

Religion & Gain

Pastoral Letter by Aloysius Cardinal Ambrozic, Archbishop of Toronto

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Valueless values

I ask myself at times why I react so negatively to a word often used these days, the word "value". The reason for my negative reaction seems to lie in the fact that the talk of values strikes me as very neutral. The word admits that for someone else my value may be quite valueless. The term communicates, in fact, our acceptance that what we take as valuable may be quite meaningless in somebody else's eyes. In other words, I react negatively to the word simply because it contains a possibility of relativism and meaninglessness.

The trouble seems to be, then, that all discussion of values is senseless; while I admit something has value, somebody else may well see it as insignificant. There is the attitude that the dialogue takes place without any attempt to change anyone's mind. All discussion of values is useless. Any attempt to change anyone's mind is, in fact, unacceptable and even unecumenical.

The sovereign ego

It seems that the only value that is universal in our society is that of the glorified ego. The notion predominates that all our views must be measured by our sovereign likes and dislikes. This notion seems to be at the basis of our democratic conviction and practice; my ego is thought to be the only authority which counts. There is no truth and value apart from what I like or dislike. The difficulty is, however, that this sovereign ego is not a neutral value -- just because it is generally accepted. It is, clearly, a one-sided myth.

If we wish to have proof of the mythical quality of our sovereign ego, it lies in the fact that it is quickly becoming something else, that is to say, a productive ego, a unit of economic utility. It is this productive human being whose "value" is beginning to fray at both ends of the life spectrum. Our society has already accepted the principle of abortion, and there is a growing number of people defending euthanasia. Whatever the reasons proclaimed by them, children learning from this type of society will get rid of their old people as soon as they become economically unproductive.

Economic progress is thought to be productive of human dignity as well as democracy. Free trade, the sacred cow at whose hoofs we seem to worship, is the missionary capitalism of our world. The notion very much at home in some of our media and the programmes of some political parties, seems to be basic and unquestioned, though it can hardly be said to be neutral, that the well-fed, fully employed and economically secure individual will remain honest and

democratic. However, this self-seeking and self-justifying individual, seeking his own economic advantage, will hardly proclaim the values of honesty and respect for others.

The point we must stress again and again is that our society is basing itself on an ideologically un-neutral notion of the sovereign individual. Much is being claimed for this sovereign individual: freedom, democracy, self-sufficiency of all sorts. But this individual, whatever may be claimed for it, is quickly becoming something else, i.e., economic and economically self-dependent. The notion, moreover, that this economically self-sufficient individual will reduce crime is pure nonsense.

Christianity and Democracy

Emanuel Kant, a late 18th century philosopher who described and defined the trend of thought in force since the 18th century, viz., the Enlightenment, felt that while all the intellectual proof for God's existence is invalid, God could be proven by the so-called categorical imperative, i.e., moral obligations by which we live and take for granted. There are two difficulties, which Kant himself did not experience, with his notion of categorical imperative. One is the fact that two millennia of Christian teaching were needed in order to make the categorical imperative obvious and taken for granted. Further, he did not realize that the categorical imperative would diminish in content quickly as the intellectual basis for it was taken away. What Kant would consider as obligatory, in other words, is not thought of as obligatory at all by our non-believing contemporaries. Before I feel that I must be honest, I must be convinced that there is a God who demands that honesty. God is greater and far more important than democracy and financial honesty. Should democracy become an end in itself, should we have no reason whatever apart from our "social" obligation to be honest and non-violent, self-controlled and tolerant, then we become victims of our own prejudices and predilections. The only way for democracy to survive is to accept the two great commandments which Jesus has given us, the love of God first, and the love of neighbour. It is only if we know that God is greater than us, that God is greater than anything else in the world, that we can then accept His commands, whether they serve us or not, whether they are useful to us or not, that we shall live in true freedom and democracy.

I end with a story from the Gospel of Luke. On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus asked the Samaritans to accept him and his disciples; they refused because they were on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. When "the disciples James and John saw it they said, 'Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?'" (9:54) Jesus' reaction is rather interesting. Instead of being merely indignant, he is said to have rebuked them. The word translated as "rebuke" is stronger; it means censure, colloquially, "blast". Jesus knows that he has brought peace to this world, and though we may at times feel like reacting strongly to unfair treatment, we simply have no right to do so, because we are asked to reflect God's peace and God's love. Jesus' reaction is acceptable to our current multicultural mood. But should multiculturalism ever cease to be politically correct, Jesus' word and attitude would remain obligatory for the Church and all her members.



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