

Homily for September 9, 2007 - PAX Community, Mclean, VA

23rd Sunday Ordinary Time

### Introduction

Last Sunday I participated in the demonstration held in Prince William County in protest of the harsh measures that county has taken recently against the immigrant population there. As I walked along in my Franciscan habit, a man approached me and began asking me questions in Spanish. Now this Boston Irish face of mine doesn't easily lend itself to spontaneous conversations in Spanish, so the gentlemen was surprised, I think, when I answered him in Spanish.

After several questions on his part I asked him who he was and he told me that he was a reporter for the Arlington diocesan newspaper, The Herald. Almost without reflection I told him he should quote me in his article as saying that the absence of the Arlington bishop and indeed all the other priests of the diocese (with the exception of one other Franciscan) was noted and much regretted.

That little anecdote might be seen as self-serving on my part. It's easy to criticize the bishop and the church. And all of us - bishops, priests, laity and religious - will have to answer for our actions - or lack thereof. No doubt I shall have to account for a lot that I do or don't do. I only tell this little story about my words with the diocesan reporter to underscore the principal message of today's Gospel - our call to be followers of Jesus and the price tag that comes with that call.

### I

To be called as disciples of Jesus is a huge vocation, as Jesus indicates so clearly in the Gospel we've just heard. The call has enormous consequences for each of us. As we noted before proclaiming today's Gospel, its context is that last journey of Jesus to Jerusalem where he will meet his destiny - condemnation, torture, execution - and resurrection. His mention of what the disciple must pay is in the framework of what Jesus was about to pay as God's Suffering Servant.

### II

Recently I have read a long article by Larry Rasmussen, a Lutheran theologian, on the subject of his denomination's response to the Nazi era in Germany. Rasmussen first analyzes the social reality of that time and place, then lays out the different ways his church reacted to the course which Germany took during those fateful years.

Here in his words is the situation of Germany as the decade of the 30's unfolded, a situation with notable parallels to our own today:

"...there was in 1930-1933, the years just prior to the National Socialist (Nazi) accession to power a surge of aggressive national pride, really a national chauvinism. It welled up

in response to national humiliation: the defeat in World War I and the burdensome Treaty of Versailles. ...Germany was the teacher of the world, the leader in science and technology and an economic powerhouse.

"...there were in the 1920's the dreams and the articulation... of a rationale and plan for a new German empire.

"There was next, starting in 1933... the curtailment of civil liberties and the organization by the new government of a sophisticated propaganda marching as the new government captured the media. There was the alliance of a capitalist business class with a military caste and... an alliance of this business-military alliance with right-wing populism... the working class voted its interests in accord with the interests of a strong corporate and military elite...

"Lastly, there was the projection of the causes of national woes and humiliation upon a despised 'other', Socialists, Communists and Jews in the first instance, gypsies, gays and lesbians and Jehovah's Witnesses in lesser numbers."

### III

According to Rasmussen, the response of the Lutheran Church in Germany was threefold:

- among numbers of Lutherans there was enthusiastic support of the new regime;
- other Lutherans held to a neutrality in matters of politics, one which maintained distance between faith and the preaching of the Gospel from the realm of politics and governance.
- finally, there was the "confessing Church" in the Lutheran communion which opposed Nazism by saying no to Adolph Hitler and yes to Jesus.

### IV

The most famous proponent of the Confessing Church was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a young pastor/theologian. We know his story: he came to America from Germany in the 30's to pursue studies and was offered a teaching position at a renown seminary in New York. His friends urged him to stay in the U.S. but he insisted that his place was back in his native Germany. After years of opposing Hitler's nationalism, Bonhoeffer was jailed and executed by that regime.

Bonhoeffer wrote a book called "The Cost of Discipleship" and situated the different responses to Nazism not in personal terms but in terms of the Church - the hierarchy, laity, priests and religious. All of these groups as Church were in one of the camps mentioned above. They were either enthusiastic supporters of the regime, or neutral before its injustices and violence, or opposed.

V

I believe this story of the Lutheran Church during the 1930's and beyond has a direct application to us, the Church, today. At the beginning of a week during which we shall commemorate our national humiliation of 9/11/01 and hear the Petreus report about our course of action in Iraq, these same choices felt by the Lutheran Church nearly 80 years ago confront us today.

#### Conclusion

It seems to me that communities like PAX have to choose among the same three responses -enthusiastic support; a craven neutrality; challenging outspokenness. This presents an overriding task for the steering committee of this community and our prayer is that we shall not fail this test.