

LOVING OUR NEIGHBOURS AS THE GOD WE SEE!!!

If the name – **BIAGIO CONTE**, does not mean anything to any of us here, I humbly beg you to read up about him whenever you are free.

On the 17th of January 2023, the Cathedral of Palermo in Sicily, was turned into a massive pilgrimage ground when over 10,000 people from all over the world celebrated the funeral of **Biagio Conte**, dubbed “**The modern-day St Francis of Assisi**”. Biagio Conte was born in Palermo in 1963 into a wealthy family of builders, he was educated in famous private schools around the world and had a good life. In 1990, he abandoned the wealth of his family and his inheritance, retired to the Sicilian mountains, and lived as a hermit. When he was 26, he watched a documentary about children dying of hunger in Africa and resolved to go to Africa and help. Before setting off to Africa, he stopped by Palermo to bid farewell to his relatives, it was there he saw the deplorable situations of the poor, the hungry, the outcasts, and the marginalised people of the city and he vowed to stay and fight for them. In 1993, he founded the “**Mission of Hope and Charity**” that houses and takes care of over 800 persons and serves over 2,400 meals every day. Conte underwent lengthy hunger strikes, slept roughly, begged arms, organised protests and made pilgrimages with the cross on his shoulders, as ways of getting the political elite to step-up reliefs for the poor. **In 2018**, after the death of several homeless people in Palermo, he slept on the street and went on a 10-day hunger strike until the Sicilian Government decided to fund meals and homes for the homeless. **In 2019**, he went on 17 days hunger strike to prevent the deportation of Mr Paul Aning from Italy to Ghana. Before long, he became the rallying point and the common voice of everyone fighting for a fairer world. At the end of the Holy Mass celebrated at his bedside before his death, Conte said, “**Let’s stand united for a better world, we can make it together.**” At his funeral, the book of the Gospels which was placed on his poor wooden coffin, remained opened at Matthew 25, 35-36: “**I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a foreigner and you hosted me , naked and you dressed me, sick and you visited me, imprisoned and you came to see me.**” Biagio Conte’s life was changed by the sufferings of the poor, outcasts and marginalised in Palermo; he became one of/with them, fought their causes, lived for them till the end and united them all. He did the above because he saw Jesus Christ on their faces. It is this love of God which is concretely manifested in our love for our neighbours that we are faced with this Sunday.

In this Sunday’s Gospel pericope from Matthew Chapter 22, Jesus was asked to pinpoint the greatest commandment of the Jewish Law. To understand how tricky, slimy, and trappy the above question was, as well as the tight corner Jesus found Himself, we need to remind ourselves of the Jewish Torah. **The Torah (Jewish Laws) has 613 commandments; while there are 248 positive commands, there are 365 negative commands therein.** Little wonder the Pharisees who were the Zealots in observing the Torah, wanted to entrap Jesus to destroy Him. However, Jesus being a true Jew and knowing their minds, shocked them all. In response to their question, Jesus answered that the greatest commandment of the law (*Megale entole en to nomo*) is to love God

with the entirety of our being (De 6:5) and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Lev 19:18).

To ensure there are no confusion on who this our neighbour might be, today's First Reading from Exodus Chapter 22 gives us a list of who they are: Strangers, Widows, Orphans, Poor People, and the Needy. Yes, our neighbours are all those around us whom we can share God's love with. By so doing, we break with the idolatry of ME, MYSELF, and I, and become the servants of the real and living God, as St Paul admonished the Thessalonians as we heard in today's Second Reading.

My friends, it is so easy to LOVE GOD because He is Almighty, and we cannot see Him. Our love of God can be visibly attested to because we come to Mass, say our prayers, and maybe contribute financially to the upkeep of the church. Since becoming your parish priest and introducing Daily Holy Hour Adoration, I have seen the numbers increase because there is a hunger for the Lord in our hearts.

It is equally easy to LOVE OURSELVES. In our self-centred world where everything seems to centre on ME, MYSELF, AND I (In the words of Kelly Clarkson in Stronger), what else could go wrong. Since my arrival in Fleet, I have been frequenting the shops a lot as I seek out bargains to furnish the presbytery, I can confidently confirm that people are shopping more in this harsh economic climate than they did in the past. Furthermore, whenever I go to my favourite JD Gym for a workout session, I encounter so many people both young and old who are keeping fit to look and live longer, as well as feel confident in themselves. Yes, we are a nation that love ourselves.

However, **it is difficult to LOVE OUR NEIGHBOURS especially when they are different to us.** It is difficult to love those neighbours of ours who are not of the same background, class and do not have the same accent as us. It might be even difficult to allow those neighbours of ours who are different to us to marry one of our sons and daughters. Why? We do not want to look different to the rest of our family members and folks. It is even more difficult to love those neighbours of ours who do not believe in what we believe even if they are Catholics. We see this in our churches; some people see themselves as holier than others because they approach the Catholic Faith in a particular way; those who do not see things from their perspective are ostracised and written off. By holding onto the above divisions, we lose sight of what really matters as stipulated in that beautiful hymn written by Sydney Carter in 1965: **"When I needed a neighbour were you there, were you there? When I needed a neighbour were you there? And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter, were you there?"**

Like Biagio Conte who helped all the poor people that came his way without noticing their backgrounds, languages, and/or skin colour, let us remember that we will all be judged on how much we loved our neighbours since they are the God we see presently.

Fr Johnpromise Umeozuru

Homily for the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A (29/10/2023)