

February 12, 2017 Anger Homily: Brothers and sisters, Bobby Valentine was the one-time manager of the New York Mets, a professional baseball team. While managing in New York, he enjoyed some success in a city not known for its kindness to losers. However, despite his success he had a black mark on his record: a contentious and acrimonious relationship with one of his players, a pitcher. Once, after a night game, the manager called this player to his office for a dressing down. A shouting match ensued. Tensions ran high. The incident in the manager's office left deep wounds in both manager and player. Thenceforth, they refused to speak with one another. Sometime later, Bobby Valentine was in St. Patrick's Cathedral for Sunday Mass remarkably, he caught a glimpse of his former player and enemy in one of the pews. When the time came for the exchange of peace, Bobby Valentine, undoubtedly moved by the Spirit, left his pew and approached his former player. He then extended his hand and said, "Peace be with you". His former pitcher was understandably startled. They shook hands and were reconciled. Bobby argued that one cannot approach the Lord, who offers himself as a gift, without being reconciled to one's brother or sister.

In Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his followers to accept a higher standard of behavior than that of the Scribes and Pharisees. His Word is challenging: "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift". (Mt.5:23-24) One spiritual writer, a Cistercian monk writes, "You cannot present your heart to God as a gift offering on the altar of sacrifice if that heart is turned against other children".

In today's gospel reading, Jesus teaches about the perils of anger, one of the seven deadly sins, and one that is a grave sin against the law of charity. Jesus reminds his listeners that evil actions have their roots in the heart of man. No one can honor God externally while remaining far from God in one's heart. Anger clouds our reason and separates us from compassion to the point of hating one another in the depths of one's soul. To quote a rabbinic sage of the first century of the Christian era, Rabbi Eliezer (A.D. 90): "He who hates his neighbor... Lo, he belongs to the shedders of blood".

Jesus teaches that there must be a renewal of hearts, of attitudes, of the very foundation of our behavior. Murder begins in the heart and the head. It begins with anger. In his letter to the fledgling Christian community at Ephesus, St. Paul offers words of wisdom: "Get rid of all bitterness, all passion and anger, harsh words, slanders and malice of every kind. In place of these, be kind to one another, compassionate and mutually forgiving just as God has forgiven you in Christ". (Eph. 4:31-32)

Let each of us ponder the following questions. First, am I angry? Do I carry resentments and wounds that make me bitter and angry inside? Do I seek miracles of inner healing in my prayer life? Have I insulted or wounded my neighbor by my harsh, unkind words? Do I seek reconciliation with my foes? I conclude with a brief prayer made noteworthy by no less a Saint than Francis of Assisi. "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring your love, where there is injury, your pardon Lord..."

Amen!