

Sunday Homily

12TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

21 JUNE 2020

YEAR A

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK IV

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body
but cannot kill the soul.”

Illustration

Fr Shay Cullen, an Irish Columban priest, has tirelessly worked for justice in Olongapo City in the Philippines since 1969. Olongapo City developed around the United States Naval Base in Subic Bay. The base was used by the navy as a rest and recreation stop for their servicemen, and a thriving sex industry developed. Despite the navy’s withdrawal a number of years ago, Olongapo remains a draw for sex tourists, particularly foreign paedophile tourists.

Fr Shay has made it his life’s work to make sure that children are not throwaway objects of the international sex tourism trade. Together with Merle and Alex Hermoso, a Filipino couple, he set up the Preda Foundation in 1974 to rescue abused children, and after many years the services offered by Preda were expanded to schools, colleges and community groups building basic Christian communities among the urban poor of Olongapo. Fr Shay was an invited delegate to the 1989 conference in Helsinki drafting the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2001.

Although Fr Shay has saved many lives and immeasurably helped many more, his stand for those who are poor and exploited has made him extremely unpopular in the Philippines. He has received countless death threats and is under constant harassment. Attempts have been made to deport him because his publicity has been damaging to local officials, some of whom have been involved in the promotion of the sex industry. Fr Shay has not only stood up to the local authorities but has tackled foreign sex abusers, bringing evidence to international attention.

Gospel Teaching

Today’s Gospel is preceded by Jesus’ commission to the disciples to go out in his name and proclaim God’s kingdom. But the reading is a bit mysterious. It is about things hidden now being revealed tomorrow, about light and dark, and about whispers and proclamations. Above all it is about not being afraid of people or authorities who might abuse, arrest, torture or even execute us when we preach the Good News, because they cannot kill our souls – only God has the power to do that.

Jesus promises that he will declare himself for us in the presence of the Father, if we declare ourselves for him in the presence of other people. But what does it mean to declare ourselves for Jesus? Does it mean telling as many people as possible that Jesus is our personal saviour? Jesus clearly expects actions as well as words. By declaring ourselves for Jesus, we are called also to work for justice and peace. Does it just mean going to Mass every Sunday and saying grace before meals? Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus condemns filling one's life with religious ritual alone. He condemns the Pharisees for their hollow, ostentatious practices. Jesus is suggesting that discipleship must include speaking out and acting to bring about God's kingdom here on earth, despite the persecution this could engender.

Application

We are to fear and love God above all things. So often, we Christians are in situations where we are called to speak words from the Lord's teachings to our government, our church, our family or our friends. Yet we are often afraid to do so because of possible rejection and persecution, or simply the fear of being made to feel foolish. So often we keep our mouths shut and hide in the safety of silence because we shy away from tensions. We do not have the courage to be truthful.

Just as Fr Shay Cullen and countless other Christians throughout the world are fearless in declaring themselves for Jesus and what he stands for, we too are urged to proclaim God's kingdom in words and actions. Some do this by speaking out against the arms trade and protesting outside arms factories, others involve themselves in rallies for trade justice and the cancellation of the developing world's debt. Some Christian churches address the issue of poverty in our own society and support campaigns for a decent living wage and the provision of more affordable housing. The Church's social teaching stands alongside scripture in urging Christians to be proactive in promoting Gospel values.

If we meet opposition when we proclaim the Good News of God's love for all people, and the justice and righteousness that the kingdom of God will bring, we have nothing to fear. For we know that we are under the loving protection of a God who cares for every sparrow that falls from the sky, and even knows exactly how many hairs there are on our head.