

SORRY HISTORY

We may be tempted to think that Pope Francis is condemning extremist Muslim violence. No doubt, this is in part what the Holy Father is referring to. But it is not an exclusively “Muslim problem”. Although fuelled by political motives, we have seen how in our own country, Christian men and women used horrific violence against each other. We have seen popes bless armies on their way to war. Europe has had its tragic history of Christian religious violence. One need think only of the Thirty Years War, for example, or the burning of “heretics” in the name of God. That is to say nothing of the Christians who went on crusade to the Middle East, or of the conquistadors, and of the violence that was used for the “glory of God”. So we in the Christian world have been guilty of distorting God’s name for our own earthly ends, just as some from other faith traditions have done.

When we look back on these periods in history, and on how our sacred books were misused, we rightly see this as an abuse of sacred texts. This remains an ongoing problem in our world today. Whether one is speaking about Christian or Jewish or Muslim fundamentalists, religious motives are often cited as justification for violence, oppression, and marginalization. Pope Francis rightly condemns this as the misuse of God’s name, for when we act like this, we fail God. The God of the Old Testament is a God of mercy and compassion, an inclusive God, a faithful God, and an infinitely forgiving God.

MISUSING THE NAME

We can misuse God’s name in other ways, however. We distort it when we use God as an excuse to dominate others, to control or manipulate them, or when we judge and exclude others on religious grounds. Pope Francis alludes to this again, when in the Joy of the Gospel, he warns us not to turn the confessional into a “torture chamber.” When the Christian faith becomes an opportunity to burden or shame others, when it becomes an opportunity to exclude rather than welcome, we have once more distorted God’s name. This can happen in subtle ways that we might not even realize. We have a constant obligation to be vigilant in terms of our actions and attitudes. Faith, the sacraments, and indeed God, are not prizes for the virtuous. The God of Jesus Christ provides a constant reminder that we are to be people of hospitality, compassion, and gentleness.

This commandment also challenges us not to be flippant or casual with God. As James Keenan explains, “Taking a person’s name in vain is nothing other than an attempt at discrediting or dismissing another as not worthy of respect” (Commandments of Compassion, 8). We can invoke a name to ridicule or to undermine, be it God’s name or the name of those around us.

To quote Keenan once more, “The second commandment wonderfully reminds us that uttering another’s name discloses the speaker’s estimation of the one named. From the beginning of our journey in faith, God has invited us to be attentive to the way we voice the Lord’s name. Today the same commandment urges us in our ordinary human intercourse to get into the habit of expressing the Lord’s name with loving reverence, for our benefit and for our culture’s.” ■



Today’s readings

Ezekiel 33:7-9
Romans 13:8-10
Matthew 18:15-20

An unhealthy and unpleasant aspect of the Roman Catholic Church is the practice, and in some cases encouraging, of anonymous reporting of individuals to higher authorities rather than confronting the individual in question. For over one hundred years certain people have taken it upon themselves to decide whether a writer or liturgical celebrant is outside the bounds of what they consider orthodox Catholic opinion or practice and to write to the bishop or a Roman Curial body informing them, but without telling the person concerned. Sometimes this information is taken at face value and acted upon without what most people would consider due and fair process or natural justice.

Our Gospel passage today is telling us that within the Christian community any matter which affects the life of the disciples of Jesus should be dealt with in an open, what we would call nowadays transparent, way. The person should be informed of the charge against them and given the chance to either explain or apologise straightaway, but not ostracised from the community without being given the chance to do so.

The word used of such a person is brother (and so it also means sister). Matthew is saying that there is a real bond between members of the Church: if this bond is broken, it is like losing a member of the family. If we try to put it right, then the Lord promises to be with us.

GOD’S WORD TODAY

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SECOND
 COMMANDMENT
**MISUSE
 OF GOD’S
 NAME**

“You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God.” (Exodus 20:7)

On January 9th Pope Francis condemned fundamentalist attacks around the world. In an address to the Vatican Diplomatic Corps, he said: “one can never kill in God’s name. We are dealing with homicidal madness which misuses God’s name in order to disseminate death, in a play for domination and power”. To invoke any god in order to justify violence and harm is a distortion of God’s image and a manipulation of faith. This second commandment calls us again towards an authentic relationship with God, and its corresponding implications for right relationship with those around us.

