central story of our redemption: that the eternal Word would take human flesh and dwell among us. The One who sent the Word now looks upon us and sees within us the real presence of Jesus. Thereby we are saved. We, in turn, look upon each other, even the least, and see the face of Christ. Thereby we are sent. Now that is intense. That is radical.

The reception of Communion makes no sense if we do not intend it to affirm that Christ is our personal savior. What could be more personal, more intense, than to say, “You are my food and drink, you are my own very flesh and blood”?

In our approach to the altar, our coming forward to receive the body and blood of Christ, we sacramentally embody Billy Graham’s procession of witnesses. When we

acknowledge that Christ is our way, truth, and life, our savior and redeemer, our sustenance, we are united not only with our fellow believers who do not share our communion, but also with Paul, so wholly given to the mystery of his ransom by Christ, and with the school of John, sustained by the belief that God is in them and Christ's Spirit is with them.



If the sacrament of Eucharist is not taken intensely, personally, and radically, it does not make much sense at all. But if we take it seriously, even our Scripture takes on deeper meaning. In the fourth Gospel's account of the Last Supper, we find an ever-intensifying invitation by Jesus to root our lives totally in him. He seeks a full union with us, "so that where I am you may be too" (Jn 14:3). He promises us that we will live in him, and he will live in us, just as he lives in unity with the Father.

I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me. (Jn 17:22-23).

In the midst of this prayer for total identification with us, the image of the vine and branches is presented as an extended portrayal of our living in Christ for sustenance and fruitfulness. *I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. (Jn 15:5).* This is not a tame claim. It is a bold assertion that we have no being, no life, apart from Christ. "Live on in me, as I do in you." – Fr. John Kavanaugh, SJ

This week the Holy Father wants us to think about the virtue of temperance, one of the cardinal virtues. Here are his thoughts:



Cycle of Catechesis. Vices and Virtues: Temperance

Dear brothers and sisters! Today I will talk about the fourth and final cardinal virtue: temperance. With the other three, this virtue shares a history that goes far back in time and does not only belong to Christians. For the Greeks, the practice of the virtues had happiness as its objective. The philosopher Aristotle wrote his most important treatise on ethics, addressing it to his son Nicomachus, to instruct him in the art of living. Why does everyone seek happiness, even though so few achieve it? This is the question. To answer this question, Aristotle confronts the theme of the virtues, among which *enkráteia*, that is, temperance, takes a prominent place. The Greek term literally means "power over oneself". So, temperance is a power over oneself. This virtue is thus the capacity for self-mastery, the art of not letting oneself be overcome by rebellious passions, of establishing order in what Manzoni calls "the jumble of the human heart".

The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that "temperance is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods".

The Catechism continues, "It ensures the will's mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable. The temperate person directs the sensitive appetites toward what is good and maintains a healthy discretion, and does not follow the base desires, but restrains the appetites" (1809).

Therefore, temperance, as the Italian word says, is the virtue of the right measure. In every situation, one behaves wisely, because people who act always moved by impulse or exuberance are ultimately unreliable. People without temperance are always unreliable. In a world where many people boast about saying what they think, the temperate person instead prefers to think about what he says. Do you understand the difference? Not saying whatever comes into my mind, like so... no: thinking about what I have to say. He does not make empty promises but makes commitments to the extent that he can fulfill them.



Also with pleasures, the temperate person acts judiciously. The free course of impulses and total license accorded to pleasures end up backfiring on us, plunging us into a state of boredom. How many people who have wanted to try everything voraciously have found themselves losing the taste for everything! It is better, then, to seek the right measure: for example, to appreciate a good wine, to taste it in small sips is better than swallowing it all in one go. We all understand this.

The temperate person knows how to weigh words and dose them well. He thinks about what he says. He does not allow a moment's anger to ruin relationships and friendships that can then only be rebuilt with difficulty. Especially in family life, where inhibitions are lower, we all run the risk of not keeping tensions, irritations, and anger in check. There is a time to speak and a time to be silent, but both require the right measure. And this applies to many things, for instance staying with others and staying alone.

