

October 17, 2004
The Prophet Hosea

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It may be the case that we have heard the plainest words of Holy Scripture so often that we no longer really hear them. A long but shallow acquaintance with the Bible's most obvious teachings may serve sometimes to deflect, if not actually to dull, even the keen double-edged sword of God's Word. We assume that the point of the divine will has already pierced its way into our hearts, whereas in truth we may have spent much of our lives dodging and deftly parrying the thrust of the blade.

Take, for example, the simple mandate to love our enemies. The thing could hardly be plainer: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you . . . But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? . . . And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you?" (Luke 6:27,32,33).

Many of us assume we have heard this injunction, whereas it is likely that we have merely stepped aside to let it pass by. It is certainly the case that a modern prejudice makes the command to love our enemies a thing hard to understand. Because in contemporary speech the word "love" rather frequently refers to feelings, there is a prior social disposition that prompts us to interpret this dominical command in a mainly emotional sense. We imagine ourselves directed to entertain kind and benevolent sentiments towards our enemies, so as long as we are blessed with the inner dexterity to throw these emotions prominently on our mental screen, we fancy that we really do love our enemies.

Regarded more closely, however, the Sacred Text says something quite different. It does not tell us how we are to feel toward our enemies. Indeed, it shows not the slightest interest in how we feel about our enemies. The love the Bible commands has about it, rather, a completely positive, active and practical sense.

The meaning of the verb "love" is illustrated by its context. Three times in the passage cited above the injunctions to "love" and to "do good" are set in parallel construction, creating what grammarians call a hendiadys, a rhetorical device in which a single idea is conveyed in two forms. Thus, the commands to "love" and to "do good" mean exactly the same thing, the second being simply the explanation of the first. That is to say, a lover is by biblical definition a do-gooder.

In the original Greek text, in fact, this hendiadys is strengthened by a play of parallel sounds: *ei agapate . . . ean agathopoiete* - "if you love . . . if you do good."

Now it may happen, surely, that by doing good to our enemies, our emotions may change. We may in due course come to feel differently about those enemies. Well and

fine, but this is not the intent of the Lord's command, which is directed to our activity, not our sensitivity.

Now in respect to this matter, we are burdened with a deep modern bias that takes "feelings" as the valid test of what is real. Thus, we judge those things to be most genuine that we feel most deeply, as though spontaneity creates authenticity. Our poor nervous systems are pressed into service as barometers of reality.

Consequently, when duty—even divinely imposed duty—obliges us to do things we do not necessarily feel, the current culture disposes us to regard ourselves as phony and insincere. This is surely nonsense. I submit that this completely bogus presupposition of contemporary culture is a great impediment to hearing and doing the Word of God (cf. James 1:22-23).

Doing good to our enemies is of a piece, of course, with forgiving them, a thing the Lord repeatedly commands. Once again, it is important to observe exactly the nature of the mandate. We are not enjoined to "feel forgiveness." God seems not the least bit concerned how we feel on the subject of our enemies. In this case too, it may happen that the cultivated habit of forgiving our enemies may actually lead, down the road, to subjective sentiments of forgiveness. Well and fine, but it is the act, not the feeling, which is commanded.

The martyred Stephen may have felt rather bitterly about those enemies, "stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears," who were violently taking his life. If so, it is a matter of no moment. The important thing is that Stephen really forgave them (Acts 8:51,60).

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