

Idolatry

Just what is Jesus getting at in today's Gospel from Matthew: "whoever loves father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me; ... whoever loves daughter or son more than me, is not worthy of me"? Simply put, Jesus is reminding us that every human person is ultimately "hardwired for God." Yes, we have physical, psychological, and social components; *but* we also have a spiritual component, spiritual dimension, a "God drive" that needs to be respected.

From a biblical perspective, what Jesus insists in today's Gospel is that life will flow properly if we give ultimate allegiance to God; if God is our ultimate anchor: everything else ... everyone else – including mother, father, spouses, children – are put in their proper perspective.

Throughout the Scriptures we're reminded that when we make someone or something a "God" in our lives, we get into big trouble... because ultimately no one or no thing: husband, wife, child, job, money, power, material possessions... can replace God. Biblically to make someone or something a "God" in our lives is called idolatry.

Let me share an extreme example: I can remember visiting a young man in his 20s who was in the throes of addiction to crack cocaine. Describing his crack use, he literally said:

- "I love crack!"
- "Crack is my lover!"
- "Crack is my God!"

Although this is an extreme example, it certainly makes the point that when we make another person or thing or experience a "God" in our lives, it will ultimately disappoint us. It is idolatry; *nothing but God* can ultimately fill the hole in our souls.

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Sisters and brothers, idolatry is not only an individual reality but also can become a social reality, a cultural reality, even a global reality. A great example is war. War is a global idol that, in essence, we worship. We are convinced war will solve our conflicts. It's absolute insanity and yet we worship at the altar of militarism: idolatry at its bloodiest.

On this Fourth of July Independence weekend, I'd like to reflect briefly on a form of idolatry, an idolatry that is dangerously growing in our Nation that has the potential to destroy our democracy as it polarizes our Nation and even our Church in America.

Christian Nationalism is a political ideology that claims America was founded and should remain a so-called "Christian nation," despite the clear intent of the Constitution to separate church and state and to honor religious liberty for all. Christian Nationalism is a christo-fascist hijacking of our faith against democracy. Christian Nationalism is a false gospel. Christian Nationalism merges our religious and civic identities, proclaiming that only conservative Christians are true Americans. A major goal of Christian Nationalism in the U.S. is for conservative churches to seize complete power by any means necessary – no matter who gets hurt or how many elections must be overturned. Adherence to Christian Nationalism's policy agenda advocates for oppressive legislation rooted in far-right religious beliefs that strip away equal rights for women, people of color, immigrants, non-Christians, and the LGBTQ+ Community among others.

Listen to the rhetoric: Clay Clark, organizer of the Reawakening America Mega Tour, has told audiences that they are on "Team Jesus" while their opponents are on "Team Satan"! Fox News ex-host, Tucker Carlson, has proclaimed that trans-people are the "natural enemy of Christians"!

Sisters and brothers, Christian Nationalism is a hotbed for disinformation and misinformation; including Q-Anon Conspiracy theories, election denial, anti-vaccine lies, ... anything that can be used as a wedge to divide the population and seize authority — valuing power more than truth.

Sisters and brothers, this is really a very dangerous moment – right before our eyes.

Pope Francis recently observed:

"I must confess that when I hear some speakers, some persons in charge of order or the government, I am reminded of Hitler's speeches in 1934 and 1936. They are actions typical of Naziism, that with its persecution of Jews, Gypsies and people of homosexual orientation, represent a negative model par excellence of a throwaway culture and hate. That is what happened in that time and today these things are reappearing."

Sisters and brothers, variations of Christian nationalism or even seeping into areas of our Catholic Church in this country and beyond, brainwashing our sisters and brothers

with ideologies that condemn, demonize, marginalize, and exclude LGBTQ+ folks, women who are seeking equality, condemning so-called “illegal aliens,” etc. Good people are being sucked into this nonsense by multi-million-dollar Catholic think tanks like the NAPA Institute, Church Militant, even Franciscan University in Steubenville, and EWTN Network! Mother Angelica would turn over in her grave if she heard some of the vile that is broadcast today on that network as they ridicule Pope Francis and his agenda of mercy.

We’ve had an experience of this right in our own Parish during LGBTQ+ Pride Month. For years we have displayed the Rainbow Flag on our campus including the newest one that includes symbols of support for transgender sisters and brothers. This year we received emails, the bishop received numerous complaints, I’ve met with him twice and I have met with a young man ‘demanding’ that we remove the flag immediately ‘because it is promoting sin and encouraging people – with an intrinsic disorder – to commit evil acts.’ Not surprisingly, all this falls in with the anti-trans movement inspired by Christian Nationalism across America — using our trans-gendered folks as political footballs... increasing violence and even death.

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Sisters and brothers, the vast majority of Christians, the vast majority of Catholics, **do not** adhere to Christian Nationalism — because it is the **antithesis** of everything Jesus stands, ...it’s **not Christian!** Where Christian Nationalism spreads Q-Anon lies, Jesus says: the “truth will set us free;” whereas Christian Nationalism incites political violence, Jesus is the Prince of Peace; and where Christian Nationalism spreads division and hatred, Jesus calls us to inclusivity and love our neighbor... **no exceptions!**

In today’s Gospel, Jesus reminds us that true Christianity is not a spectator sport. If the world Jesus envisioned is to be birthed into being, it is going to come at a cost. We need to take up our cross – get involved, even if it costs. True Christianity is not cheap grace....

The Cross is *not about* admitting defeat, the cross is *not about* remaining silent or passive, the cross is *not about* opting out. The Cross *is about* shaking things up, about rattling the systems and ideologies of hate at their core, the Cross *is about* confronting evil with the power of grace and love.

Sisters and brothers, to take up the Cross as Jesus did, is to stand always in the center of the world’s pain. Taking up the cross of Jesus means recognizing Christ crucified in every suffering soul and body we encounter and – together with other people of goodwill – pouring our energies into alleviating the pain no matter what it costs us.

To be a Christian means to have the grace of Christ within us, to lay down our lives for our neighbor, to wash the feet of the poor. To be like Christ, is to be unafraid to go to the margins and touch the sick, the wounded, the sinners and all those shunned by society. To be a Christian is ultimately to live in the spirit of martyrdom – willing to offer up one's life for the sake of the Gospel. To be a Christian is to be like God... *the God of Jesus*, not the false gods of culture or the god of our own self-centered egos.

So, sisters and brothers, I would invite us to reflect on the words of Tony DeMello on ideology:

“If you have to choose between the dictates of a compassionate heart and the demands of an ideology, reject the ideology unhesitatingly. Compassion has no ideology.”