

Homily for the 15th Sunday of the Year - Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
July 10, 2022

† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated religious, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

In geometry, an *apeirogon* is a polygon with an infinite number of sides. *Apeirogon* is also the title of a novel published in 2020 by the Irish writer Colum McCann. It is inspired by the real-life friendship between two fathers from peoples historically bitterly divided: Rami Elhanan, an Israeli, and Bassam Aramin, a Palestinian. They are united in grief by the loss of their young daughters: thirteen-year-old Smadar, killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber; and ten-year-old Abir, shot by a member of the Israeli army. Both bereaved fathers become members of the Parents Circle, a joint Israeli-Palestinian group of families who have lost children or close family members during the ongoing conflict. Rami and Bassam commit to spending their lives sharing their stories and working for reconciliation and a just and peaceful resolution to the conflict. "This became their jobs: to tell the story of what had happened to their girls."

When Jesus tells a lawyer that to inherit eternal life he must love God and love his neighbor as much as he loves himself, the question immediately follows, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus does not define who the lawyer's neighbor might be, but tells him a story instead – the famous parable of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). The priest and the Levite in the story ignore the beaten stranger by the roadside, even though he is a fellow Jew; in contrast, the Samaritan, who is from a different and despised people, shows the injured man love and care. Those Jews listening to Jesus probably hoped he would name one of them as the solution. Perhaps a kind leper, a sympathetic tax collector, or a good Pharisee. The person Jesus chooses to help the injured victim is a total shocker: a Samaritan. Jews and Samaritans hated one another with an intense hate. How could Jesus even suggest such a thing? The scholar of the law gets the right answer, even though he will not even say the word Samaritan. My neighbor is anyone who, out of love for God, meets the needs of others with love.

If Jesus had merely wanted to teach about neighborly love, the third passer-by could have been another Jew, or the victim might have been a Samaritan assisted by a Jew. In selecting a Samaritan as the hero, Jesus is turning the social world upside down and challenging deep-seated

suppositions. It is the Samaritan who behaves like a loving neighbor even though he is under no obligation to do so. The priest and the Levite, who are supposed to be examples of virtuousness, reject the opportunity to show love and to be good neighbors.

Jesus intended the story to demonstrate the nature of love in God's kingdom. The response to "Who is my neighbor?" is that everyone, including my enemy, is my neighbor. The Samaritan's compassion was costly. It involved making himself vulnerable to attack by robbers because he was walking instead of riding after giving the beaten man his mount. He also made a financial payment to an innkeeper to look after the victim without any expectation of being repaid. He might even have been ostracized by his own people for assisting a Jew. Jesus directly asks the lawyer which of the three travelers was a neighbor to the injured man. "The one who took pity on him," he replies. To underline the message still further, Jesus instructs the lawyer to "Go, and do the same yourself."

Jesus asks that we care about our neighbors with the same intensity that we care about ourselves. We are to love as he loved us, and even an enemy is redefined as a neighbor. This love is more than simply smiling at strangers and trying to develop positive attitudes towards people we do not

particularly like. The command to love our neighbor is placed immediately after the command to love God, and it demands a serious effort to elevate the neighbor's need to the same level as our own. Moreover, we are called not just to serve those who serve us, or return favors because we have received them; we are called to love beyond the usual expectations of making special efforts only for family and friends.

Our Lord's parable of the Good Samaritan provides a fitting example for the proper way to respond to the recent incidents of violence in the world. Following the tragic and senseless shooting during a Fourth of July parade in Highland Park, Illinois, there were the usual calls for authorities to "do something," usually in the form of gun control. The assassination of former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last Friday in a largely gun-free nation shows that killers bent to do evil will find whatever means they need to commit their crimes, as the assassin apparently used a home-made weapon. Banning weapons is a simplistic and largely ineffective solution. It is much more difficult to change people's hearts from hatred to love. But that is what Our Lord calls us to do. Christians do not murder people. Christians love their neighbors as themselves, even their enemies.

In our first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy (Dt 30:10-14), Moses emphasizes the need of the people of Israel to continue heeding God's voice just as they promised. Moses emphasizes that the commands and decrees of the law are not burdensome. They seek to clarify precisely what is expected of them as God's covenant people, thus removing any fear that they may commit some transgression of the law unawares—and thus inadvertently jeopardize that bond.

Moses further stresses how compatible the covenant laws are with their status as God's chosen people. The laws are so near as to be already in their mouths and in their hearts. Their origin is not from some distant or unfamiliar source that is uncaring or accessible only to a few; they come from the same personal God who created them with the power to speak and to understand. The people of Israel, and we as well, should, therefore, find no difficulty in adhering to the things God expects of us; we have every means to carry them out. This truth gives us every reason to comply with God's expectations and put them into practice.

May God give us this grace. Amen.