Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)

Gospel text (*Mk* 12:28-34): One of the scribes, when he came forward and heard them disputing and saw how well he had answered them, asked him, “Which is the first of all the commandments?” Jesus replied, “The first is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

The scribe said to him, “Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, ‘He is One and there is no other than he.’ And ‘to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself’ is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And when Jesus saw that [he] answered with understanding, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

“Which is the first of all the commandments?”

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Today, it’s very fashionable to talk about love for our neighbors, Christian justice, and so on. But we rarely hear about the love for God.

For this reason, we must pay close attention to Jesus’s response to the scribe who, with the best of intentions, asks Him, ‘Which is the first of all the commandments?’ (Mk 12:29), which is not surprising given that, among so many laws and rules, the Jews sought to identify a guiding principle that would unify all expressions of God’s will.

Jesus answers with a simple prayer that, even today, Jewish people recite several times daily and carry on their person: “‘Hear, Israel! The Lord, our God, is One Lord; and you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength’” (Mk 12:29-30). Jesus is reminding us that, above all, we must proclaim the primacy of love for God as humankind’s fundamental task; this is both logical and fair, as God has loved us first.

However, for Jesus it is not enough to remind us about this primary and foundational commandment but adds that we must love our neighbor as ourselves. And, as Benedict XVI said: “Love of God and love of neighbor are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment. But both live from the love of God who has loved us first.”

A rarely discussed aspect is that Jesus commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves—no more, but no less. This implies that He also commands us to love ourselves, for we too are the work of God’s hands, beloved by Him.

If we take the double commandment of love for God and our neighbors as our guiding rule of life, Jesus will say to us, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mk 12:34). And if we live by this ideal, we will make earth a rehearsal for Heaven.

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “Seeing, therefore, that we are the portion of the Holy One, let us do all those things which pertain to holiness” (Saint Clement of Rome)

- “Love of neighbor – if based on a true love for God – corresponds to the commandment and the example of Christ” (Benedict XVI)

- “... Jesus endorses some of the teachings imparted by this religious elite of God's people: the resurrection of the dead, certain forms of piety (almsgiving, fasting and prayer), the custom of addressing God as Father, and the centrality of the commandment to love God and neighbor” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 575)