

05 Sunday of Lent
March 29, 2009
Fr. Tom Elliott

Courageous Obedience

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Psalm 51
Hebrews 5:7-9
John 12:20-33

Most of us this week heard the news stories bashing Pope Benedict's words on artificial birth control in Africa. I heard several people commenting on how out-of-touch the Pope is on the "reality" of life and how his words were not only naïve, but irresponsible. What most of these news reports and commentators don't understand is that there is a radical difference between the world's view and our faith's view. It was a fresh reminder of the relativism that we're drowning in throughout the United States, as well as the all-too-common belief that the end justifies the means. Not surprisingly, none of these news stories quoted the Papal Encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*.

When *Humanae Vitae* was written by Pope Paul VI in 1968, the world mocked his view of artificial birth control. Remember, the media proclaimed that the birth control pill, condoms, and other forms of artificial birth control would successfully put an end to divorce, teen pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted diseases. Pope Paul VI refuted such proclamations, writing that, not only would artificial birth control NOT put an end to these things, but it would actually make them worse. Forty one years later, it is obvious that his words were prophetic. Yet, the media continues to call the Church's teaching naïve and irresponsible.

Quite often, the Church calls us into courageous obedience. I know that it's not easy. A married couple recently shared with me their struggle with being obedient to the Church's teaching on birth control. They had courageously chosen to use Natural Family Planning (NFP). When the topic came up in their "Why Catholic?" small group, the couple shared their experience with NFP. They were ridiculed by the other people in their group for their decision. A similar thing can happen when an engaged couple decides to go through the proper process in order to be married in the Church.

It takes a lot of courage for a previously married man or woman to go through the annulment process. Sometimes they chose to go through the process despite not being supported by their current spouse, family members, and/or friends. Yet, their courageous obedience ALWAYS bears good fruit. The same thing is true of those men and women who are going thru the RCIA process and are waiting for annulments in order to come into full communion with the Church.

I recently interviewed Fr. John Antony, the pastor of St. Raphael Catholic Church in Springdale, AR, and he had some beautiful and encouraging things to say about such courageous and obedient people. Here's an excerpt of the interview:

(Audio Clip Played—listen to audio version of this sermon for the full homily)

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus shares with us the fruit of following Him in courageous obedience. He describes it as a type of death.

Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me.

-John 12:24-26

The author of the letter to the Hebrews also understood this beautiful and necessary connection between courageous obedience and suffering. We heard him explain, "Son though he was, [Jesus] learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Hebrews 5:8-9).

When you and I respond to the Lord in courageous obedience, we become an avenue of salvation for other people; we become a light shining in the midst of the darkness of our world; we become the voice of faith in the midst of the world's noise. This is what our Pope has been this week. This is what so many of you have been for me and Fr. John and countless others. Let us pray that God will continue to give us the grace to put aside the "wisdom" of the world and embrace the courageous obedience that leads to hope and new life!