

January 28, 2018 Uncleaness and Holiness Homily: Brothers and sisters, some thirty years ago, a large group of angry protesters gathered in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City for the sole purpose of disrupting the mass and embarrassing the then Archbishop, John O' Conner. In the weeks leading up to the mass, posters appeared throughout the city depicting the Cardinal and highlighting the words, "Stop the Church". As expected, the mass was widely covered by the local media. After the Cardinal proclaimed the gospel of the day, he began his homily. Many of the protesters stood up and turned their backs on him. Others began to shout him down. If that were not distressing enough, one person, upon receiving Holy Communion later in the mass, angrily dropped the consecrated host to the floor and then stomped on it, saying in a shrill tone of voice, "This is what I think of your God", to an obviously distraught Shepherd of the Church.

Following mass, the badly shaken O' Conner was visited by Fr. Benedict Groeshel, a noted evangelist. Groeshel informed him that the Archdiocese of New York had one of its greatest days in its long distinguished history. The cardinal protested. He considered the demonstration to be a sad and tragic day for the church. But Fr. Groeshel pointed out the protesters bypassed every church and synagogue in the city in order to come to the cathedral. "Only you matter", he said, "and the teaching of the church you are bound to uphold".

The setting of today's gospel reading is a synagogue in Capernaum. (The synagogue is the place where faithful Jews gather for prayers, scripture readings and instruction). On this memorable morning, Jesus preaches. The evangelist, Mark, gives us no indication of the content of Christ's teaching. But he is clear in singling out, in particular, the effect of his preaching on one member of the congregation. He is enraged. The presence of the Messiah unsettles him, disturbs him. He cries out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" (Mk. 1:24) His scream shatters the silence of the service. The "unclean spirit" does not submit quietly to Our Lord's command to cease and desist. It does so under violent protest. "The unclean spirit convulsed him and with a loud cry came out of him". (Mk. 1:26)

"Uncleaness" and holiness have nothing in common.

A true story: Immediately following the Russian revolution in the early twentieth century, Lenin, one of the architects of the revolution and a rabid atheist, hoped to consolidate his power by ridding Russia of his most dangerous enemies. The men he truly feared and hated, and later persecuted, were the holy monks. Corrupt priests were of no concern to him; they were easily beaten. But the holy monk was a real problem for the long term success of Communism and the atheistic state. "The purer the religion, the more dangerous", he declared.

On many levels, this gospel is instructive for those of us who live in a society increasingly intolerant of those who are sincere believers and who embrace wholeheartedly the Word of God. Why are so many of us so reluctant to speak openly of our Catholic faith? One word: fear.

Bear in mind that St. Mark's community considered itself to be the focus of the hatred of the world because of its preaching of the Good News about Jesus Christ. The gospel for today should embolden

believers of every era to be resolute in defending the faith and proclaiming the gospel by word and deed to a skeptical, and sometimes hostile populace.

“The people were astonished at his teaching”. (Mk. 1:22) That remains true today as it was twenty centuries ago. May we spend more of our time contemplating the beauty of the Master’s teaching as we draw near to the season of Lent.

Amen!