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#116

For the First Sunday of Advent -- Mark 13.33-37

Being alert

Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. -- Mark 13.33

Keeping watch, being alert, is a common theme for Advent. In the passage from Mark's Gospel, we are told about the doorkeeper of a house and the owner who is traveling abroad. The doorkeeper does not know when the owner will return. The doorkeeper must be prepared to receive the owner at any moment. Because of this unexpected arrival, the servants must see to it that all the normal routines of the house are maintained. The kitchen must be clean and in order: no dishes in the sink. The laundry must be done on time, and the vacuuming too. The living room must be tidy and in order, and the owner's whole house ready for his return. With all this work to be done, the servants have little time to rest, especially the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper bears a special responsibility, and must be alert to the sounds of the owner's return.

Jesus asks us to compare ourselves with the doorkeeper. The owner of the house is Jesus himself, and we are the doorkeeper. The house is our life --not really ours, but God's. We go through our lives not knowing when Jesus will come to us. We must keep the house -- our lives -- in order. We are the doorkeepers of our own lives. It is not always easy to keep them in order. Sometimes the other servants are not as helpful as they might be. And it is not always easy to know right from wrong. Life is filled with many gray areas where we don't know if what we are doing is right or wrong. In the complex society in which we live we are exposed to the problems of stress, drugs, depression, marital and family problems, and all the other burdens that society places upon us. In all of this confusion,

though, a voice -- Jesus' voice -- still asks us to "keep watch," to be alert, to keep our house in order.

Society and its problems test us on a daily basis. Our faith is challenged. But our faith, and the guidance and fellowship of the Church, have given us the spiritual strength to keep our house in order -- to keep our lives in order. Our faith helps us to stay awake in preparation for the Owner's return. ++

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Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

A look back -- eighteen years ago

This forum is being written on the anniversary of the foundation of the Brotherhood of St. Gregory -- eighteen years ago on September 14, 1969, in the convent of the Visitation Nuns in Riverdale, New York. I received many congratulatory messages today - and those messages are very sobering. Eighteen years -- a long time trying to perfect the work God has called us to do.

Sunday, September 13, found me recalling to friends how back in 1969 at the same hour I was rereading the Rule to which I would pledge my observance the next day. The Visitation Nuns come to mind; their dedication and caring: caring for me, for us, for this new vine planted by God's hand.

A year later, in 1970, Sr. Mary Benigna wrote a poem, which was presented to me, illuminated and framed. I'd like to quote from that poem here:

Our Brother's Profession

*Softly and sweetly on your hearts
in muted ecstasy the master played;
Lute-like was your responsive minstrelsy:
True, vibrant, and with consummate art
love flamed for Christ alone.
Lord today receive with love
their life's sweet symphony.*

Love flamed for Christ alone -- powerful words, especially in this day and age. I am reminded of one of the Visitation Nuns from an era unknown to me -- Mother Mary de Sales Chappuis. In her writings she said: "When I desire some little thing in the course of the day, I show it to the Lord and leave it

to him to will and to do as he likes best. The thought that he knows best then comes to my mind, and at once I leave him to choose for me, being sure of him."

I was sure of God in 1969 and I'm equally sure now. Mother Chappuis says further: "The soul's chief care should be to humble herself and to obey; that being done, we may pass from this life to the next without any fear." Someone at the Church Center today asked me what made me do it. I replied that I am sure I was totally crazy. I was; I am; I will remain so -- I suppose it's my Italian and Polish resiliency. Mother Chappuis also said: "The will of God contains all good in itself. It will matter little to us at the hour of death if we have done our own will, but it will matter more than anything else if we have done the will of God."

This forum has rambled -- that's what founders do -- they ramble around to see if anyone else is crazy and daring enough to join the band, looking for ways to do the will of God. I have twenty-nine brothers and one sister-in-formation doing the will of God. "At once I leave him to choose for me." God chose, we followed - and God willing, we'll remain faithful to the end.

As I look back eighteen years, I close with one more thought of Mother Chappuis: "I have always trusted the Saviour; I have nothing else to carry to him; I go to him with confidence."

