

25th Sunday Ordinary Time Year B

September 18-19, 2021

Readings: Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; James 3:16-4:3; Mark 9:30-37

As a believer in the goodness of humanity, I maintain that the vast majority of people would not intentionally set out to be obnoxious. An episode from Grade School art class remains seared in my mind, both because I behaved as such and because envy got the best of me. At the outset, I acknowledge that art, shall we say, is not my gift. Even as a 4th grader, I resented it being considered an academic class.

To add insult to injury, I was seated across from a girl whose artistic talents were simply amazing. And yet, at the end of the paper Mache project, she remarked about her own creation: “Oh! It’s terrible! Immediately, classmates came to her rescue. “No, don’t say that. It’s wonderful.”” Still, she replied, “No, no, I hate it. It’s terrible.”

Having finally reached my boiling point, I piped in uninvited: “You’re right...it is pretty bad, isn’t it?” “No its not!” came her indignant reply. “Well, I was just agreeing with you!” Yes, I felt guilty later, but not then! What may have been perfectionism, I saw as false humility, and it was obnoxious to me. I suspect I was also quite envious of her talents.

While my comment was uncalled for, the fact that I can recall the encounter with such specificity 48 years later is a testament to something that stirred in my soul. If we perceive something or someone as being disingenuous, we may react viscerally, as did I. Is there a lesson here?

Our passage from the Book of Wisdom has been seen as a foreshadowing of Jesus, the just one beset by the unrighteous. Yet, it may also be seen in a broader sense. What was seen by some as obnoxious, was actually a person deemed to be a “just one.” Thus, the presence of a virtuous and just person bothered the unrighteous. Obviously, if someone bragged about their goodness or put it on display for others, that could be a legitimate critique. Yet, that does not seem to be the case here.

In St. John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, he notes that the martyrs and saints “light up every period of history by reawakening its moral sense. By witnessing fully to the good, they are a living reproof to those who transgress the law (cf. *Wis 2:12*)...”¹ Good people do not set out to be a “living reproof” to others, and yet that is precisely what happens.

Why are the attacks on the Church so pointed, if not because the clarity of her moral teaching offends so many today? We still stand for something. Certainly, the Church all too often an easy target for those who see hypocrisy. Yet, something deeper is at stake here—the sin of envy.

The poet Dante Alighieri died 700 years ago this past Tuesday. He is chiefly remembered as the author of the epic poem “The Divine Comedy” and also as the father of the Italian language, since he penned his poem, not in Latin, but the Tuscan vernacular. He certainly took no prisoners in his assessment of hypocrisy, whether in society or in the Church. Similarly, he attacks envy, one of the seven deadly sins.

In Canto XIII of *Purgatorio*, the ancient Roman poet Virgil guides Dante on the path, as he offers consolation to the spirits of the envious. Dante knew theology. He knew that the purpose of Purgatory is to remove from our souls all that is unsuitable for Paradise. Purgatory is depicted as a mountain we must climb. One of its terraces or indents, allows for the person to separate oneself from the vice of envy, eventually replacing it with virtue and moving along the path towards heaven.

While Dante waiting there, he is shown the virtues he needs to acquire before leaving purgatory. He hears the voice of Mary, who says that “we have no wine.” This is a call to generosity, allowing us to counteract envy. For medievals, envy was not merely **wanting** what others have; it was **not wanting** others to have good things. Do you see the subtle difference?

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, paragraph #93, 6 August 1993.

In Purgatory, the envious are temporary blinded, their eyes sewn shut with wire- ouch!² As a result, they were forced to take hold and depend upon their neighbors for safety, lest they fall off the terrace of envy.³

Envy blinds us to the gifts of God freely bestowed on others; we only see what we lack and are saddened by what others have.

“Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us.”

When we are saddened by the success of others, we are mired in envy. We will never be happy, perpetually comparing ourselves to others and all too often, coming up short.

The lesson in the reading from the Book of Wisdom is that the just person was obnoxious because unrighteous souls had to live with their choices to discard justice. They were left to blindly make their way through life.

I add just one caveat today. If our deeply held convictions are seen as being obnoxious by others, there may be little we can do. However, we must also consider whether our own manner of communicating these convictions needs refining. Could the way we model our faith be causing some of the reactions?

In the meantime, let us pray to be freed from the sin of envy, instead truly rejoicing in how God works in the lives of others, rejoicing with those who rejoice.

² Dante, Purgatorio, Canto XIII, 70-71 “for iron wire pierces and sews up/the lids of all those shades, as untamed hawks” (“ché a tutti un fil di ferro i cigli for a/e cusce sì, come a sparvier selvaggio”)

³ Cf. Rod Dreher, *The American Conservative*, “Purgatorio, Canto XIII,” March 17, 2014.