

26TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR—Year B

It's often said—rightly said--that Catholicism is a “both/and” faith, always ready to recognize the complementary nature of truths that some other traditions might separate in such a way as to accept one and dismiss the other. I say this at the beginning of my homily because what I am going to say could possibly appear instead as an “either/or,” so emphasizing one point as apparently to overlook or even deny another.

Our first reading gives us Moses' defense of two persons, Eldad and Medad, who were outside of what one might call an “in-group” but nevertheless received the spirit of prophecy, to the delight of Moses even though it troubled his aide Joshua. Similarly, in the Gospel reading Jesus came to the defense of a man who was doing a good deed but whom the disciple John wanted to prevent because he was not one of Jesus' direct followers. Jesus' words, “Whoever is not against us is for us,” could well be taken as justifying all that leaders of the Church have been doing in recent decades to work with those of other faith traditions in order to promote peace and justice in the world. Although Pope John Paul II was strongly criticized by some of his own advisors for meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Dalai Lama, and more than 150 other religious leaders from many different traditions to pray for peace at Assisi in 1986, most people praised him for this initiative, which he repeated in 1993, and by now that kind of collaboration is largely non-controversial. What I want to do this morning is go farther and ask whether there is any point in widening the net to include not just those who, in Jesus' words, are “not against us” but also those who really are in some way opposed to us. To put it most bluntly, can we learn anything at all even from militant atheists?

To take this out of the realm of generalities, what about the man who is probably the best-known atheist today, Richard Dawkins, who has a professorial chair for the public understanding of science at Oxford University? Does he have anything at all to say about religion that is worth hearing? In a recent memoir covering the first three or four decades of his life, Dawkins gives

various reasons for his unbelief. Some of them, in my opinion, can be rather easily dismissed. For example, he writes that when he was nine years old he learned from his mother that there are many religions besides Christianity and that they all teach different, even contradictory, things, so, he writes, “why believe the one in which, by sheer accident of birth, I happened to be brought up?”¹ But in fact our Church teaches clearly that it is not a matter of dismissing all other traditions as simply wrong, all of them merely contradicting both the Catholic faith and each other, but rather, in the language of the Second Vatican Council, of recognizing the rays of truth that are to be found in all the great religious traditions and seeking to appropriate whatever is of value in them and compatible with our own faith. Many adherents of other religions understandably hold the same position with regard to their own tradition.

As a second reason for his unbelief, Dawkins writes that he “became increasingly aware that Darwinian evolution was a powerfully available alternative to [a] creator god as an explanation of the beauty and apparent design of life.”² This objection would hold water only if one put divine action and natural causality on the same level or plane, in such a way that the more one becomes able to explain something by natural causes, the more God recedes into the background. That is a trap into which some Christian thinkers have fallen, but not those who are most astute and most familiar with the best of our theological tradition, going all the way back to great thinkers like Augustine and Aquinas. They see that what is often called God’s primary causality is on a totally different level from the secondary causes examined in the natural sciences.

The third reason that Dawkins gives may sound trivial, but I think it may be the most powerful, even though the specific example he offers is from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* rather than from something specifically Catholic. He writes that when he was at a

boarding school for his secondary education, “I was especially incensed by the hypocrisy of the ‘General Confession’ in which we mumbled in chorus that we were ‘miserable offenders’. The very fact that the exact words were written down to be repeated the following week, and the week after and for the rest of our lives (and had been so repeated ever since 1662), sent a clear signal that we had no intention of being anything other than miserable offenders in the future. Indeed, the obsession with ‘sin’ ... is one of the nastiest aspects of Christianity.”³

Those words remind me of something that an acquaintance of mine said some months ago, even though he did not utter it with anything like the vehemence of Dawkins. My acquaintance is a layperson who attends daily Mass, prays some of the Liturgy of the Hours every day, and is diligent about doing his professional work as thoroughly and as faithfully as possible. He is certainly not in any sense a candidate for potential canonization, but he told me that he feels very uneasy when, in reciting the Confiteor at the beginning of Mass, he has to say time and time again that he has “greatly sinned” and has indeed done so not only through his fault, but through his “most grievous fault.” He is so intent on sincerely trying to follow God’s will in all things day after day that he just doesn’t think that he has “greatly sinned.” This doesn’t bother him in any oppressive way, but it certainly does not make him feel closer to God.

