

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Jan 18th 2020

I once heard a scholar proclaim that Catholic culture is dead; that it lies in ashes before us. The scholar went on to explain that the pervasive moral relativism that exists in contemporary society has decimated Catholic culture, offering little hope for the faithful. While I certainly wouldn't agree that Catholic culture has expired, his comments prompted me to reflect on what it means to be Catholic in contemporary times. So too did Jesus's words in today's Gospel.

In today's passage, Jesus encounters a man named Levi whom he invites to join him on his journey. The passage does not provide much context about who Levi is, but most scripture scholars understand him to have been a tax collector. Indeed, Jesus encountered and broke bread with many tax collectors, sinners, and other troubled souls in his journey. And when Jesus's disciples were challenged by the scholars of their time about Jesus's relationships with these individuals, Jesus simply responded, "[he] did not come to call the righteous but sinners." (Mark 2:17)

There is no doubt that the times in which we live now are challenging. Certainly, we should always be looking to strengthen Catholic culture. Today's Gospel passage inspired me to reflect on how we, as Christians, set out to build Catholic culture in contemporary society.

I often worry that for some, building Catholic culture might be an exclusionary practice, one that rejects the presence of others who most need the grace of God. Perhaps they feel that these others are unfit, unworthy, or otherwise undeserving of the gifts of our faith. However, Jesus's words and actions, revealed to us in today's Gospel reading, turns this notion on its head. After all, we are all flawed in some way – imperfect and thirsting for the spiritual nourishment that comes with healthy faith. If Catholic culture excludes those who have strayed at some point, then it begs the question – for whom are we building Catholic culture in the first place?

Recently, Pope Francis celebrated Mass in St. Peter's Basilica for the third World Day for the Poor. He stated that "wearing the label 'Christian' or 'Catholic' is not enough to belong to Jesus. We need to speak the same language as Jesus: that of love". He also challenged us to ask ourselves "do I, a Christian, have at least one poor person as a friend"? As we reflect on today's Gospel passage, let us examine our relationships with others, seeking to improve them to with those who need it most – including the spiritually poor, who may have lost their way or perhaps never had it in the first place. We should take time to understand their stories more fully, avoiding judgement, so that we may be models of Christ's provincial disposition. After all, the best way for us to establish Catholic culture is through encounter, especially with those who have the most to gain from a relationship with Christ.

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