

Toxic Sense of Entitlement

Reflections put forth in this bulletin are, more or less, informed based on the topic. I am better at theological reflection than most other things because of my training and years of experience. But, of course, theology and spirituality are nothing if they don't inform the way we live our lives and provide a means for discerning the right way to be in the world with respect to God and our neighbor.

I am not the first person to take up the topic of the title at hand. In fact, this reflection is rather derivative, since I have read many other commentators on the matter. Still, the problem of an excessive or toxic sense of entitlement in our culture can and should be commented on from a faith perspective.

I would assert that this topic is related to a number of other phenomena in the culture such as radical individualism, the victim mentality, narcissism, and a radicalized sense of freedom, among others. By definition, entitlement could be defined as a *“right to something”* or *“a belief that one is inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment.”* It is the latter sense which is at issue here. The distinction may be that the *“right to something”* is an objective matter based on law: For example, one is entitled to certain benefits from the government as codified in legislation. Whereas, the latter sense is subjective. It is one's own belief that he/she is entitled: And this is something which may or may not be true. An inflated sense of self or an exaggerated sense of personal rights may warp the very meaning of the word *“entitlement.”*

The scripture which immediately comes to mind in relation to this topic comes from the mouth of Jesus, as recorded in Luke 17:10. There Jesus expresses what ought to be the attitude of a servant: ***“When you have done all you have been commanded, say ‘We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do.’”*** These words are, of course, focused on matters of duty and responsibility. Periodically taking the garbage out is a household responsibility which, probably, ought to be shared, and is a task for which there is no compensation other than the good order of the household and family harmony. If you expect a round of applause or a gold star for taking the garbage out to the side walk for pick up, you may want to reconsider your sense of entitlement.

I have had priests complain to me that the Bishop has never called to tell them that they are doing a good job or to thank them. At the risk of sounding aloof or morally superior; these things never occurred to me. There is, more often than not, gratification in the ministry itself, even though there is often frustration and difficulties. If I am just doing what I am supposed to do, why should I expect a pat on the back or a special word of thanks.

Such is not to say that a bishop or a boss or some other leader can't go over and above with his expressions of affirmation or gratitude. This has more to do with one's expectations. An elevated sense of entitlement which is unmet leads to resentment. And it seems to me that the nation and the church are afflicted with the scourge of resentment. Here I am dipping my toe into the science of psychology, but I surmise that where there is an excess of resentment there is also a toxic sense of entitlement.

However, there are some caveats or words of qualification necessary in such a reflection: There is and has been terrible injustices inflicted upon people for which much compassion is in order. True victims of abuse, neglect, betrayal and other such things require our understanding, patience and care. Wounds arising from deformative upbringing and/or abuse can manifest in the attitude outlined here. But this, I think, is a separate category of consideration.



What I address in this brief reflection has more to do with the spirit of our times. Perhaps we do well to include in our Lenten reflections some consideration of the factors mentioned before; radical individualism, the victim mentality, and excessive self-concern. Recall that we have been directed to *“lay up treasure in heaven,”* (Mt. 6:19)