

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 17, 2011
Homily for the Anglican Usage Mass
of the
St. Thomas More Society
celebrated at
St. Clare Roman Catholic Church, 2310 N. Washington Ave.
Scranton, Pennsylvania 18509
Matthew 13:24-43

The impulse to purge the tares from the midst of the wheat is strong among humans. Over the years the separation of the supposedly good from the supposedly bad has taken many forms; and every form this attempt takes produces untold suffering, as well as suffering with which we are all too familiar. What comes to mind immediately are the efforts of secularist/atheist regimes to “purify” society: so we remember the Holocaust and the slaughter of the Jews in Europe; we remember the Great Leap Forward and the deaths of millions in China; we remember the Khmer Rouge and the killing fields of Cambodia; we remember the Stalinist purges and the gulag archipelago of the Soviet Union. The atheists have claimed the most victims, but this impulse has occasionally infected the Church also.

The Inquisition, which took place primarily in Spain over the course of 300 years, claimed only 2,000 lives, yet it stands as the most famous example of a time Catholics attempted to separate the wheat from the tares this side of the Judgment Day. What the Spanish government sought were heretics and insincere Catholics who posed a threat to the state, and the Church all too readily did the dirty work. When the Church found heretics and false Catholics, many changed their tune for fear of what the State might do to them. Those who persisted in their heresy or insincerity were imprisoned, tortured, exiled and, as I said, on occasion killed. This episode is a black mark on the Church that the world has not yet forgotten, and it could have been avoided had the words of Jesus simply been heeded: “Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so it will be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his Kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers.”

So Jesus has promised to separate the good from the bad at the end of time. We need to be patient because, quite simply, we lack the faculties to reliably identify the good and the bad, the wheat and the weeds. Only God knows each human heart, only God knows the future course each of his servants will take; and so there is a risk that if we should take for ourselves the angels’ task, we will uproot the wheat along with the weeds. In fact, history has amply demonstrated that those who self-identify with the wheat and who actively “weed” society of the bad elements show themselves to be rather wicked. The “good” turn out to be rather bad, and many of their victims will stand with Jesus on the Last Day to judge their oppressors for their arrogance, impatience, and brutality.

Our limited faculties are reason enough to refrain from any attempt to separate the wheat from the weeds, but there is another reason, as well. Experience teaches us that good Catholics sometimes go bad, and the crooked often go straight.

The sad case of Fr. John Corapi painfully illustrates why we mustn't count our chickens before they are hatched. Ordained by Blessed John Paul II twenty years ago, he became a world-famous evangelist, able to pack stadiums and sell millions of his books and CD's. His religious superiors now inform us he was living a double life, unfaithful to all three of his vows: poverty, chastity, and obedience. Many of us held him in high esteem, and some of us even went to see him speak in person. Now he makes a spectacle of himself, donning a Harley Davidson jacket, coloring brown his gray beard, and making rambling speeches on the internet about how leaving the priesthood will enable him to reach a wider audience. Six months ago most of us would have counted him among the wheat. That shows what we know, doesn't it? Please pray for his repentance.

On the other side, there are those who transition from bad to good. Just last week we celebrated the feast of Augustine Zhao Rong and his companions. Father Rong was a Chinese priest martyred for his Catholic faith in the 19th century, but he did not enter the seminary before first serving as a guard who led other Catholics to the place of their execution. That's right; he murdered the innocent and upon his conversion and ordination was himself murdered. Had we attempted to separate the wheat from the tares as he led another priest to the scaffold, I am sure we would all have counted Fr. Rong among the weeds. Yet today he stands before the throne of grace interceding on behalf of his Chinese brothers and sisters who continue to suffer the persecution he once meted out.

The upshot of our inability to read the heart or know the future is that we must refrain from judging men's motives, their sincerity, and their souls. That is, we do the Lord and His Church a disservice when we take upon ourselves the task He assigned long ago to His legions of angels. They will punish the wicked and no doubt many that men have lauded on this side of heaven will be cursed; and others men have persecuted as they walked the earth will with all the saints enjoy the beatific vision. Our obligation, then, is to respect the freedom of conscience and defend the right to freedom of religion, even when that religion is not Catholicism and even when one's freedom is used to verbally attack the Catholic faith. Today's Protestant apologist may be tomorrow's Catholic evangelist, and those in error may yet embrace the truth to the glory of God in the service of their fellow man. For proof of this, look to your right and left and contemplate the thousands of Anglicans across the globe now to be reconciled to the Church.

Our respect for the right of conscience and freedom of religion does not mean that anything goes. The Truth is still the Truth, and we must be unflinching in all our efforts to proclaim this Truth and offer the invitation to others to embrace it. Our protection from evil, we find, does not come from identifying all the "bad" people, but from identifying and punishing those behaviors that are detrimental to the peace and welfare of society. Thus, while we are

prohibited from judging souls, one manifestation of our defense of the Truth is our defense of public order, the reward of right conduct and the active discouragement of wrong conduct. The rights of conscience and the freedom of religion do not extend to the license to do whatever one pleases; but even where order must be maintained, room for repentance and conversion must be given to the offender. In the end we recognize that the wheat and the weeds live side by side among the clergy and the laity, among believers and atheists, and yes, among those who walk free and those who are in prison. If we desire at the end of time to be harvested with the wheat and not burned with the weeds, we cannot do better than humbly asking God to guard our souls, even as we patiently witness to the unconverted.