

Lenten Reflection

Laetare Sunday, March 6, 2016

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The God of Providence is just a wonderful travelling companion and Jesus' manifestation of how to live out a Providential moment often has GREAT CLARITY. Such was the case regarding my receipt for the request of a reflection for the Fourth Sunday of Lent! Let me explain. When I received the readings, I immediately underlined the beginning section of the Gospel of Luke where Jesus is rebuked by the Pharisees and Scribes, who state: "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." That led into the parable of the Prodigal Son as the lesson to be learned in terms of acceptance and rejection within the family system. I knew immediately that I wanted to "take on" the exclusion of sinners by the Pharisees, but was not sure yet of the direction. In less than 24 hours I received a chapter from *Inclusion: Making Room for Grace* by Eric H.F Law, and Episcopal Priest, entitled: "This Fellow Welcomes Sinners and Eats with Them" to reflect upon for a Providence Circle Meeting. The article is exactly where I wished to go in terms of inclusion, exclusion and boundaries. I only declare a few things Providential because the notion can be overworked, but THIS... This was God being very CLEAR!!!

Often we think of "including" and "excluding" persons in our families, workplace and social situations as just what we do or don't do. Therefore, we don't always pay attention to the boundaries that we establish as having deep roots, sometimes very conflicted with the Gospel and the actions of Jesus. Yet reflection is essential if we are to pay attention to what we are called to as Christians. This seems to be particularly true at an international and intercultural level, as we deal with the refugees crying out for help in increasing numbers, but it may also be true in our own families as well. Recently we have encountered the TV rhetoric of an election year: "We will build a wall, a strong wall, to keep them all out of our country." ...And what would Jesus do?

Eric Law mentions four types of boundaries: 1) Direct exclusion as in the "wall" situation just described; 2) Major or even neighborhood demographic shifts. An example would be people of color moving into what had been a "lily white" neighborhood. In this situation, we may even wish to be accepting but cannot handle the neighbors' reactivity, which is rejecting and angry. 3) A more subtle form of alienation is the situation in which people are accepted into the community, the club, or the political party but are not given full privileges to move into leadership. Often, people who are excluded say nothing, but just leave. 4) The final kind of boundaries challenge is the quasi-acceptance of newer members or neighborhood people because this creates a possible economic gain. Persons are not accepted fully, but are solely to create an economic advantage.

As we reflect upon this Gospel and the parable of the son named "prodigal," we may wish to examine who, like the elder son, are the persons whom we rule out of the human family and why. Then we may wish to re-read the Epistle. There, we are charged with the task of reconciliation. Thus, if our hearts are open, we become ambassadors for Christ, entrusted with acceptance and full reconciliation with all of God's children.