

3rd Sun. Ord. Time (B)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
January 24, 25, 2015

I am within pages of finishing a book on Pope Francis: The Great Reformer by Austen Ivereigh. It contains many stories of Jorge Bergoglio's life prior to his being elected Pope. There are examples from his life as a Jesuit priest, then as a bishop and cardinal in Argentina. One of these examples is when he had to deal with the meaning and implications of his vow of obedience. As I read it I remembered my homily from early November in which I suggested to you that what may be very life-giving to other people is for them to see real lived examples of the evangelical counsels of piety, obedience, chastity and poverty. If people saw these lived in us they may be attracted to Jesus and Church. That day I dealt a bit with piety or reverence, suggesting that our personal piety and reverence might well be inspiring to others. At that time I also said that I would return to the other virtues at some point. The mention of Jorge Bergoglio's struggle with obedience reminded me to go back and deal with this counsel.

At the time of the example, Pope Francis was provincial of the Argentine Jesuits. In that role as Provincial, he oversaw many of the Jesuits in his country. He was not yet a bishop nor a cardinal in the Church. As a Provincial he was very successful, increasing the number of men in the Jesuit seminary and inspiring these men with an intense desire to serve the poor. He did all of this by reaching beyond the usual way of doing things. Because of this he was pulled out of his position as Provincial, and assigned to graduate studies in Germany. Bergoglio struggled with the thought, “was this God's will for him in the middle of his life?” The author says Bergoglio “knew it wasn't to sit in a library for three years tweaking footnotes. He was a leader, a reformer, a pastor, a missionary. But how could he obey that call and the call of his superiors to study at the same time?”

What does it mean to obey? Obedience comes from a Latin word “*obaudire*” which means 'to hear' or 'to listen to'. The virtue of obedience and Bergoglio's vow to obedience was “to free his heart from self (ego) in order to listen to God, and to submit freely to God's will.” People who do this are incredible witnesses to others of the Kingdom of God. People who are free enough to listen to God with their heart and then submit to God's will with their lives inspire others ... they inspire me, at least.

We have great examples of this in both today's First Scripture and Gospel: Jonah and some of the early apostles. They hear God and respond. Most often this involves conversion ... we are called to change our lives. As mentioned just last weekend, it means paying attention to the 'restlessness' in our lives, naming it as God, and then following God's call and urgings. The people of Nineveh did this immediately. Some of the disciples did this immediately as well. Jonah, on the other hand, required more time before he was able to submit to God's urgings, before he was willing to undergo the

conversion needed to obey God's will. But whether it takes a long or a short time, when we do listen to God and make a decision to follow God's way, we are an inspiration to others. And sometimes those who struggle the longest and the hardest are the greater inspiration.

Add this thought to the mix of your thinking

To be Catholic is to be connected, even devoted, to the Church

To be a disciple (a Christian) is to be connected, devoted to Jesus.

Obviously these are closely related, but that being said, they are not the same. For years, I have been connected, even devoted, to the Church. Recently, I hope, I desire and try to be connected, even devoted, to Jesus. And I am willing to admit that there are people who are very connected and devoted to Jesus, but who have little or no connection to Church.

I struggle with this for obvious reasons, I guess; my life's work is and has been with Church. But I struggle with this also because I believe that the Church is the Sacrament of God, that the Church (we) is the presence of Jesus among us. Yet, I know that the presence of Jesus shines through the Church best when we as God's people live as Jesus calls us to live. And one of these ways is that we listen to God with our heart and then submit to God's will with our lives. In doing this we are living the evangelical counsel of obedience, and our lives will inspire others.

This is why I think so many people today are taken up with Pope Francis. He seems so real, so genuine. He listens to God, and he listens to the yearnings of God's people. He not only listens, but he seems to respond to what he hears in his listening. He is willing to set himself, his own ego, aside to follow the urgings of God. He obeys God's call. Jesus also listened to his Father and obeyed him, even to the point of the cross. This is what inspired the apostles, and all those who were attracted to Jesus.

What of me inspires others to listen to God, and respond to God's urgings.

What of you inspires others on behalf of God?

If you gave thought to the virtue of obedience, to listening to God and submitting freely to God's will, what about you and in you might we see that we cannot see now.

Maybe the coming Lenten season is a time for renewed reverence and obedience.