

Homily for September 6, 2009

Introduction

Let me drop a name as I begin this reflection. It's that of the world-class theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, whom I knew well during my years in Peru. He once told us that when academics would come to discuss some esoteric bit of theological speculation, he would direct them to the Letter of St. James. Gustavo said that the plain-spoken practicality of that Letter was good for these cerebral people.

Today's excerpt from James is a good example of Gustavo's observation. As we heard, it speaks in very ordinary terms about not discriminating between the well-dressed person who might enter the gathering and the shabby fellow who could also show up.

I

The Letter goes on to say that God has chosen the poor of the world as special favorites, giving them a privileged place in God's Reign.

In these later times we've come to call this insight the "preferential option for the poor", a phrase which many people find hard to accept. How can God, how can we prefer one person over another, one class of people over another?

One of the planners for this Sunday's liturgy had a wonderful explanation for this "option". As a high school religion teacher she once ran into students who were having difficulty understanding/accepting the idea of a "preferential option for the poor". She told us that she asked the students if any of them had a sibling with any particular difficulties - with studies, or emotions, or physical limitations. Most of them answered yes. The teacher then reminded them that their parents surely gave extra attention to those sisters or brothers and that no one felt cheated or diminished by that fact. Again, the students agreed. That, concluded the teacher, is how God treats the poor: with extra care and concern because they need it. Lesson learned.

II

During Senator Ted Kennedy's recent funeral and memorials these things were very often spoken about. How the Senator did all kinds of good things on behalf of the less-fortunate, both on national and international, as well as very local levels. How he went to a local school in the District of Columbia each week to read to at risk children; how he checked the report card of a young man who worked in the Capitol; how he sponsored legislation after legislation in favor of all kinds of needy persons.

In these testimonies the point was made several times that such an attitude and way of operating was a direct consequence of Kennedy's Catholic Faith.

III

Indeed, the "option for the poor" is part of our Catholic DNA. We have a built in sense, an upbringing, a conviction as Catholics that our lives have to be about something greater than ourselves. Of course other religious traditions have these same convictions as well. But it seems that Catholicism is especially centered on the requirement of helping the poor.

This is true even of those among us whom many of us would consider not at all good examples of Catholic-Christianity. Take for example the following true story:

Cardinal Law, the deposed Archbishop of Boston, deposed because of his total failure with regard to dealing with the clergy scandal in that city, once received a phone call from a resigned priest. The man had contracted AIDS and was asking if the Cardinal would agree to celebrate his funeral Mass. The Cardinal agreed, and then asked the man how he was doing. "Not so well" came the reply. The Cardinal assured him that if he needed a place where he would be cared for, that the Cardinal's own residence was open to him.

Shortly afterwards, the resigned priest wound up in the hospital suffering a medical crisis. The Cardinal heard of it and went to see the man. Entering the hospital room, Law found the sick person in bed very ill and his partner assisting him. The Cardinal went to the partner, embraced him and said: "Thank you for taking care of my brother".

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me take today's reading from St. James and the lesson it teaches to another level. We just commemorated the 4th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina and the devastation it worked in New Orleans. The scandal of a country which as yet has not rebuild that city after all this time, particularly the part of the city inhabited by the poor, is startling.

Our society needs the kind of "option for the poor" which our Catholic tradition so emphasizes. We really need to inject this concern into our public life because as we know, as the prophets have warned - every society will be judged on how it has treated the widows, orphans and poor.