

Dcn. Jerry's Homily for February 19, 2023, 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

"Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." The lesson in today's Gospel challenges us in so many ways. First, Jesus rejects the part of the law that states an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. And while that rule was part of the Mosaic law, it is more complicated than just a rejection of the law as handed down by Moses. In the first reading, from Leviticus, the Law of Moses, states you shall love your neighbor as yourself and today's Psalm states the Lord is kind and merciful.

If we understand that the law an eye for eye, etc., is actually a prohibition not to incur a greater punishment on your neighbor than he inflicted on you rather than a permission to give him a good whack then we come closer to understanding the consistency in God's law over time. But Jesus is asking us to go beyond a legal redress and instead take actions that should affect our tormentor.

Perhaps this point can be better illustrated by three examples from the relatively recent past, all from shortly after World War II.

Rev. Richard Wumbrand was a Lutheran minister in Romania in the 1940s and 1950s. He taught that Communism and Christianity were incompatible. This led to Rev. Wumbrand being repeatedly jailed and tortured in Communist Romania. Once a guard was torturing him and recognizing the despair in his victim and trying to discourage him, said, "Your prayers have not reduced your suffering. What good is your prayer? If you are beaten and almost broken what good can come from your prayer?" Rev. Wumbrand responded, "No, they will not help me, but they might lead to your conversion."

He was not praying to be saved from torture. He was praying that his guard would be saved for Jesus. This is part of the message Christ is trying to get us to understand. Self-giving love will give our enemy an opportunity to convert.

Takashi Nagai was the head of the Radiology Department at Nagasaki University in August of 1945. In the early 1930s while still a medical student, he had left his Shinto faith and became an atheist, that modern rational man rejected. The journey many young scientists take when they become overly focused on the rationale to the exclusion of faith. But when he saw his mother one day, he knew there was a hereafter and he began his journey to Catholicism. He became involved with Japanese families who had maintained their faith since the great persecutions some 400 years earlier.

He married the love of his life, Midori whose family had been imprisoned and some were tortured and even died some 70 years earlier because of their faith. When the bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, Takashi survived because he was in the concrete Medical School. His children survived because they were in a Franciscan monastery founded by a former patient of Takashi, Maximilian Kolbe in the early 1930s on the other side of the mountain. Midori was near ground zero, in Urakami, the historical Catholic district of the most Catholic city in Japan. She was vaporized. All Takashi could find was some ash and her melted rosary. Takashi became a great Catholic Christian writer and poet in the six years before he died of radiation poisoning.

He wrote of peace and civilian use of nuclear power. He was visited by the Emperor of Japan among other dignitaries.

Shortly after the bombing, he was asked by the Bishop to speak at the funeral Mass for the 8,500 Catholic bomb victims. He spoke of the many Catholic dead as the unblemished lamb who was offered up to lead to the end of the war. At the end of a book he completed shortly before his death in 1951, he quoted Tertullian that the Church is built on the blood of the martyrs. We can offer our sufferings as a sacrifice to the Lord.

In 1945 near the end of World War II in Europe, American pilot Dean Hess mistakenly bombed an orphanage in which approximately 40 children died. Shaken by the event, in some ways he became his own enemy. How do you extract revenge from yourself when you are the problem? Hess became a minister and tried to devote himself to God, but nothing helped his sense of guilt. He had taken innocent lives. He rejoined the Air Force and trained the South Korean Air Force in the early days of the Korean war. His base was close to the front lines. Perhaps because he had accidentally bombed an orphanage five years earlier, he became passionate about helping orphans. There were many, many Korean orphans. He did what he could to help to establish a Korean orphanage. In December 1950 when the Chinese entered the war by crossing the Yalu River, he and his air base were forced to evacuate to the south. But what about the orphans who lived near the base? Would he just abandon them? He helped to organize the "Kiddie Car Airlift" in which 950 orphans and 80 orphanage staff members were evacuated in Air Force transport planes. And he helped to establish an orphanage on the island of Cheju where the orphans would be safe from the ravages of war.

If we have an enemy, we can pray and accept suffering for their conversion as Pastor Wumbrand did. If we are subject to some great loss, we can treat it as a sacrifice as Takashi Nagai did. If we have committed some wrong, we can become passionate about doing a good like Lt. Col Hess. Whatever the case, Jesus is not telling us to be meek when we turn the other cheek. He is telling us to spread the faith through the Cross, our cross.

~Dcn. Jerry