

Sixth Sunday of Easter: Protecting Our Culture

Today's first reading is an abbreviated and amalgamated version of the first serious internal difficulty that faced the early Church. With the success of the evangelization of the gentiles, many non-Jews were becoming Christian. This led to a questioning of their admittance into the faith. No one doubted that the Lord had come for all people, but some were convinced that since Jesus and the apostles were Jewish, and the Jews were the Chosen people, the Gentiles should first become Jewish before becoming Christian. Paul and Barnabas, the successful evangelists of so many of the gentiles, were vehemently opposed to this and took their opposition to the apostles gathered in Jerusalem. The conclusion of today's reading relates the decision of the Church: the gentiles were to be welcomed into the faith. They did not have to be circumcised or follow any of the Jewish practices. They merely had to be sure that they abstained from meat sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from immorality.

Now it certainly is not popular today and probably never has been popular for anyone to receive directives on living. The apostles told the gentiles that they were to abstain from anything connected to pagan sacrifice and from immorality. They were being told that they could not live in the way that everyone else was living. They could not join in on certain pagan festivals that hid despicable actions behind religion. No one wants to be told what they can and cannot do. But Christianity is a lifestyle. And that lifestyle is radically opposed to the pagan lifestyle, to pagan immorality.

That is from the negative side, from the positive side, the gentile converts and the rest of us, are told to adopt a way of life, a culture, that is Christocentric, centered on the Lord.

Let's take a closer look at that word, culture. Culture is defined as the totality of social behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other patterns of human work and thought. The word comes from the Latin word, *cultus*, or cult. At the heart of culture is worship.

Our brilliant St. John Paul II coupled culture with the dignity of the human person in his arguments to the people of Poland, and Czechoslovakia, Russia, and people throughout the Communist world of the late twentieth century. He explained that no one had the right to deprive a person of his or her culture. It resulted in the people of Poland demanding a restoration of religion. The first time that St. John Paul II went to Poland, hundreds of thousands of the people chanted, "We want God." And, as we are all pleasantly aware, once communism fell in Poland, it was only a brief time before it fell throughout Eastern Europe.

We enjoy a Catholic, Christian culture. Our way of life revolves around our faith. Like the letter to the early gentile Christians demanded, we abstain from pagan immorality. At least we do our best to avoid this. But we do not feel limited. In place of the darkness of sinful manners of living, we have the light and joy of living with

purpose and meaning. We have the hope of eternal life. As the second reading states, the New Jerusalem does not need a sun or moon for light. The Lamb, Jesus, is the light.

But there are forces that want to eliminate our culture. There have been efforts to cancel our culture. The cancel culture movement has gotten a lot of press recently, but really, there has always been an effort to attack people with faith by attacking their culture.

The school districts in our area have replace the name, Christmas, with winter break. I am convinced that the violence of the efforts to eliminate Christ from Christmas has more to do with attacking the Christian culture than with being sensitive to non-Christian religions. After all, the school districts have already successfully reinterpreted Thanksgiving from a day of giving thanks to God for the harvest, as it was established by our Founding Fathers--who, I might add, were very religious--to a day of thanking each other and celebrating the wonderful gifts the early colonists received from Native Americans. This was a successful attack against a culture that sees the hand of God in all good gifts.

Americans, as well as people throughout the world, are easily influenced by the movies and television. Statistics show that the vast majority of producers, directors and writers are atheistic. Therefore in most of their presentations, the American family is godless. What this is saying is that if worship has a place in your family, than yours is not a typical American family. This is another direct attack on our culture. Hollywood is doing its best to destroy the reality that most Americans are, in fact, religious.

These are just a few of the attacks on our Christian culture. You can all name many more. All these attacks emphasize the need we have to seek and find support from each other to affirm our way of life and to protect and nourish the presence of Christ among us.

There are also many challenges to our culture. As humanity progresses, we have to siphon that which is a true advancement from that which is an attack on the presence of God among us. This is often quite difficult because a desirable immediate solution often overlooks the creation of long term problems. For example, as we learned about forty years ago, the concept of a surrogate mother resulted in an immediate solution, a child for a childless couple, but led to a long term problem, a surrogate mother who demanded the return of the baby. Challenges such as these are continually occurring in the medical field, from fetal stem cell research, to cloning, IVF, etc. These present questions to our culture as to what is or is not acceptable for a Christian lifestyle.

We have to abstain from pagan practices and from immorality. That's what the letter from Jerusalem directed. This is easier said than done. We really need help to discern where pagan immorality exists. We need help to fight off the attacks on our

culture. We need even more help to recognize and determine the Christian response to the challenges to our culture.

We cannot be successful in defending and promoting our culture without divine help. And God gave us the Holy Spirit. We have to trust in the presence of the Spirit in the Church and in each of us to discern how we can best live our Christianity in our changing and challenging times.

Today we pray to the Holy Spirit to guide us when we face difficult challenges and give us the courage to follow the path that God has set for us. We cannot allow any one or any thing cancel our culture.