

Feast of St. Francis, October 4, 2009; Walton & Lexington

Introduction: This past Tuesday I had the opportunity to see the play on the life of St. John Vianney. He is perhaps best known for the fact that he spent sixteen to eighteen hours every day hearing confessions. I was impressed though by the simple and yet blunt way he preached to the people about hell. He minced no words when he spoke on this subject. The thought occurred to me that I perhaps have been remiss in this regard. In other words I have not preached often enough and long enough that there is a hell, and that it is possible for both you and me to go there. In my own defense I can say that if I have not preached enough about hell, it isn't because I don't believe in it. I very much believe in it, and as I said before, "it is possible for both you and me to go there."

1. Example of St. Francis; Today is the Feast of St. Francis, and although the Feast is actually celebrated today instead of the Sunday liturgy in Franciscan Churches, I don't feel that this is our situation here and therefore we are celebrating the regular Sunday liturgy, which is the 18th Sunday after Pentecost. I doubt if many people would associate the idea of preaching on hell with St. Francis. Oh, he was too kind and gentle! On the contrary though, in the ninth chapter of his Rule, St. Francis tells his followers that in the preaching they do, they should announce to the people "vices and virtues, punishment and glory with brevity of speech ." In other words St. Francis tells his followers to preach to the people about what is right and what is wrong, and that people are going to receive punishment or glory according to the way they lived. I don't know if you noticed "with brevity of speech.' If a Franciscan ever preaches too long, feel free to tell them that they are not observing the Rule of St. Francis in his regard!

2. A presumption: I will admit that I generally presume that when I preach to the people of your caliber or to people who prefer the traditional Latin liturgy that I am preaching first of all to people who do believe in hell, and to people who by their way of life are trying to avoid hell. I'm also presuming that I'm preaching to people who know enough of their religion that they know what sin is, and if they commit sin, they know what to do about it, namely to go to confession.

3. An overlooked situation: I would venture to say that for most of you, actually committing fully deliberate mortal sins is not so much the issue. But one area where even otherwise good people fail is when it comes to taking advantage of opportunities that we may have. After all, if we really believe what the Mass is, namely, Christ becoming present on our altars and making that same offering of Himself which He first did on Mount Calvary, would we miss opportunities to go to Mass, even though we are not obligated under pain of mortal sin. In laying down the law that all Catholics should attend Mass on Sundays and Holydays, the church is legislating the minimum, not the ideal. Very bluntly we can ask ourselves, "Are there opportunities for me to go to Mass during the week that I fail to take advantage of?"

4. The situation: Shortly after the II Vatican Council the complaint was made that most churches are no longer offering opportunities for extra devotions, such as Benediction, the Rosary, Way of the Cross, etc. That certainly is true, but did this happen because someone just decided to do away with them, or was the decision made because there was no interest being shown? A few years ago when Fr. Nick Pagano was pastor at St. Peter's in Lexington, he suggested that our Latin Mass community and the parishioners of St. Peter's have a joint or common celebration of the Stations and Benediction during Lent. There wasn't enough interest shown to warrant the priest taking the time for these devotions.

5. Judgment before God: I think it is a good idea for us often to think of that moment when we will appear before God. Yes, any intentional wrong that we may have done will be brought forward. I do believe that God will also use the occasion to make us see all the missed opportunities that we had. I imagine we can at least be embarrassed by those things. The thought used to strike me when we were attempting to have a communal celebration of the Way of the Cross and Benediction, that a good

percentage of the people not present were simply at home watching television. Perhaps this also is a good place to remind people that when we appear before God, God isn't going to ask us about or discuss what other people did.

6. The demands of the world: In actuality the world and its pursuits are much more demanding than God is. Years ago when my younger brother and sister-in-law were raising their children, I recall how difficult it was to arrange a time for me to visit. I was stationed either in Arizona or New Mexico at the time and only got home once a year. There was football practice, baseball, soccer and all kinds of things and obligations which interfered. I couldn't help remember the situation when I was a child. Our parents never drove us anywhere to play. If we couldn't walk there, we didn't go. I just bring this up to show how much we are willing to do for worldly pursuits and how little we are willing to do for God.

Conclusion: For the general public probably the best known work of St. Francis is his Canticle of Brother Sun, in which St. Francis exhorts all creatures to praise their God and Maker. But there is one line in his poem that isn't repeated much, and that is where St. Francis says; "Who to those who die in mortal sin." I doubt if St. John Vianney ever quoted these words, but I am sure that that was what he was trying to remind people of when he preached to them about sin and hell.