

Heart Disease

Homily for September 9-10th 2017

In 1890 the English novelist and playwright Oscar Wilde wrote a novel about a man named Dorian Gray who made a pact to sell his soul in exchange for eternal youth. But that was just the beginning.

For years Dorian got deeper and deeper into evil, deception, and murder. His physical appearance remained unchanged, remaining always youthful. But there was a record of his moral decay told in his portrait, that had been painted by Basil Hallward. With the passing of the years the portrait mysteriously became more and more ugly with each of Dorian's callously wicked acts. At the end of the novel, we finally see the fruit of the unrepentant soul in decay: the picture of Dorian Gray, which is the novel's title, had become a hideous man, hardly recognizable as a human being.

This rather somber portrait puts into a narrative framework the theme central to this week's readings. If we ignore or deny mortal sin in our lives it corrupts and destroys our souls, and with time our life itself. This is why both Ezekiel and Jesus exhort us to help our brothers and sisters when mortal sin has gotten a hold of their souls and why we need help when it has seized ours.

There is a kind of heart disease that is not physical but spiritual in nature, the result of mortal sin, that if left unattended, leads to the marring and even defacing of God's image that is to be reflected in every human being.

To confront one with their sin is called fraternal correction. Jesus in the Gospel will give us very practical counsel on how to exercise such correction while Ezekiel states that we have a God given responsibility to address such sin. St. Paul in Romans says that what is to motivate such action is love.

Remember what he wrote? The only debt we can never fully pay is the debt to love others. What motivates such love? Nothing other than the infinite love God shows to us in the Passion of His Son. The love of God in Christ is the theme that governs the first 11 chapters of Romans. Chapters 12-15 are all about how we are to love in response to Jesus' love for us. Paul here in chapter 13 says that love is the culmination of the Law and quotes the second part of the summary of the Law:

"Love you neighbour as yourself".

Thomas Aquinas said to truly love our neighbour is to will another's good. It is to want what is best for them. What Aquinas puts positively St. Paul puts in a negative and then positive formulation.

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

To will our neighbour's good is therefore to do good to our neighbour. One of the ways we express love is by exercising fraternal correction when their life is caught in the deadly trap of mortal sin.

This however is not easy to do because the reaction can be one of denial, resistance or even hostility. Let me illustrate this from the novel.

One night Basil Hallward, remember him, the artist who painted Dorian's portrait, visits his friend to confront him about all of the terrible rumors he has heard. The painter wants to believe that his friend is still a good person. Dorian decides to show him the portrait so that he can see the true degradation of his soul, but when Basil sees it he is horrified, and urges his friend to repent for his sins. Basil's reaction enrages Dorian, and he murders the artist with a knife.

How hard it can be for us to admit mortal sin when confronted - Dorian's reaction is of course extreme but telling. Rather than repent, Dorian resents Basil intrusion.

Repeatedly I have mentioned mortal sin. So let me now take a minute to talk about the Catholic Church's teaching on sin.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines sin as venial and mortal. Venial sins are lesser in degree and damage our relationship with God, mortal sin destroys it. Venial sin is like a fight between spouses; mortal sin is like a divorce. To die in a state of mortal sin is to lose heaven forever. For there is no more time for repentance and conversion after death. To die with venial sins on the soul is to need purgatory to purify the soul before heaven. To die with neither kind of sin or their consequences in the soul is to merit heaven without the need for purgatory.

There are three conditions necessary for mortal sin. All must be present for the sin to be mortal; if any one is missing, the sin is venial. They are: "grave matter", "full knowledge", and "full consent".

First, the sin must be a grave matter, an act in itself seriously sinful, like adultery, grand larceny, blasphemy, or murder (including the murder of unborn children or old people), the harbouring of anger and resentment, deviant forms of sexual pleasure expressed in unremitting pornography, promiscuity as people are objectified for selfish gratification. The objective act itself must be seriously (gravely) sinful. Second, there must be full knowledge that the act is a serious sin. Third, there must be full consent of the will.

A grave matter, a true understanding that the sin is serious and still a willfulness to commit the sin.

It is because of the second and third conditions necessary for an act to be deemed a mortal sin that we have the directives in the reading from Ezekiel and Matthew.

Ezekiel says that we have a God given responsibility to address such sin to help the person understand its severity. Listen again to the passage in more colloquial English:

“You, son of man, are the watchman. I’ve made you a watchman for Israel. The minute you hear a message from me, warn them. If I say to the wicked, ‘Wicked man, wicked woman, you’re on the fast track to death!’ and you don’t speak up and warn the wicked to change their ways, the wicked will die unwarned in their sins and I’ll hold you responsible for their bloodshed. But if you warn the wicked to change their ways and they don’t do it, they’ll die in their sins well-warned and at least you will have saved your own life.

There is a special responsibility given to priests to act as such watchmen. In the passage the Lord was designating Ezekiel as such a sentinel. The heart of the priesthood is the work of helping to guide people through the dangerous waters of this world so as to reach heaven’s shores. When I, as a priest, reach that destination, one of the searching questions I will be asked is how faithful was I as a watchman?

But it is not just those who are ordained who are to carry out this exacting work, all who are disciples of Jesus Christ are to help name mortal sin when we see it in the lives of others.

Remember love wills another person’s good and to will another person’s good is to will their destiny to be heaven and not hell or a prolonged state of purgatory. If we have not warned them they are committing grave sin we will have to own responsibility for our negligence and lack of love.

Jesus in the Gospel makes it clear that we have a special responsibility to exercise this kind of correction when it is fraternal – that is committed by a brother or sister in Christ, and especially when it is against us. But notice the directive Jesus gives to us. First we are to go and seek to address the sin one on one. If there is a desire for repentance and forgiveness we have won that brother or sister back. If such correction finds resistance and denial we are then to take two with us to seek in love to address the serious sin. If in turn this is unfruitful, only then would we call for the leadership of the Church, be it the parish priest or bishop to help address the issue. If after the third attempt at fraternal correction there is no response, then says Jesus:

let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

In other words, it is now time for ex-communication. Why such a drastic step? To hopefully help the person realize how their refusal to admit their sin has separated them from God, as now expressed through their being separated from the Church. The intention is to ultimately win that erring soul back to Jesus and the Church.

Let me say one more thing about this. Jesus also teaches that we are to be filled with mercy when dealing with people struggling with mortal sin. In the very next portion of Matthew he will speak about forgiving seventy-times seven. He understands that overcoming sin is not easy and needs to be supported in a community of grace-filled love. If there is true repentance and a willingness to grow towards deeper conversion, we as the Church are to be that fellowship that extends love and mercy to such a one.

Let me end by saying that it is here where priests especially, are called to be merciful watchmen who desire to see in the lives of the faithful a fuller correlation between who you are on the outside with the state of your soul.

Dorian Gray is a telling morality story of what happens when such a correlation does not occur. Terminal spiritual heart disease ending in death and eternal separation from God.