

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Rom. 12: 16-21

Brethren: do not be wise in your own estimation. Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all. If possible, on your part, live at peace with all. Beloved, do not look for revenge but leave room for the wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Rather, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil with good.

Mt 8: 1-13

At that time, when Jesus came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And then a leper approached, did him homage, and said, "Lord, if you wish, you can make me clean." He stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, "I will do it. Be made clean." His leprosy was cleansed immediately. Then Jesus said to him, "See that you tell no one, but go show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses prescribed; that will be proof for them." When he entered Capernaum, a centurion approached him and appealed to him, saying, "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, suffering dreadfully." He said to him, "I will come and cure him." The centurion said in reply, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed. For I too am a person subject to authority, with soldiers subject to me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes; and to another, 'Come here,' and he comes; and to my slave, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, "Amen, I say to you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I say to you, many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven, but the children of the kingdom will be driven out into the outer darkness, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth." And Jesus said to the centurion, "You may go; as you have believed, let it be done for you." And at that very hour [his] servant was healed.

Conquer Evil with Good

Third Sunday after Epiphany (EF) – Rom 12: 16-21 / Mt. 8: 1-13
Ave Maria Catholic Church, January 22, 2023 - Fr. David M Vidal

Last Friday, many thousands of people marched in Washington, DC. It was the 50th anniversary of the *March for Life*. And this happened approximately seven months after the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 case that legalized abortion across the country.

Among the highlights of the day, was the daughter of St. Gianna Beretta Molla, who is also a doctor, Gianna Emanuela Molla, who spoke during the event. Her mother became ill while pregnant, and she was encouraged to abort her child to save her own life. But she chose life and passed away a few days after giving birth. The year was 1962. She was 39 years old. The saint's daughter said: *"I would not be here with all of you, if I had not been loved so much!"*

As good as the change in the Supreme Court's rule was, we are still in great need of the March for Life. Why? Because ultimately, we must work for the change of human hearts. Our hearts must be formed. Our hearts must learn to love. Our hearts must learn to produce fruits of true love, just like St. Gianna Beretta Molla and so many others who were ready to die for what is good, true, and beautiful!

Why do we still have to march for a principle as obvious as this: *"You shall not kill innocent children"*? What has happened to our society? Why do so many people challenge this principle? What is wrong with us? At the very least, we must admit that something is wrong with us. If we accept the statement that a baby can be killed in the mother's womb, something is terribly wrong with us.

Then, the question is: How did we arrive to this point? It will be impossible to examine the multiple personal reasons, but we can observe a common pattern. Our moral boundaries, as a society, have been in decline. What was unthinkable or at least shameful years ago, now, is permissible, or even more, is declared to be worthy of praise!

Our debacle begins when we decide to separate ourselves from our Creator. It is not surprising to know that according to statistics, the majority of people among Christians who defend abortion do not attend weekly Mass or weekly Christian services.

When we detach ourselves from God, little by little, we detach ourselves from God's order and providential plan for us. If we do not need God, it is because we think we are self-sufficient and autonomous. Then, we become the center of the world and the legislators of what is good and evil. When that happens, we could even say that "killing babies in the mother's womb" is not only permissible but worthy of praise!

How do we get back to our senses?

We begin with our need for prayers. The conversion of hearts is a miracle of grace, and we need to pray for this miracle. We need to pray for the change of unjust laws and the promulgation of good laws, but most especially, we must pray for the conversion of hearts.

Next, we must pray and work. And what is the work? The work is “education.” We must educate and form our hearts to accept what is good, true, and beautiful. Most probably, many of those who defend abortion have been taught since childhood that abortion is “care,” “love,” “compassion,” “true freedom,” and the sign of a “mature society.” Then, many people believe and are convinced that “this is true.”

We still have much to do to form ourselves and our younger generations. Where should we start? Let us listen to Saint Paul. In today’s first reading, taken from his letter to the Romans, Saint Paul teaches: **“Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil...” (Rom. 12:21).**

We know that we are not always strong. A child is not strong. The little child needs to grow. The little child is called to become a man or a woman filled with physical, intellectual, and spiritual strength. And we know that childhood is a time of growth. Our first school is the home. Our lives with dad, mom, and siblings become the first school of our lives: sharing, helping, and forgiving are some of the lifelong lessons that we receive at home.

We continue by attending Institutions, learning with teachers, companions, and friends. And we grow. But on this path, there is an important aspect that we need to be aware of. There is no doubt that the family educates and that the school teaches and educates, but both the action of the family and that of the school will remain incomplete (and even useless) unless each one of us undertakes the work of our own education. Our lives cannot be built only “from the outside.” Being a good person is not like a jacket or a hat that you wear; it goes deeper into us and is built in us from within.

Our lives depend very much on what we build “from within,” and that is our personal work. This work requires effort, perseverance, and patience. Our Lord Jesus speaks of this when he emphasizes that only “with perseverance” can we “save our souls” (See Lk 21:19).

In this path of growth, one of the fundamental steps is learning to say “no.” Perhaps, someone might say: *“That is easy... I say ‘no’ all the time... that is not a problem.”* That is not true. To say “no” is not easy. Saying “no” to what is evil is not easy. Saying “no” is the first step to true growth. Saint Paul says in his letter to the Romans: **“Do not be conquered by evil but conquer evil...” (Rom. 12:21).** Conquering evil is not easy; it is difficult. It is difficult because, in this world of ours, it seems that to be successful, we have to be crooked. It seems that to have something in life, we must lie to others or hurt and use others. It seems that the evil way is the way of life.

We must be brave and ready for this fight. We must be strong for the struggle: the struggle against evil: against everything that offends God, against every injustice, every falsehood and deceit, everything that insults and humiliates, everything that profanes human society and human relationships, every crime against life, in a few words: against every sin.

To conquer evil, we must fight. In this fight, we will have some friends and some enemies, but the fight is ours: we must conquer it. Saint Augustine once wrote this great quote: *“God who created you without you will not save you without you,”* (St Augustine, *Sermo* 169, 13, PL 38,923).

Victory and defeat are before us, and because we want to be victorious, we must say “no” to what is evil. Then, we must conquer evil in the battlefield of our hearts, first of all, and then by extension, in the hearts of others.

Now, the writing of Saint Paul does not end there. Saint Paul continues: **“Conquer evil with good,” (Rom. 12:21)**. It means that our path of growth cannot be reduced to saying “no” to evil; most importantly, we must say “yes” to what is good. Let us listen to Saint Paul, who teaches us in his letter to the Philippians: *“Consider whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious,”* (See Phil 4:8). We must reject evil and practice what is good.

Therefore: Against the avarice of those who accumulate worldly riches, show that all worldly things are too small for your heart because your heart desires God himself, and the world cannot contain Him.

Against the laugh of those who act against God’s will, show with your life that true happiness lasts forever, not just for a moment, and that you look for this everlasting happiness.

Against the dishonesty of those who lie and deceit others to satisfy themselves, show your hunger and thirst for true food and that living water that springs up to Heaven; show that you do not want rotten meat or broken wells.

Against the immorality of those who teach or practice impurity of heart, show that beauty that only comes from God’s friendship, a beauty that the world cannot give because it goes beyond our senses, and the world cannot take away because it will continue after death.

Against the anger of those who persecute you because you do good, renew your desire to do better because you have not yet achieved your goal, and only those who do good will live in the kingdom of Heaven.

If we do all these things, we will show with our lives that we belong to Christ. We will show that Christ abides in us. Then, we must not be afraid if we are cursed or hated or receive any kind of evil because we belong to Christ. We must not be afraid because Christ has already won this battle for us, and victory is ours. Amen