A far more poignant instance of what can happen to a person when sin or sinfulness is greatly emphasized appeared in a book we read in the refectory a while back. It was an autobiography written by a man whom I had the privilege of knowing in the final years of his life. William Johnston was a Jesuit from Ireland who spent most of his life at Sophia University in Tokyo and who wrote some fine books on Christian spirituality as found in such classics as *The Cloud of Unknowing* and the works of Sts. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila. In the early part of his autobiography Fr. Johnston recounts with great honesty how, when he was just

fourteen years old, he was so overwhelmed by fear of hell because of the sexual thoughts or desires that naturally came to him in early adolescence that once, while crossing the Irish Sea with his mother during World War II, he kept imagining that he heard a German torpedo sizzling through the water to sink the boat and send him straight to hell. He writes that he was “overcome with terror, . . . became violently sick, and vomited on the floor” of the cabin.⁴ To whatever extent that is an example of what is sometimes called “Catholic guilt,” one can only say that it is not in accord with the way God wants any of us to live.

We also read how some of the greatest saints considered themselves the worst of sinners. This is often explained by the fact that their unusually vivid awareness of the holiness of God made even their slightest failings seem like enormous crimes, but it could also be that a pervasive overemphasis on universal human sinfulness affected them more than most persons. Back in the early seventeenth century, there was a holy nun of our English Benedictine Congregation named Dame Gertrude More, a distant relative of St. Thomas More. Some of her devotions were published after her death, and while there is much that is laudable and of enduring value in them, there are also parts that I think should strike all of us as excessive, as when she writes: “Take pity, O Lord, take pity on me, a most miserable sinner, doing things worthy of blame and worthily suffering for the same. . . . If I ponder the evil which I daily commit, that which I endure [in sickness] is nothing in comparison with it, that which I have done being much more grievous than my affliction.”⁵

There are certainly things that all of us do wrong and for which we should be sorry and ask forgiveness, but there is surely much in our spiritual tradition that is extreme in this regard. It all comes down to the question of whether human beings are fundamentally good or fundamentally bad. Does original sin or original blessing have the upper hand? It’s very

possible that when a person does something wrong, perhaps by seriously offending another person, and is then forgiven, the offender will conclude, “I’m bad, but you forgive me all the same. I’m no good, but even so you are so good that you forgive me.” But surely what should happen is that the forgiveness extended to a person will awaken a sense of that person’s own goodness, which has been partially damaged by the way he or she treated another.

In my opinion, an indication that most persons, deep down, are basically good was pointed out in a reading we heard a couple weeks ago at the beginning of night prayer, *Compline*. The author wrote as follows:

Until September 11, 2001, we had no sample of any size to tell us what people are like when they face certain death. Now, however, we know, thanks to dozens of cell phone calls,... what men and women do in these last seconds of their lives.

They forget themselves as they think of those they love, their spouses and children, their parents and friends. They do not complain or bemoan their fate. Neither do they pray for miraculous deliverance or even for the forgiveness of their sins....

They just want to tell others how much they love them, that they want them to be safe,... that their last will and their true testament is one of utter concern for those they cherish ...

The flaming towers and the skies were not filled with business travelers or tourists that last morning but with lovers, some laying down their lives for their friends, but all of them at their best, drawn fully out of themselves so that we see them as they really were all the time.⁶

Words like that are not only inspiring but encouraging. To return in conclusion to what I said at the beginning of this homily, yes, all of this may appear one-sided and even naïve, so I hasten to add that I do not deny that truly grievous sins have been and are being committed in our world, do not deny that the sacrament of penance or reconciliation is a great gift, do not deny that a person may develop so lax a conscience as to be quite unaware of ways in which he or she falls far short of what God asks of them, and do not deny that the sins of greed or the sexual abuse of children that Pope Francis has inveighed against have done massive harm to society and to the Church. But none of that is the whole truth, and we ought never let a sense of sin lead to the kind of terror that afflicted young Billy Johnston. One might indeed say that if left totally to ourselves, we would be nothing but sin and darkness, but in fact we are not left to ourselves, and through our union with Christ we may say, “You, Lord, are my light, my holiness, my heaven. You never tempt any of us beyond our strength, and with the help of your grace we may live lives ever more in accord with your will.” Great saints of the early Church like Athanasius of Alexandria and Basil of Caesarea said that Christ became one of us so that we might come to share in his own nature. That’s a glorious calling, and through his grace it is possible to live that way, so beautifully summed in a verse of a hymn by Charles Wesley we sometimes sing and with which I will conclude this homily:

Heavenly Father, Life divine,

Change my nature into thine!

Move and spread throughout my soul,

Actuate and fill the whole!

Be it I no longer now

Living in the flesh, but thou.

1" Richard Dawkins, *An Appetite for Wonder: The Making of a Scientist* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 140.

2" Ibid., 142.

3" Ibid., 140.

4" William Johnston, *Mystical Journey: An Autobiography* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 18-19.

5" Dame Gertrude More, ed. Dom H. Lane Fox, *The Holy Practices of a Divine Lover* (n.p., n.d.), 32.

6" Eugene Kennedy, 9-11: *Meditations at the Center of the World*, in *A Maryknoll Book of Inspiration* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 275.