

Homily
May 17, 2009

Introduction

Reflecting on today's Gospel and Jesus' words at the Last Supper "This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you" (Jn. 15:12), I remembered a curious question which Pope Paul VI asked in a talk many years ago. The pope asked: "Is love enough; is it enough to love".

One would think that the Holy Father, having meditated all his life on this passage from today's Gospel, would not ask such a question. Clearly, Jesus places great importance, all importance on loving one another. However, the Pope did ask the question and then proceeded to answer it for himself: "Love is NOT enough if it is not accompanied by its minimum expression, justice." Strange question; profound answer.

I

When we think of it the pope had it exactly right, didn't he. If I tell you that I love you but treat you with anything less than fairness, equity, justice, then my statement about loving you rings totally false. Love's basic, "minimum" expression is justice.

As I say, I thought of this statement of Pope Paul VI as I read over today's Gospel, and as I watched this past Friday evening on NBC the documentary about Ms. Farah Fawcett-Major's battle with cancer.

II

If you watched the documentary, you remember what a compelling, tender and sad story it told, of an attractive woman and her apparent losing struggle to overcome this dreadful disease. There was much footage, done by herself with the help of her friends, of this woman's treatment at the best hospitals in the U.S. and in Germany: the drugs, and procedures; her endless flights back and forth between this country and Europe; the collaboration between American and German specialists all attempting to extend this woman's life.

I found myself rooting for Ms. Fawcett -Major.

III

But I also found myself wondering about the hundreds of thousands, millions perhaps, who have no access to such care. I remembered another documentary several weeks ago about another woman whose free clinic where she was being treated for cancer had to be closed for lack of funding.

In the face of these two scenarios: that of Farah Fawcett-Major and that of an uninsured single mother of a 15-year-old son, we would all say that both should get the kind of treatment that Ms. Fawcett-Major is receiving.

But even that is questionable, isn't it. The world does not have the resources to treat everyone with that degree of sophistication. In health care, as in everything else, our resources are finite.

IV

These are the dilemmas that face us when we act on Pope Paul's insight that justice is love's minimum expression. These are the justice questions: how much treatment is enough? How much is too much? How do we bring equity into national and global health care?

Conclusion

And the questions become very personal sometimes. For people like myself who are getting older they come close to home. For example, five years ago I underwent a fairly sophisticated procedure to implant a stent into a nearly-blocked coronary artery. Even as the doctors and nurses were working on me, I wondered if the day was not approaching when I would say "no more". After more than seven decades of a full and very happy life, when should I say "dedicate this effort to others who have not lived as long and as well as I"?

I first came across this way of thinking about health care years ago in Lima, Peru, where a doctor friend of mine who had trained as an open-heart surgeon under Drs. DeBakey and Cooley at St. Luke's Hospital in Houston, TX told me that he had given up all thoughts of such sophisticated surgery in favor of saving 15-year-old kids who needed appendectomies in order to survive.

Looked at in this light the truth of Dostoevsky's words in his novel "The Brothers Karamazov" ring true. You may remember Dostoevsky's Father Zossima saying at one point in the novel: "Love in practice is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."

Stern words in the light of today's Gospel and in the light of Pope Paul's further insight about justice being love's minimum expression.