If the temperate person knows how to control his own irascibility, this does not mean we always find him with a peaceful and smiling face. Indeed, at times it is necessary to be indignant, but always in the right way. These are the words: the just measure, the right way. A word of rebuke is at times healthier than a sour, rancorous silence. The temperate person knows that nothing is more uncomfortable than correcting another person, but he also knows that it is necessary; otherwise, one offers free reign to evil. In some cases, the temperate person succeeds in holding extremes together: he affirms absolute principles, asserts non-negotiable values, but also knows how to understand people and shows empathy for them. Shows empathy.

The gift of the temperate person is therefore balance, a quality as precious as it is rare. Indeed, everything in our world pushes to excess. Instead, temperance combines well with Gospel values such as smallness, discretion, modesty, meekness. The temperate person appreciates the respect of others but does not make it the sole criterion for every action and every word. He is sensitive, he is able to weep and is not ashamed, but he does

not weep over himself. In defeat, he rises up again; in victory, he is capable of returning to his former reserved life. He does not seek applause but knows that he needs others.



Brothers and sisters, it is not true that temperance makes one grey and joyless. On the contrary, it lets one enjoy the goods of life better: staying together at the table, the tenderness of certain friendships, confidence with wise people, wonder at the beauty of creation. Happiness with temperance is the joy that flourishes in the heart of those who recognize and value what counts most in life. Let us pray to the Lord that He might give us this gift: the gift of maturity, of age, of emotional maturity, of social maturity. The gift of temperance.

Whoever lives in me, as I live in him, bears much fruit. (Jn 15:5)



Some Commentary by Saint Augustine, the great Doctor of the Church *Little fruit or plenty, there can be neither without him, because without him nothing can be done.*

The passage from the gospel in which the Lord calls himself the vine and his disciples the branches affirms in its own way that, as mediator between God and the human race, the man Christ Jesus is head of the Church, and we are his members.

It is beyond dispute that a vine and its branches are of one and the same stock.

Since Christ, therefore, possessed a divine nature not shared by ourselves, he became man precisely in order that in his own person there might be a vine of human stock whose branches we could become.

Little fruit or plenty, there can be neither without him, because without him nothing can be done. The incarnate Truth goes on to say: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever dwells in me and I in him yields fruit in plenty, because without me you can do nothing." These are words to be weighed and pondered continually.

Even if a branch does produce a little fruit, the vinedresser prunes it away so that it may produce more. But if the branch does not remain attached to the vine and draw its life from the root, it can bear no fruit at all. Now, although Christ could not be the vine if he were not human, he could not offer such a grace to his branches if he were not at the same time divine.



How did Saint Paul (once the persecutor Saul) understand this connectedness? The commentary of Fr. Dennis Hamm, S.J. can help us:

The community was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers. (Acts 9:31)

Persecutor Turned Promoter *Jesus of Nazareth is alive, not simply resuscitated but glorified; he is indeed the fullness of God's revelation.*

Democrat or Republican, Labor or Likud, Call to Action or Catholics United for the Faith — one need only name some of the groups that shape the contours of the social life of this world, and emotions begin to stir. We get a sense of who we are and what we are about from the groups to which we belong. That helps us appreciate a paradox of Jesus' life: although his own action and teaching reached beyond all subgroup solidarities and the consequent divisions — whether Pharisee versus Sadducee, clean versus unclean, Jew versus Samaritan, rich versus poor — that very inclusive way of being and acting provoked division among all that he met.



No one experienced this paradox more deeply than Saul of Tarsus. Put yourself in his sandals. You are a Pharisee, one whose whole purpose in life is to study and teach the Word of God as mediated by the Law of Moses. Your joy is to help the people of God live the Torah in their daily lives. You are a tolerant person at home in a society with a variety of ways of being Jewish — Sadducee, Pharisee, Essene — to name just a few.

