

Pastor's Pen:

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The Seven Revolutions: The Revolution of Community

Community in the Roman World

As most things in the Roman world, community was dictated by the norms set by the state. As religion was a function of the state, so was morality. One was expected to keep a set of norms that guided one to participate in the Roman religious cult. One was to be a good citizen. However, one's personal morals as lived day-to-day were not of great concern insofar as they did not bring shame publicly. Sin, as understood by us today, was non-existent. It flowed from an understanding that people did not know what the right thing to do was and would do it if only they knew. However, since education was reserved for a very few and the overwhelming amount of humanity was to labor, morality was not pushed nor lived.

This affects the way society or the community works. The responsibility one had to those outside one's family and outside of the Roman religious cult was limited. Those who fell on hard times, were widowed or orphaned, or who were poor were of no concern to society. To please the populace, the Emperor might hand out food and provide entertainment (aka bread and games), but it was completely self-serving. The Roman Empire was engaged in social Darwinism long before Charles Darwin came along. Aid to the poor, if it was done at all, was not born of charity, but of self-service. Hungry people have a tendency to riot.

There was disconnect between religion and lived morality: the typical Roman was 'spiritual not religious' long before it became popular in our own age. Because there was no connection between morality and religion one had no obligation to the welfare of their neighbor. The Roman religion had no idea of charity. Charity, when given by the state, was to quell potential rebellion or to set the populace against a person in power by another person in power.

What Christianity brought

Jesus told us to love our neighbor. When asked who our neighbor was, He used the parable of the Good Samaritan. He uses in the parable two people who hated each other and did not look out for the good of others: a Jew and a Samaritan. In this parable, Jesus makes clear that anyone and everyone is our neighbor. Where pagan societies felt no need to care for the orphan and widow, Christianity picked up from its Jewish roots that they were to care for the poor and needy. Part of the thanksgiving sacrifice was to be given to the poor and needy. Even farmers were not to go back for a second cutting; they were to leave what was left for the poor and needy as an act of thanksgiving to God. In the Judeo-Christian world, one helped the poor and needy because it pleased God. Religion and morality were intimately tied together.

Christianity went one step further in that the obligation to look out for the good of your neighbor was not limited. One was to help the poor and the rich, the slave and the freeman, the man and the woman, the adult and the child, the Christian and the pagan. One of the major attractions to Christianity in the Roman world was that you belonged to this group who didn't see you as the world saw you; they loved you regardless of the circumstances of your life.

On paper, at least, Catholic teaching is still there. Nowhere in Church teaching are we allowed to isolate out and persecute any group. This does mean we must support any ideology or enable sin. It does mean I cannot turn someone away because they belong to some subgroup of humanity. In fact, within Christianity, we do not define people as groups...only as fellow human beings. Notice, though, I said 'on paper.' Throughout the two millennia of Christianity, many have forgotten this. Many persecutions of certain group (Jews, native populations, different races) have been done in the name of Christianity. However, there is no scriptural nor Magisterial backing for such an attitude.

Because of this attitude of care to all, such institutions as hospitals and orphanages were born. That education should be available to both genders, all classes of society, and all races was a Catholic invention. The invention of schools, colleges, and universities came from monasticism in the Catholic Church. Entities such as the Knights of Columbus arose from this taking care of those in need. The Catholic Church remains the single largest contributor of charity in the world. In some parts of the world they are the only entities offering education and healthcare. All of this is based on our understanding of the community...that we are responsible for the welfare of those around us.

What Christianity Can Bring Again

Our epoch in history is not so different as that of Ancient Rome. With the rise of social Darwinism and Eugenics in the 19th, 20th, and now 21st centuries, our mutual care for each other is ebbing. In our country, we are still generous with the poor. Some, though, have allocated care of the poor to the state. Personal involvement in the care of the poor is regulated to paying taxes. I am not saying the state doesn't have a role, but that it secondary to the role we personally have in building up our communities.

We have become a fragmented society. Turn on our media or listen to the overwhelming amount of our politicians, we hear a litany of people being pitted against each other. Persecution of certain groups is fine in our country. Being a student of history, I know one of the necessary steps to tyranny is pitting groups within a nation against each other. We Catholics should be screaming, "Enough!" Our obligations to each other rise above race, gender, socio-economic class, political affiliation, and so on. This doesn't mean we have to accommodate sin, but we are to help everyone, even the sinner.

Within a parish, we can bring this sense of community by understanding that we are a community. We are not a business that sells holy stuff. We have an obligation to support one another whether our children go to parochial school, PSR, or are homeschooled. We have an obligation to support one another regardless of race, job, whether we identify as liberal, conservative, traditional, or progressive. The Gospel of Christ transcends all these human limitations. We, as a parish, are to support our youth and our elderly, support our staff (both clergy and lay), support our poor and needy and be a friend to the poor and needy not of our parish. The Christian ethic is not built on what others can do for me, but what I can do for them. Jesus told us to love our neighbor, not nickel and dime them to death, not neglect them.

Our society, like the society two thousand years ago, needs a place where you can and will be loved and are expected to love. In a society of identity politics, we should be above that fray.