

BLESSING AND ITS CONTRADICTION

Some have already done it. A number of dioceses in the Anglican Communion are threatening to do it. It is impossible to do, but that doesn't stop them. They mean to bless sin. Of course, they are not putting it in those terms. They claim, in the name of diversity, to be marrying or ordaining practicing homosexuals. But a ceremony does not a sacrament make, nor does saying blessings necessarily confer blessings.

If I asked what a blessing is, most of you would say, rightly, that it is one of those good things God has bestowed upon us for which we are very thankful. That is one of the most important ways blessings appear in the Bible. As St. Augustine says, all the good things of life are blessings, including health, substance, honor, friends, a home, a spouse, children, and the other things that enhance this life in which we are pilgrims.

But in the Bible we find that blessing has a variety of meanings. It is used as a synonym for praise: "I will bless the Lord at all times, His praise shall be always in my mouth" (Ps. 34: 1). It is used to express the conviction or desire that good fortune may go with a person or thing, as when David says: "Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord...it shall be well with thee" (Ps. 128:1, 2). It accompanies the sanctification or dedication of a person or thing to some sacred purpose: "Christ took bread and blessed, and broke..." (Matt. 26:26). It is also used to describe a gift, as when Naaman wishes to thank Elisha for healing him of his leprosy and says: "I beseech thee therefore take a blessing of thy servant" (2 Kings 5: 15).

These multiple forms of blessing eventually became focused, in the life of the Church, into prayers and rites through which all Christians could acknowledge and thank God for past and present blessings, and be assured of receiving further blessings. The Catholic Encyclopedia says blessings were eventually refined into liturgies: "In its strictly liturgical and restricted sense, blessing may be described as a rite, consisting of a ceremony and

prayers performed in the name and with the authority of the Church by a duly qualified minister, by which persons or things are sanctified as dedicated to Divine service, or by which certain marks of Divine favor are invoked upon them."

We get a clue to what is happening in a blessing if we recall that one synonym for "bless" is "benediction," literally, "saying good." All that God created is good, as affirmed in the biblical story of creation where God saw that all that he had made was good. All good things in life come from Him (Genesis 1).

However, Satan and mankind let something else into the world, sin and evil. Sin damages creation, leaving behind evil where there should be good. Evil, though it is real, is not an entity that exists, a "bad" creation. Strictly speaking, it is the deprivation of good, the absence of good. To put it another way, it is the presence of nothing, like a hole in the road. Where there should be a safe smooth surface, there is nothing, a pit.

The peril of the hole is the chaos between car and road that occurs because of it. The supporting relationship that should be there is absent. That is what sin always does; it destroys the relationships that God ordained in the first place for good. Trust, love, truth, health, safety, all the bonds of support that make life worth living are broken.

All the evil we know, death, illness, nature red in tooth and claw, bad government, man's inhumanity to man, are damage done to the goodness of God's creation, the holes made by fallen angels and mankind as a result of their sin.

Blessings are God's way of filling up these holes, goodness poured into the empty spaces in the fabric of our lives, restoring the potential for good relationships. When we bless people or things the harmony of goodness is restored.

When the Church gives a blessing through its Apostolic Ministers, there is more to it than a symbolic ceremony. Blessings are real transactions that are fully efficacious. Goodness is transferred from its source to the person or thing to be blessed. Blessings are especially important where the person or object blessed is to be employed in God's service.

However, so deep is the tear in the fabric of creation, so disruptive is the chaos unleashed by sin, that God has told us *this* world finally cannot be fixed. No amount of this world's goodness can overcome the catastrophe of death and decay. He must make a new creation.

Theologically speaking, it is Divine grace rather than goodness that enables us to participate in the new creation. That, by the way, is why "being a good person" is not enough to make it possible to enter God's kingdom. We do not need a better life. We need a new life, one that is beyond our human power to reach, and beyond sin's power to touch.

Divine grace is the action of God in our life to make this new creation, made possible through the redemption of the world by Jesus Christ. To communicate grace to us, Christ has given the sacraments to the Church: Baptism, Holy Communion, Confession, Marriage, and so on. All of these are means of grace for two purposes: forgiveness of sin, and second birth as a new creation maturing into the fullness of the risen Christ.

You may have noticed that the sacramental liturgies that confer grace, like Baptism and the Eucharist, also include blessings. These gifts of goodness restore potency for good relationships that we had lost by our fall into sin, the sin that is now forgiven in the sacraments. Grace makes it possible to receive a blessing; not just the blessings of this transitory life, but also the eternal blessings that belong to the new creation.

Grace is of such primary importance that in this context we can speak of grace flowing from its origin in the Incarnation as our greatest blessing, our utmost treasure; the blessing without which all other blessings will come to nothing.

As we learned in our catechism, the sacraments do not limit gifts of Divine grace, for like the sun and rain, grace falls on the just and unjust alike. But the sacraments do assure us that we have received grace when we partake of them, an assurance we sinners definitely need. In the same way, the blessings of the Church do not limit God's gifts of goodness. The Church's blessings do, however, assure us that in them we do receive the Divine gifts.

For that reason, blessings are only to be given in accordance with the express will of God as revealed in scripture. The Church cannot give assurance without Divine warrant. The Church cannot bless what God has shown us is beyond the possibility of blessing.

To bless sin is impossible because it is a contradiction. A man about to rob a bank cannot expect God to bless his enterprise. You cannot bless sin, pouring in goodness while at the same time the sin is depriving the world of goodness. You can't have your cake, and eat it too.

As the scriptures make abundantly plain, sin and evil, the great deprivers, are hated by God and are to be destroyed. So there will be no mistake about it, God has telegraphed to us beforehand in the Bible the targets, the sins, he means to hit.

But the sinner is not hated. God loves us beyond all reckoning. Through His forgiveness we can escape the targets of God's wrath. This is the freedom the good news offers us. This is the message of infinite compassion. There is more Divine forgiveness in the world than there is sin.

When we turn from our sins and are separated from them by forgiveness as far as the east is from the west, we are not only safe from God's wrath we are empowered to receive a blessing. Opening ones heart and life to grace makes it possible to receive goodness.

So you can't hold on to sin and expect to be blessed at the same time. We cannot ask God to do what He has told us beforehand cannot be done.

Yet that is just what some in the Anglican Communion have set out to do. Blessing a man lying with men, or women with women, creates the impression that homosexual behavior has ceased to be a sin.

But if the church says to those who are in danger clinging to their sin, "Have no fear, everything is OK, and here is our blessing on it as our guarantee," it condemns them to certain destruction. That's the ultimate cynicism. It's like telling people in a burning building, "Stay where you are, go back to sleep, there is nothing to be afraid of." It's the absurdity that comfort and feeling good are more important than safety.

God has made it quite clear what will happen to those who give false comfort and encouragement in His name. "If I the Lord God say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand (Ezekial 3:18).

We all live, to use another metaphor, on the volcano of our sins. We all need warning. So, who loves more, the one who cries "Danger--Fly" or the real estate salesman? Like Jesus, when the Church cries, "Repent," it is not shrieking condemnation. It is offering a way out, pastoral help to get there, and a welcome embrace to all sinners, including those of homosexual orientation. As it has been said many times before, the Church is not a haven for saints it's a hospital for sinners.

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