Pray for us as we learn God's will for us in this age.
We go to him with confidence. +++

--RTB

Kerygma Komer

In God's Image -- male and female?

The greatest difficulty in the debate on sexuality is the lack of a rigorous, systematic theology. This article will not attempt to develop such a theology, but offer a possible starting point, in response to one particular flaw in current thought on the subject.

The flaw is apparent in the way in which some have been interpreting a biblical text: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Gen. 1.27) This interpretation, developed by different authors, can be expressed simply as this: that the image of God is only perfectly reflected in the union

of male and female. As one bishop put it, "... the divine image in humanity is incomplete without both man and woman."

At first glance this seems rather harmless and orthodox. It is my belief, however, that not only is this view itself an incorrect reading of Genesis, but that many ideas developed from this starting point are questionable. I will try to describe the implications and offer a response.

The problem is revealed in the frequent misquotation of the text as, "God created man in his image, male

and female." This reading forcibly applies the modifier, "male and female," to the image of God. It implies an androgynous God, a God both male and female, rather than the God who is beyond and above categories, and Christ "the image of the invisible God," in whom "there is neither male nor female." (Col. 1.15; Gal. 3.28)

I think the plain meaning of the text is this: God created humanity in his image; he created both male and female, men and women. Each is made in the image of God, and shares in a likeness to God that has nothing to do with their sex.

Jesus echoes this in the well known, "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren you did it to me." (Matt 25.40) Every person is in the image of God, and we either honor or reject that image in our day-to-day behavior in relation to individual human beings. Those who say they love God but hate those who bear God's image are liars. Equally, those who say they love "humanity" while hating individuals have fallen into a theology of the "mass man" --and the idea that God's image is somehow best expressed by a married couple partakes of this error. Another author has suggested that a man and a woman and the love that exists between them represent the Trinity. That might be a useful analogy, but little more.

There are several other inconsistencies in this theology of sexuality. If sexuality were chiefly expressive of the divine image then we would be forced to adopt the notion that all of the animals and many of the vegetables are also created in the divine image! There may be some comfort in this for those who see God as a great Life Force rather than as the Creator of all that is, seen and unseen -- including the "life force." But sex isn't what makes us special as God's children. That which we share with the image of God is something which is unique to us as human beings -- something shared by all of us yet complete in each of us. What is it? The Catechism says it best -- and I would refer everyone to it before they make any more comments about our relation to the divine image -- "What does it mean to be created in the image of God? It means that we are free to make choices: to love, to create, to reason, and to live in harmony with creation and with God." Free will, not sex, is our share in God's image.

Perhaps the gravest error arising from the identification of sex, or the union of the sexes, with the divine image is the way in which it effectively denies the Incarnation as defined by the Council of Chalcedon (BCP pg. 864). Jesus Christ, in his divine nature, *is* the image of God. His human nature, which he shares with us completely and perfectly, derives entirely from Mary his mother. If Christ's

humanity is perfect and complete, he encompasses all that is human. He was a man, yet he partakes of human "substance" -- that which he shares with all humanity -- from Mary, a woman. His sex cannot be an essential or substantial part of his -- or our --human nature, but as an instance of the "scandal of particularity."

An Episcopal priest once told me Jesus couldn't have been fully human if he wasn't married; so, therefore, he must have been married, secretly. One shudders to think what the Council of Chalcedon would have done with that one. Jesus, a man, in his human nature is of one substance with Mary, a woman, and with every man, woman and child -- with all of humanity.

What does the Scripture tell us about the relations between male and female, on the symbolic level? Paul develops an analogy in Ephesians 5.21-33 between the relationship of Christ with the church and a man with his wife. The unity in love and obedience which exists in the "one flesh" of a man and woman is a "mystery" reflecting the relationship of love and obedience between Christ and his body, the church. There is no suggestion that male and female have anything to do with God's divine nature, or our human nature. Paul is building upon what for him was a natural hierarchy of love and obedience which could lead to a transcendent unity: a man loves his wife because through the sexual act they "become one flesh"; and no one hates his own flesh. Note that in conclusion Paul refers the whole concept to a higher plane, and even implies that sexuality exists merely to provide such a symbol! "I am saying that it [i.e., the "one flesh" idea developed in Genesis 2.24] refers to Christ and the church; how-ever, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband."

