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4th Sunday of Easter – Year A (May 3, 2020)

Christ is risen!

Someone especially attentive to my homilies of the last two weeks might have noticed that they seem to express two opposed principles. On Divine Mercy Sunday, I said that we should not rely too much on our own reason as to give room for our trust in God. Last Sunday, I said that we must reject any command which would deprive us of using our reason to guide our actions. I feel perfectly comfortable in making these assertions with full force, because in the end they are not contradictory. The contradiction lies within us and our divided minds and hearts. We desire one thing and do another. We know something to be true and yet easily reason to conclusions contrary to it. The point is that when making conclusions and choices, we can never make ourselves the basis and measure of that judgment. This Sunday, being Good Shepherd Sunday, is the perfect time to reflect on this.

The point that we have reason and must use it to arrive at truth does not revolve around us. The whole point is that when we act rationally, we take part in God who is Himself Logos. If we ignore His role in that process, we inevitably start coming to different conclusions. We proclaim: “*I* am right.” In this we are greatly deceived.

The point that we must rely on faith has not so much to do with contradicting reason. In fact, they must be in PERFECT conformity. The point is that there is a difference between facts and reasoning. Faith concerns facts, and we can reason about those facts and arrive at other facts. But we often want to grasp who God is by experience. We implicitly think that if we gather more data, we’ll be able to get a handle on him. The more data we have, the more tempting it is to think this way. But God cannot be fully comprehended.

God gives us the antidotes for these tendencies by giving us only just enough knowledge and shepherds to rule over us. When we wish we could understand God better, He will often remain silent to force us to rely on faith in Him, rather than on our personal experience or intellect. When we begin to think that we understand how to handle a situation or a question better than anyone else, He gives us a visible authority to tell us how things are going to be handled.

How do we recognize the voice of legitimate authority? In it, we must find the voice of Christ, the Good Shepherd, to a greater or lesser degree. Jesus says, “[The Shepherd] walks ahead of [his own], and the sheep follow him, because they recognize his voice. But they will not follow a stranger; they will run away from him, because they do not recognize the voice of strangers.” Since Jesus is the Eternal Logos (Word), the voice of any true authority echoes to voice of Logos himself. If it contradicts what is good and true, it is illegitimate, and the sheep do not follow.

But we know that people of good will can come to different conclusions because we do not have all the facts and we make mistakes. For this reason, authority is placed over us so that the entire community can come to a conclusion and act upon it for the common good. An individual’s conclusions ought not to assert themselves

over the decision because the individual is not the measure of society, but rather what is for the benefit of all. This submission to reasonable authority actually enables a person to participate in Divine Logos without having to do the thinking himself. This frees us from the burden of believing that we are autonomous. It is an antidote to pride.

The key is that the authority must not contradict reason. This is an important reflection for parents, teachers, and other authorities. The precepts and rules that we give, if they are reasonable and not arbitrary, will teach those who obey them what is true, right, and just. These precepts engender trust in those subject to us. Though they do not produce virtue on their own, they lay a good foundation. When we are arbitrary, when we overburden those under us, when we judge with partiality or in anger—then those under us lose confidence in the power of logos. Then everything moves out of balance.

Thus, the order of a society depends on the conformity of the authority to Logos. Among other things, this means the authority is virtuous, because virtue is a habit by which actions conform to reason. Virtuous authority inspires trust of the truth in its subjects. In a republic, this is particularly important, because the people themselves exercise authority through representatives. If the people of a republic are not virtuous, the society will quickly decline into tyranny, as the founders of this nation often noted. Laws not in conformity with reason must become increasingly arbitrary and authoritarian to keep in check people whose trust even in reason is quickly eroding. The way to prevent such a collapse is to remember that political authority, even if it is exercised by the people or through their representatives, does not come *from* the people, but God, and as such it must conform to Reason.

The corruption of a people leading to suboptimal authority is even found in the Church. Even though authority is top-down, those called to shepherd the Church are drawn from among her members, and they will reflect the virtue of the people from whom they come. Happily, God provides His Grace to overcome our weakness in this matter. God chastises those He loves to make saints out of them, and so the Church has been continually reformed in her history by the crises she undergoes. In these times, God calls us to the love we had in the beginning; He calls us to follow Him with a pure and simple heart by showing us the truth in stark contrast. Thus He continues to be our Good Shepherd. We recognize His Voice, His Logos, in our hearts, and we submit ourselves and follow Him wherever He, and those He has placed over us, may lead us.