Into this mix comes a group of Jews who call themselves people of “the Way.” They claim that a craftsman from Nazareth, one Jesus, recently executed by the Romans, is the long-awaited Anointed One. What is more, they claim that this Jesus has already entered the end-time experience of being raised from the dead. Even more startling, these upstart “Jews for Jesus” have made the Galilean into a replacement of the Torah itself. They proclaim that his resurrection from the dead certifies him as the ultimate Word of God to God's people, the capstone of revelation. That makes his teaching tantamount to a new Torah. In effect, this Jewish Christian movement is challenging the centerpiece of Judaism.

It is not hard to understand why Paul, a professional teacher of the Law, felt it necessary to stamp out this new movement (much as Senator Joseph McCarthy felt obliged to root out what he suspected to be the incipient virus of Communism in the United States during the 1950s). Then comes the event that turned this good zealot around entirely. Armed with search warrants from the Jerusalem authorities, he is on his way to Damascus to arrest some of these dangerous “Jesus freaks” who have begun to spread this aberration in that urban center to the north.

On the road, he has the famous vision: a theophany of light out of which a voice says, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.” For the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus, this is the Big Bang that contains, in germ, the insight that will drive the rest of his life and work. Jesus of Nazareth is alive, not simply resuscitated but glorified; he is indeed the fullness of God's revelation, what the Law and the Prophets have been pointing to all along. In addition, the

group Saul has been persecuting is intimately identified with this risen Jesus, whom they confidently call by the divine name Lord.



In a matter of days, this arch-persecutor of the young Church becomes one of its star promoters — a startling phenomenon, which brings about the situation described in this Sunday's First Reading, where the Jerusalem disciples require some vigorous convincing before they can accept Saul as a fellow Christian.

Saul's embrace of the Christian faith will plunge him into the paradox of Jesus' own life and work. His sense of the Christian mission is that the Church is to embody Israel's vocation to be a light to the nations. His urgent sense that this "new creation" is meant to grow beyond the boundaries of the people of Israel will provoke division, even as he works for unity.

We are Saul/Paul's heirs and debtors. In his letters, this ex-Pharisee became the theologian of Christian solidarity. The unity that Jesus described in terms of vine and branches, Paul developed with the images of Temple and body. The Church of the risen Lord Jesus is a body meant to be a sign of God's love. The love that its members show one another is to empower that body to serve the rest of the world. Since that way of being counters the way most of this world is run, resistance and division are inevitable. The life of the body of Christ stands for an attitude—toward the poor, the unborn, the aging, the marginal, the use of the earth's gifts for the good of all—that is rejected by many if not most. Paul demonstrated in his life and work that the Easter paradox of Jesus (the rejected stone becomes the capstone) is still the touchstone of the Church's solidarity today.— *Fr. Dennis Hamm, SJ*



Sometimes people feel dis-connected from faith and from our Lord. How do we understand this? How can we help others and ourselves? Once again, Fr. Rolheiser has some thoughts to clarify our spiritual journey:

Orthodoxy, Sin, and Heresy *Simply stated, Catholic moral theology has always taught that sin is a subjective thing that can never be read from the outside.*

Recently, while on the road giving a workshop, I took the opportunity to go the Cathedral in that city for a Sunday Eucharist. I was taken aback by the homily. The priest used the Gospel text where Jesus says, ***I am the vine and you are the branches***, to tell the congregation that what Jesus is teaching here is that the Roman Catholic Church constitutes what is referred to as the branches, and the way we link to those branches is through the mass and if we miss mass on a Sunday we are committing a mortal sin and should we die in that state we will go to hell.

Then, aware that what he was saying would be unpopular, he protested that the truth is often unpopular, but that what he just said is orthodox Catholic teaching and that

anyone denying this is in heresy. It's sad that this kind of thing is still being said in our churches.

