

Homily for Sunday, October 4, 2009 (27th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 128:1-6; Hebrews 2:9-11; Mark 10:2-16

When I was a child, we would often come home from school and claim that we were “starving.” This usually meant that we hadn’t had something to eat since lunch three hours earlier. It also meant that we would soon enter into extended negotiations with our mother about a snack, especially its size and composition. These would result in what diplomats would call “a frank exchange of views.”

Most moms want only the best for their children. Ours generally encouraged us to eat something nutritious like a piece of fruit or (if we were really hungry) a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. My siblings and I, however, had different ideas about what constituted a “good” snack. We were thinking of something more along the lines of cookies or cake.

Thus would begin the negotiations. Mom would insist that if we were *really* hungry, we would readily accept her options of fruit or PBJ. We would counter by insisting (or whining, if that was more effective) that we were indeed hungry...just not for *that*. Most of the time, Mom would win. But every once in a while, however, we would catch her in just the right mood—relaxed, exhausted or generous—and we would relent and say, “OK, OK....but just one!”

There’s a big difference between encouraging something as the ideal and allowing it as a concession. Sometimes we do what we ought to do; sometimes we do what we want to do; and sometimes we do what we can get away with.

When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees, “Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?” he had no choice but to answer yes. He couldn’t deny that that was indeed the law. But Jesus also wanted to remind them that not everything that was lawful was moral or consistent with God’s will. The law today permits abortion; but as the Church continues to teach, that doesn’t make it right.

This in no way diminishes the fear and anguish that many women face in making the decision to abort a child, nor does it lessen our obligation to reach out to those considering abortion or those who have made that terrible choice. At the same time, it doesn’t sugarcoat the reality that abortion is the intentional destruction of human life.

Similarly, Jesus wouldn’t dance around the fact that, while Moses permitted divorce as a concession to a hard-hearted people, it was still a serious problem, an adulteration of God’s intention for humanity. This is truly one of the Lord’s “hard sayings,” because we live in a society in which

divorce is so widespread. While some deal with divorce almost casually it is for most couples an emotionally wrenching experience. Indeed, there are some cases where couples must separate as a matter of survival.

Wouldn't it be even more immoral to insist, for example, that a woman who is the victim of relentless domestic violence stay married to a man who has no intention or capacity to change his brutal behavior; or to demand that a man to stay in a marriage when his wife is more devoted to feeding her addiction than her family? Keeping a marriage together "for the sake of the children" only makes sense if it doesn't also mean subjecting them to a daily dose of dysfunction and instability.

Jesus said that, "what *God* has joined together, human beings must not separate." The sobering truth is that not every couple is brought together by God. One of the great challenges that the Church today faces is of upholding the ideal, recognizing the reality, and dealing with the whole thing in a pastorally sensitive manner.

That's the challenge of ideals and concessions. Following the gospel and living committed lives as disciples demands that we take Jesus and his teachings seriously. Turning the other cheek, loving our enemies, going the extra mile, giving people the shirt off our back, embracing those marginalized as "sinners"—these are all things that Jesus asks us to embrace as *standards of behavior* and not mere pious platitudes.

It can be frustrating, even disheartening, when we examine our consciences and realize how much we fall short of living as we are called to by Christ. But as the author of Hebrews reminds us, we can also take comfort and strength from recalling that Jesus did not give us these teachings from some Olympian throne, removed from our experience. Instead, the Son of God immersed himself in our own human condition:

*He "for a a little while" was made "lower than the angels,"
that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

The cross is our most obvious reminder of that. But so was the Lord's embrace of children. When the disciples tried to prevent people from bringing their children to Jesus for a blessing, he "became indignant" and told them to let the children come. He went even further, reversing roles and challenging the disciples to consider those children as *their* role models: "the kingdom of God belongs to such as these...whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it."

Children, even today, are innocent, trusting, accepting, and unafraid to embrace an ideal. May we not be afraid to embrace the "inner child" of the grace that we received at baptism and embody that grace more fully in how we live. +