

Homily: Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ King – Nov. 22, 2020

By Fr. Virgil Petermeier, osc

We gather to celebrate Jesus Christ as our King and King of the whole universe. We must realize that by participating in this celebration we are telling Jesus to be the king of our hearts and lives. That actually was our baptismal promise. Aware that we don't always fulfill that promise, we call out to our compassionate God for mercy.

Initially I thought that preparing this homily would be so easy. Why? Well, it's simply about the necessity of Christians doing the works of mercy---feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and prisoners, etc. Well, upon studying a bit, the initial focus of this gospel shifted to something I had missed before. "Whatever you did for one of these **least brothers** of mine you did for me." Matthew uses the term "brothers" always to indicate disciples. Therefore, helping, or refusing to help one of the brothers, namely one of the disciples, was simultaneously an indication of accepting Jesus and his message or not. For the early Christians, this was an absolutely controversial, foundational and dangerous choice for them to make. Jesus' disciples were sometimes jailed, killed or shunned and not given basic necessities. There was persecution of the Christian disciples.

At the end of today's Gospel, Matthew uses the shorter term, "the least ones [the most needy ones]"—not just disciples. That is the clear intimation that accepting Jesus and his message is calls for fulfilling the needs of any and all of our sisters and brothers, who are in some dire need. Clearly many of Jesus' other messages, especially his parables, such as the good Samaritan, show us that helping **any "least" ones**—like a person half-dead in a ditch—is an essential way of fulfilling Jesus' command to love.

As you may know, on Oct. 3, 2020, Pope Francis signed a new encyclical at the altar of St. Francis Assisi in Assisi. The encyclical is called "Fratelli Tutti" meaning "Brothers [and Sisters] All"—a term used by St. Francis. Pope Francis used the evidence of 2020 mixed, confusing and often ineffective ways various nations have dealt with the pandemic. He sees this as an indication that we don't seriously enough consider one another as true sisters and brothers. We have been too haphazard and overly casual about protecting ourselves and one another and subsequently exhausting our medical personnel and overwhelming hospitals.

One of the categories of people whom Pope Francis deems as “the least ones” are the strangers. Hence his call once again for nations to be inviting and welcoming of strangers, as Jesus just called for. In our present day those strangers are especially the refugees in need of a new and safe home--people fleeing from their countries which are war-torn or not safe to live in.

Several evenings ago, I had a Zoom meeting with a faith dialogue committee consisting of my confrere, Fr. Kosman Sianturi, osc, and five other Muslim women and men. All of them came as highly educated refugees from Turkey, because highly educated people became the hunted victims to be imprisoned. One of the three Turkish women has a doctorate in biology and now works at the Phoenix branch of Mayo as a cancer researcher. Two men are doctoral students. Two other women are middle-school math teachers. They are truly contributing to our society. In addition to their busy careers they now join this planning committee for an interfaith dialogue event in February 2021. They want to build bridges, something which Pope Francis calls for in his new encyclical.

If we don't build bridges and thereby refuse refugees, whether educated and not-so-educated, we enlarge the group of suffering “**least ones.**” When we build walls, we are categorizing mostly good but suffering people as “least” and even as unworthy of getting a better life in our good country. When we don't improve our justice system, we enlarge the world's already largest single-country group of incarcerated peoples—United States prisoners. They now total more than 2 million, one-half of which are black and Hispanic. That's a huge number of “least ones” in our society.

Today Jesus continues to tell us, “Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.”

May we allow Jesus, our foolish yet glorious king of love, to guide and direct our hearts and lives so as to build a new world of sisters and brothers ALL.