

January 29, 2006

Sunday of the Canaanite Woman

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Real pagans, if they are also good and sane pagans, are obliged to agree on certain rules among themselves, a set of common expectations, in order to make social life possible. Indeed, they must exert this effort simply in order to survive. They have to establish minimum social standards of behavior, with a view to discouraging murder, adultery, fraud, and other conduct harmful to one another. In pursuit of this purpose, they promulgate laws, establish forums of adjudication, and provide for sanctions against offenders. Philosophers call this cooperative effort the Social Contract, which strives to preserve at least a manageable level of public decency and order, sufficient to make civic life possible, even enjoyable.

The goals of a decent, stable society are modest. Its standards are not necessarily demanding. It endeavors to form citizens, not saints. It does not command holiness. It does not require fast days and the maintenance of vigils. It imposes on no one the obligation to strive for sanctity, and except during wartime it does not normally exact heroic virtue of its common citizens.

On the other hand, a society of this sort should hardly feel threatened when some of its own members, not entirely satisfied with the modest goals of civic life, desire to strive for something higher. Ordinarily a good, sane pagan society should have no objection to a few saints and ascetics in its midst, as long as these saints and ascetics are also solid citizens.

Early Christian apologists made this point over and over, tirelessly explaining to the pagans of their own day that the higher calling of the Christian faith posed no threat to the stability and wellbeing of ordinary society. They assured their readers that Christians, precisely because they held themselves to more a demanding spiritual criterion, could always be counted on to maintain the minimum moral expectations of the social order.

To the chagrin of reasonable pagans, however, it sometimes happens that those professing adherence to the higher norms of religious faith

nonetheless fall below--even far below--the elementary, minimum level of goodness expected in a decent society. How can this be?

Indeed, it is a demonstrable fact that the people of God, when they fall, often enough do not fall to the level of good paganism, but much lower. They sink down so far that even the law-abiding pagan is bewildered. And this bewilderment constitutes scandal in the strict sense, because it testifies that the people of God are truly bad people. It convinces the unbeliever that they are hypocrites, who do not truly believe what they declare.

How will pagans take seriously those who profess to be better than the world, when in fact they live by norms conspicuously lower than those of the world? How can a Christian church hold its bishops, for instance, to lower ethical expectations in matters of business than the chairman of an ordinary corporation? How can a priest not be unfrocked for offenses that would promptly send a school counselor to prison?

The Books of Maccabees, which describe at length the severe pagan persecution of the Jews during the second century before Christ, tell also of the scandals caused in the pagan world by very bad but highly placed Jews. What would prompt the serious pagan of that day to take the biblical faith seriously, for instance, when he saw its adherents shamelessly competing with one another in ever greater efforts of bribery to obtain the honor of the high priesthood?

Among the worst of these latter was a character named Menelaus, who simply outbid the previous high priest, Jason, who also had obtained that office by bribery. Indeed, by his cunning use of riches stolen from the temple treasury, Menelaus became for a while a major player in the politics of the Middle East.

The treachery of Menelaus was shocking even to the pagans of the time. When he arranged for the murder of Onias, an earlier high priest, the deed touched the moral sensitivity of the whole region, even of that cruel persecutor of the Jews, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (2 Maccabees 4: 35-38). Later, when a delegation of Jews complained of Menelaus to the king, the high priest arranged to have them murdered as well, an act that horrified even the not usually sensitive Phoenicians (4: 44-49).

The Books of Maccabees, while describing the persecution of God's people by the pagans of that day, make it clear that their worst enemies

were sometimes their own coreligionists. Alas, among God's people this seems often to be the case.

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