

Sermon for the Feast of the Holy Family - Fr. Paul Check

We describe the period of time before Adam and Eve committed the first sin as the state of “Original Justice”. (CCC 376) You and I have no experience of this state because we feel the effects of the Original Sin, called concupiscence. St Paul describes our human condition with humility and clarity: “The good I want to do, I don’t do. The evil that I want to avoid, that is what I do.” (Rom 7:19) We do not always live up to our good intentions, nor do we always avoid our weaknesses.

But for our first parents, prior to their infidelity to God, things were very different. They did not struggle with conflicting desires. In the state of Original Justice, they were not at cross-purposes with themselves. Indeed, they enjoyed an internal harmony: a unity of mind, heart and emotion, with no tendency to malice. All was rightly ordered: personally, in their relationship with one another, and in the relationship with God.

This wonderful harmony was possible because they freely and fully cooperated with God’s grace, with His will. They understood what was good, true and beautiful and they unselfishly and gratefully sought these things for themselves, for each other, but most of all for the love of God. Adam and Eve obeyed God because they loved Him...this was the highest and fullest expression of their freedom...and as a result, they had constant peace and joy.

We know from our personal struggle that this state of Original Justice has been lost. Why Adam and Eve acted as they did—why they disobeyed God—is a mystery, but it can be understood as a failure of love and gratitude. That our first parents exchanged their birthright for a mess of pottage (cf. Gen 25:29-34) is clear from what we see and feel daily in a fallen world.

For centuries and centuries, God allowed man to follow his own course, to try and find fulfillment and happiness apart from His creator, and to suffer the futility of his efforts. And then, “in the fullness of time,” the Good God intervenes out of compassion and love for his children. He gives us the infant Savior in the manger.

Today is the Feast of the Holy Family, and the Church offers us in the Gospel one of the few pictures we have of the family life of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. The scene is very familiar: the Finding in the Temple, the fifth Joyful Mystery of the Rosary. I would like to consider just one aspect of this episode in the life of the Holy Family.

To begin, St Luke tells us that Jesus was 12 years old at this time, a young boy who would probably be in 6th grade today. A question I sometimes ask children is: Was Jesus God when He was 12? Understandably, they sometimes hesitate in answering, and the replies are a mixture of “yes”, “no”, and silence. When I assure them that He was indeed God at age 12, I go on to inquire about Mary and Joseph...were they not human? Yes, Father, Mary and Joseph are human...about that, they are more confident.

And then, I point out this striking line, recorded by St Luke—the Communion antiphon for this Mass—which describes what happens after the Holy Family is reunited: “And He [Jesus] went down with them [Mary and Joseph] and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them.” (Lk 2:51)

So I say to the children: Why would Jesus who was God, even when He was 12 years old, be obedient to two human beings? After a thoughtful pause, the answer I usually receive is: “Because He wanted to give us a good example.”

That is a very fine answer, I tell them, and certainly true...but I don’t think it is the first reason for His obedience. Jesus does want to give us good example, and show us the right way to live...but His humanity is not only skin deep, so to speak...He is truly man and truly God and so He lives His humanity to the fullness of its perfection. In other words, He does not do things just so that we will see them and be edified by them.

Why was Jesus obedient to His parents, Mary and Joseph? ...I ask them again... Because He loved them! That is the first reason since it was and remains true...He loves them dearly and wishes to please them, and so, He obeys them.

In the Garden of Eden, in the state of Original Justice, our first parents—who were God's first children in creation—lived in a communion of love with God. They obeyed God because they loved Him, and this union of love and obedience ensured that everything was rightly ordered, first in their souls and then in their relationship with each other.

Man lost grace because he put aside his love for God in favor of self-love, and this led to disobedience, discord, and disaster. How will God remedy the problem? How will he overcome the sadness? How will He restore joy and peace? He will come into the world as the Son of Man, and show us what it means to be human by living a fully human life, so that we can be children of God once again. He will obey because He loves.

Parents—biological and spiritual—want the souls under their care to be obedient. Such is necessary and good for the training of the will, when obedience is directed to the truth. But adults cannot expect the souls of little ones to be docile and compliant if we are not so first ourselves...not because we have to, but because we want to...because we love. Because we love God whom we trust and believe is good, even when we suffer and when things do not unfold as we hope...and because we love even when the authority of God on earth in the Church requires of us things that difficult, and sometimes radically different from what friends or family are doing.

Love will always be the first and best motive for obedience, and it is the Sacred Heart of Jesus that tells us so.