Does the Catholic Church really teach that missing mass is a mortal sin and that if you die in that state you will go to hell? No, that's not Catholic orthodoxy, though popular preaching and catechesis often suppose that it is, even as neither accepts the full consequences.



Here's an example: Some years ago, I presided at the funeral of a young man, in his twenties, who had been killed in a car accident. In the months before his death he had for all practical purposes ceased practicing his Catholicism: He had stopped going to church, was living with his girlfriend outside of marriage, and had not been sober when he died. However his family and the congregation who surrounded him at his burial knew him, and they knew that despite his ecclesial and moral carelessness, he had a good heart, that he brought sunshine into a room and that was a generous young man.

At the reception after the funeral one of his aunts, who believed that missing mass was a mortal sin that could condemn you to hell, approached me and said: "He had such a great heart and such a wonderful energy; if I were running the gates of heaven, I would let him in." Her comment wonderfully betrayed something deeper inside of her, namely, her belief that a good heart will trump ecclesial rules in terms of who gets to go to heaven and the belief that God has wider criteria for judgment than those formulated in external church rules. She believed that it was a mortal sin to miss mass on Sunday but, for all the right reasons, could not accept the full consequences of that, namely, that her nephew was going to hell. Deep down, she knew that God reads the heart, understands human carelessness, welcomes sinners into his bosom, and does not exclude goodness from heaven.

But that still leaves the question: Is it orthodox Roman Catholic teaching to say that it is a mortal sin to not go to church on a Sunday and that such an ecclesial lapse can send you to hell? No, to teach that **categorically** would itself be bordering on heresy.

Simply stated, Catholic moral theology has always taught that sin is a subjective thing that can never be read from the outside. We can never look at an action from the outside and say: "That's a sin!" We can look at an action from the outside and say: "That's wrong!" **But that's a different judgment.** From the outside we can judge an action as objectively wrong, but we can never make the judgment that it's a sin. Moreover this isn't new, liberal teaching, it is already found in our traditional Catechisms. Nobody can look at the action of someone else and say: "That's a sin!" To teach that we can make such a judgment goes against Catholic orthodoxy. We can, and must, affirm that certain things are wrong, objectively wrong, but sin is something else.

Probably the most quoted line from Pope Francis is his famous response to a moral question where he simply responded: "Who am I to judge?" He's in good company. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says: "You judge by appearances; I judge no one." That, of

course, does not mean that there isn't any judgment. There is, it's real, and it can condemn someone to hell. But it works this way: God's Love, Life, Truth, and Light come into the world and we judge ourselves apposite them. God condemns no one, but we can condemn ourselves. It is God's Love, Life, Truth, and Light against which we weigh ourselves and these determine who goes where, already here on earth and in eternity.



In our catechesis and our popular preaching we must be more careful in our use of the term "mortal sin" and in our judgments as to who goes to heaven and who goes to hell, fully aware that there wasn't any group that Jesus was harsher on than on those who were making those kinds of judgments. – *Fr. Ron Rolheiser, OMI*

Don't forget the teaching of the Church on the conditions for a mortal sin: Just as there are three ingredients in evaluating a moral action (the object, intention, and circumstances), so there are three ingredients in a mortal sin: (1) "grave matter," (2) "full knowledge," and (3) "deliberate consent." And the Catechism is clear that all "three conditions must together be met". So we look before we leap to judgment! Thank God!

Before I finish this week, I want to applaud our school play production of Peter Pan, Jr. The music was written by some of our country's most talented composers. The thoughts of Never Never Land are wondrous! Congrats to all who were part of this delightful and amazing performance!



And again some encouragement for the Catholic Charities campaign in the Diocese of Cleveland. Your participation is vital for the well-being of others! Check out the diocesan website for more information. And also thanks to the number of folks who want to take on the ministry of being extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion (EMHCs) in church and for the homebound, hospitals, and nursing homes. Your stepping up to make these connections is so important for others! God bless!



Oremus pro invicem. Soli Deo Gloria.

Fr. Michael J. Lanning