Homily for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time 2026 Year A

The first reading today from the prophet Ezekiel, expresses in a very strong way, the debt of mutual love that St Paul is writing about in the 2nd reading in his letter to the Romans.

Both are stressing that in the sight of God we are each responsible for each other, but Ezekiel's idea goes a lot further, that if our fellow man dies, and we have done nothing to prevent that death, then God will hold us responsible for that death.

The death He is talking about is a spiritual or moral death, and that is pretty strong stuff.

Both are saying that we have a task, a mission, and a responsibility for the spiritual and moral welfare of each other, for the salvation of each other, and that it is a duty that we should perform only out of love, the debt of mutual love. It is no more than Christ says when He teaches that you cannot claim to love God if you do not love your fellow man.

The Second Vatican Council stressed the same thing, but in a different way.

That Council reminded us, that by the virtue of our Baptism, our membership of the Church, that each of us has a specific task, to work for the establishment of the Kingdom of God and the values of that Kingdom. That is what is called the Mission of the Church.

The Church itself is not the Kingdom of God, it is there at the service of the Kingdom of God. And what the Church is now doing, slowly and cautiously, is to let us know that we are not just some large amorphous mass to be led and governed by the clergy. The Church is trying to awaken us up to the idea that we are also the Church, and that each one of us has gifts, gifts to be used for the building up of the Body of Christ, the Church, and each other. Because these gifts are God given, gifts of the Holy Spirit, they are therefore accountable; they are to be used and not neglected or lost.

It is as though a quiet Revolution has been taking place these past 30 years.

Hitherto the Church was very much seen and understood as a power structure, with all power in the hands of the clergy. The clergy, be they Pope, Bishop or Priest, delegated that power, whilst keeping the reins safely in their own hands. If a lay person wanted to do something in the parish, or the Diocese, or the Church, it always had to be with the approval and permission of the Parish Priest, or the Bishop, or Rome.

No matter how worthy a project, if they said No then the chances are it would never get off the ground.

We had got the false idea into our heads that there was only one Ministry, and that was exercised by the Clergy.

Well it is true, there is only one Ministry, but it is Christ's Ministry, and there are many diverse expressions of Christ's Ministry, and the priesthood is only one of them.

What is now slowly happening is that people are being alerted to the fact that, especially in the 3rd world where there is a shortage of priests, that the people too have tasks or ministries, and that not only do they have the obligation to exercise them but by virtue of their Baptism they have the right to exercise them and that the Church should be facilitating and encouraging this, not frustrating it.

Now expressions like "rights" can be very volatile. Violent bloody revolutions start when people wake up to the fact that they have rights and are being denied them. But that is not how it works in the Church, all ministries are a form of loving service, not expressions of power, and the only criteria that should determine whether a particular gift or ministry should be exercised is whether or not it will build up the Body of Christ, and does it express that debt of mutual love and responsibility that we have to each other?

Because of the way that the Church is structured it is the task, or office of some within the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to discern whether a particular gift or ministry is good and useful for the building up of the Body of Christ, the Church. It would be extremely harmful to the unity of the Church if a state of anarchy existed, where people, perhaps motivated by power, demanded their rights, rather than motivated by a spirit of service, and in the process they would divide the Body of Christ!

In the early, primitive Church, many of the tasks that we now associate with the clergy, were exercised by ordinary people, the laity. As the centuries passed and the Church expanded, a more structured priesthood evolved and those tasks were taken away from the laity.

What is happening today is that the Church is restoring some of those tasks, those ministries, back to the laity, precisely because it can lead to the building up of the Body of Christ. The Church is recognising that people have gifts, talents, or ministries in

certain areas that are for the service of the Church, and for the enrichment of the Church.

Some are obvious. You now have lay people reading at Mass, distributing Holy Communion, bringing the Eucharist to the sick and the housebound, teaching not just Catechetics, but teaching Theology in Seminaries and Universities, and training future priests. They act as Counsellors and are even helping to administer the Diocese. All of these tasks were hitherto done by the clergy alone, because there was a prescription that it was part and parcel of what priesthood was all about. Not so, that was not what the Ministry of Priesthood was about at all. It may even be that in the near future, the ways of being a priest will change; celibacy will become just one way of living out a priestly life.

It would equally be a mistake now to assume that "Ministries" are to be confined to those very public and dramatic areas of Church life, and that everybody should focus their attention on becoming an Acolyte, Reader or Deacon, like a mini-priest. It would be so easy to ‘clericalize’ the laity, and that would be a mistake. Just as it would be equally wrong to try to laicize the clergy; each has its own specific task or ministry in the Church, a ministry of loving service.

Marriage and family life is a special Ministry within the life of the Church and for building up of the Body of Christ. Our world is crying out for examples of loving fidelity within marriage, the reinforcement of sound family values and standards of living. Just quietly and routinely living every day in its own way, such lives give more eloquent witness and example than all the sermons from the pulpit.

Doctors and nurses, by working to sound ethical principles and standards within the medical profession; Teachers in our Schools; Employers and Trade Unions, by recognising basic human rights and dignities, not only a fair and just wage for a day's work, but also a fair day's work for that wage.

All of our lives have opportunities for Ministry within them. The practical living out of that debt of mutual love. No matter how insignificant we feel we are, we all have some gift or task that, if it is well done, can lead to this building up of the Body of Christ, and with that gift goes the obligation and the right to exercise it in a spirit of loving service. Slowly and painfully we are just beginning to wake up to our dignity and potential as Christians. We are beginning to repay part of the debt of mutual love that we owe to each other.