



The Pastor's Corner



from the pastor

Objective Evil and Subjective Guilt

In my homily last Saturday evening I mentioned that when we Christians think about the killing done by extremists such as ISIS, we should remember the times when Christians, especially during the crusades, also were violent in the name of God. One thoughtful parishioner took the time to think about this and email his critique to me.

Parishioner's message to me:

I question your analogy of ISIS killing in the name of god vs. the Crusaders (as Christians) killing in the name of God not being much different. I see a difference – in this century the ISIS fighters are cold blooded killers that have no regard for human life or rights. A thousand years ago the crusaders pillaged in the typical medieval manner. Drawing parallel similarities between current events and historical events is much more complex than your analogy. What is acceptable or unacceptable today is much different than what was acceptable or unacceptable in the past.

my reply to him:

Thanks for your message. It pleases me greatly when people think critically about any homily and continue to discuss and comment long after Mass is over! And I'm always glad to hear what folks are thinking, no matter how critical or even angry they may be.

Your comments about the cultural context at the time of the crusades are very relevant to assessing the situation of any evil act. They remind me that we often fail to make an important distinction in our moral evaluation of situations. The Catholic Church has always distinguished between *objective evil* and *subjective guilt*. An *objective evil* is evil in itself, regardless of the cultural context of the action or of the personal limitations of the individual. *Subjective guilt*, on the other hand, refers to the individual's (or group's) personal degree of responsibility and its implications of punishment deserved.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches in item #1857:

For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: "Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent."

(cf. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a8.htm)

For example, killing myself or someone else would be considered a "grave matter" (aka *objective evil*) because only God has the authority to end a human person's life. However the degree of "full knowledge and deliberate consent" must be considered to determine whether the killer is considered to be *subjectively guilty* of a mortal sin. If I have long-term schizophrenia and constantly hear voices telling me to kill myself, that would reduce my "full knowledge" and/or "deliberate consent" and the Church would probably not consider me *subjectively guilty* of a mortal sin after a suicide attempt. The attempt, nevertheless, would still be considered a "grave matter" or *objective evil*, something to be resisted.

Applying this important moral distinction to the Christian crusaders leads you to say, "A thousand years ago the crusaders pillaged in the typical medieval manner" and you are correct. So we would be wrong to presume that we could judge every crusader as *subjectively guilty* of mortal sin. In fact we know that many (if not most) of the crusaders went into battle precisely because their religious leaders (pope, bishops, pastors, kings, etc.) told them it was a holy thing to do.

However, the killing of civilians and the theft and destruction of their property was and is an *objective evil* and a truly "grave matter", even when the degree of *subjective guilt* was reduced.

14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

When we turn our attention to the killing done by ISIS forces, we see again a serious *objective evil*. But when we know that these men believe passionately what their religious leaders are telling them (that this is a good and holy thing to do in the name of Allah) we can also say that the degree of their *subjective guilt* may be reduced for the very same reason we say that about the crusaders.

In my homily last Saturday I could have been more precise in noting that I was commenting on the *objective evil* of both ISIS and medieval Christian crusaders. When you say, “What is acceptable or unacceptable today is much different than what was acceptable or unacceptable in the past” you are clearly referring to the category of *subjective guilt*. But we still need to ask the question: Acceptable to *whom*? If I believe that what I am doing is holy and good, that is certainly acceptable *to my understanding* and thus my *subjective guilt* is reduced – no matter what the time, place or circumstances may be. However, the fact that any group or culture considers killing to be holy and good does not change the fact that it is still *objectively evil* to Christians.