

## Homily: Sept. 10, 2023

By Fr. Virgil Petermeier, osc

Today, we celebrate our compassionate God. He wishes to strengthen us all in facing one another's sins and weaknesses. How many of us desire changes in ourselves and in those with whom we live and work? As parents and grandparents, how many of you anguish about your children or grandchildren not carrying out what you think is best? Our God is compassionate and ready to help us through his word and sacred meal. So we call out, "Lord, [Christ], have mercy."

Today's readings help us face, with love, one another's weaknesses, mistakes, addictions, and bad choices.

The first reading reminds us that just being "nice" by not saying anything to a person choosing poorly or harmfully, is equivalent to participating in and supporting the bad or harmful behavior that person is doing. On the other hand, we must realize we cannot force goodness but only invite goodness. We cannot change a person. We can only invite that person to consider a better way.

Forcing change will usually backfire. Forcing or manipulating a person for something good—even forcing someone to go to church or stop smoking and drinking, usually makes that person more belligerent or hard-hearted. We would be better to follow St. Paul's advice, "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another." In another letter, Paul said something similar, "Overcome evil with good." Usually, people have both bad habits and good qualities. Although behaving unhealthily, that person may also be kind, work hard, and have good humor. Then, it would be far better to say something like this, "People really appreciate your help and humor. Yet, I feel sad when alcohol changes your good spirit to anger. I love you—and I pray for you."

We often want others and ourselves to change, but it seems slow or not happening. What keeps us from changing? Often, peer pressure, coupled with the fear of not being accepted, may prompt us to continue buying what we do not need or lying and gossiping. We think, "Everyone else is using their cell phone at the table—so will I. Or, many people watch porn—why should I stop watching the same thing. Or, so many people aren't going to church, and yet they seem to be doing OK."

Such thoughts are merely excuses we use to continue with unhealthy and harmful ways of living. At times like that, it is beneficial to ask God what is best—have another drink, or stop; watch one more porn clip or stop. Deep down, we know God's answer. That's why it is so helpful to turn a moment of temptation into an opportunity to ask God, "What do you want me to do now?"

Finally, Paul uses Jesus' words, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That does not mean to love your neighbor **as much as** you love yourself, but rather, love that other person in front of you as if you were standing there. Perhaps this sounds simple. But, we know it often is not easy to do. And that's precisely why Jesus advises us to gather in twos or threes and pray.

When we gather as a group with one mind, one heart, and one prayer, such as we do in this Eucharist, marvelous changes can and will happen. The ability to love and forgive will grow, ESPECIALLY when we pray IN THE NAME OF JESUS, meaning—pray with the love, hope, and faith of Jesus as sincerely as we can.

Jesus said at the end of today's Gospel, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."