

Homily for Thursday of the 2nd Week of Easter
Acts 5:27–33 Psalm 34:2, 9, 17–20 John 3:31–36

Today's first reading teaches us something that is a fundamental spiritual principle. Religious faith can be the greatest influence for good in the world, but sadly it can also be the greatest influence for evil. When people of religious conviction allow themselves to be controlled by the grace of God, then their lives will be spent in his service. When people of religious conviction use their spiritual authority to control others then their lives are spent expecting others to serve them and their lives are in the service of evil and the devil.

We see this principle at play in the reading from Acts. Here the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin, made up of the most prominent religious leaders in Judaism, want to control Peter and the other apostles and so they demand:

We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us."

Here is a kind of control that wants to silence the Apostles, not only because they are proclaiming Jesus raised from the dead, but because Peter was also willing to honestly state how the Jewish authorities were implicated in Jesus' death. In response to the high priest's demand listen to how explicit Peter is:

We must obey God rather than any human authority. 30 The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. 31 God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. 32 And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

Peter is very clear and boldly declares how the religious authorities of Judaism were responsible for Jesus' death. But says Peter, because Jesus has been raised from the dead and been exalted at God's right hand we are under his control and not under yours. So he states we must obey God.

This so angers the Sanhedrin that St. Luke, the writer of Acts then states:

When they heard this, they were enraged and wanted to kill them

The Sanhedrin were people of religious authority who used their power to demand that others comply with their orders and they would go to any length, even murder to exact obedience. Here we see how religious conviction can be used in the service of evil. Contrast this with the Apostles where devotion to Jesus Christ and their obedience to him was used in the service of the good, as we repeatedly see in the Acts. This was a community that was known for their courage, generosity, service, care and devoted love.

Within the history of Catholicism there have been times when sadly the Church has more often been in league with the Sanhedrin and not embodied the character of the Apostles. When this has happened the Church has been an instrument of evil and has caused deep and profound damage.

Just last night I was listening to a report where in Pennsylvania hundreds of people are coming forward disclosing that they had been sexually abused by Catholic Clergy. We are still seeing the deep effects of how this evil, both the abuse and the cover up by the Church has devastated the lives of so many. This kind of evil is representative of the spiritual control represented by the Sanhedrin and is antithetical to Gospel of Jesus Christ.

As well, the Church has been an instrument of great good, when her leaders have embodied the character of the Apostles and the Gospel. One such example of this embodiment was St. John Baptist de la Salle, whose Feast Day we observe today. Born into a wealthy French family in 1651, he gave up his wealth to serve the young. He became an educator and school administrator. He is the Patron Saint of Teachers. Listen to the instruction he gave to his teachers:

In your teaching, the boys in your charge must see by the way you teach that you are true ministers of God, full of true charity and sincere in carrying out your task. It is most important for you to realize that you are ministers not only of God but also of Jesus Christ and the Church.

Above all, let your charity and zeal show how you love the Church. Your work is for the Church, which is the body of Christ. By your diligence show your love for those whom God has given you, just as Christ loved the Church.

Here are words that so clearly reflect the character of one who understood how religious conviction is to be used in the service of the Good.

St John Baptist de la Salle please pray for us. May we like you and the Apostles always choose to listen to God and so spend our lives in the service of that which is good and holy and true.