Human nature transcends sexuality, which is a part of the physical creation we share with animals and plants, and was created as a means to "fill the earth" (Gen. 1. 28). The divine nature is beyond sexuality; God is neither male nor female. And we too, when we become children of the resurrection, will be even as Christ is, "neither male nor female," because we will no longer need the sexuality that was created for "mutual joy..., help and comfort..., and... procreation." (BCP pg. 423) "Those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more." (Luke 20.35-36) As Aquinas said, "Types and shadows have their ending...." When Love comes, and when we are in that Love, we will no longer need sexuality. Because "when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away." (1 Cor. 13.10)

Lest anyone accuse me of dualism, or being anti-body, let me set the point straight right now. You want dualism? you want a linkage of sex and original sin? you go to Augustine of Hippo! The poor man couldn't help confusing the imperfect with the bad. God didn't say creation was perfect; God said it was good, except for one thing: loneliness. (Gen. 2.18)

I think sex and sexuality are great. They are good, a part of God's creation. But like a lot of other good things they are imperfect, earthly and transient. That the risen body will be unlike the "body of death" is a promise of hope. Many things that we think are great now, many "creature comforts," many things valued in the church, like prophecy and knowledge, will pass away. Love will remain. +++

-- The Editor

In whose image?

A key to understanding the concept of being made "in the image" comes later in Genesis: "When God created man, he made them in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived a hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth... and he had other sons and daughters." (Gen 5.1-4) Now Adam had fathered Cain and Abel, both male, and had other sons later, yet only Seth is described as being "in his likeness, after his image." His sex is therefore not the key to his likeness, but some other quality (which is not explained). Perhaps the phrase means nothing more than "after his own heart"; that human beings are particularly dear to God, as Seth was dear to Adam. In any case, Scripture makes it clear that while all of God's children, both male and female, are in God's image and likeness, in Adam's case only Seth among his children bore that quality -- and it wasn't because of his sex.

After all, just as Adam had sons before Seth came along, so too God created creatures with sexuality before creating human beings. If God had intended sexuality -- maleness and femaleness (what some people call "gender") -- to be especially expressive of the nature of God -- it would have been better to save it for humanity!

On the imperfection of creation

God did not create a perfect world, but a good world. God did not create perfect beings, but created beings that were capable of becoming perfect because they were made in God's image. Had humanity chosen obedience, they might have achieved perfection. Through the Fall they lost that ability until the time when God became a human being. With this redemptive act, human beings once again become capable of reaching perfection in Christ and through Christ. All of creation is awaiting the perfection of humanity, for when human beings take up the task for which they were created, the world can then become perfect. (see Rom. 8.19-23)

Companions' Corner

Companion Catherine ("Kay") W. Sturm writes:

I was raised a devout Evangelical & Reformed Church member (now a part of the United Church of Christ) by parents who set an excellent example by their own lives. I became an Episcopalian after marriage, but since one of my grandfathers was born in England, and served as a lay reader in this country, it seemed like coming home to me.

I'm a graduate of the University of Michigan with a Ph. D. in zoology, and taught at Ohio University, Athens, until my marriage. I've probably made a greater use of my minor in music throughout the intervening years. Our family consists of three sons and a daughter, three of whom are married, and none live at home right now.

Since our divorce, I'm an office manager in a busy sales and service office, still teaching a few piano lessons, and busy with activities at the local parish, and also in the Queen City Contact Crisis line service, for which I'm a volunteer and also a trainer.

My interests include -- besides music, obviously -- sewing, swimming, reading, knitting, and art. I've had training at the local Jesuit Center for the Art of Spiritual Companionship; the 40-hour training for the Calling and Caring Ministry; have attended a number of Healing Ministry conferences in Philadelphia, and am considering the Lay Eucharistic Ministry program as well as trying to finish the EFM course.

Those interested in finding out more on the Companions can contact Br. Bernard Francis LaReau, BSG, Director of Companions, 201 St. Alban Avenue, Madison WI 53714