

Give Them Some Food Yourselves

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Fr. Tony Davis

Both believers and atheists have something in common: they both blame God for not being more active in the world. For believers, this takes the form of being frustrated that God does not answer all our prayers. No matter how many times we pray to end world hunger, bring peace to our societies, or heal the sick, we still have hunger, war, and illness. ‘Why doesn’t God just intervene and fix everything?’ For atheists, this takes the form of cynicism. ‘If there is a God, why is there evil in the world.’ Since evil, injustice, and suffering are part of life, God must not be real. In both cases, God is at fault. ‘God (if you do exist), why don’t you do something!?’ Both of these perspectives are missing a key part: us.

In our Gospel passage today, as evening comes, Jesus’ disciples want to send the crowds away. They say, “this is a deserted place and it is already late; dismiss the crowds so that they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.” In reply, Jesus says something quite unexpected: “there is no need for them to go away; give them some food yourselves.” In other words, ‘you do something! Don’t keep passing responsibility on to someone else.’ By the end of the story, not only were the 5,000+ people fed with just 5 loaves and 2 fish, but there were twelve wicker baskets worth of leftovers. Jesus was certainly involved in this miracle, but the disciples had to do their part, too. Once they were willing to do their part, Jesus could do his.

There is a saying attributed to St. Ignatius of Loyola which says, "pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you." I think this is a nice corrective to both believers and atheists who like to blame God and push off responsibility. It reminds us that God will certainly do God's part, but we have to do ours as well. This quote has the added benefit of not trying to quantify the percentage of how much is God's role and how much is ours, as if it were a 50-50 relationship. The paradox is that it depends completely on us and completely on God at the same time. "Pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you."

One of the clearest examples of this very partnership between God and us is found in Catholic Social Teaching. While some Catholics think social justice is just optional or fluff, it is where our credibility lies as believers. We are the ones who should be defending the life and dignity of the human person, building community, showing solidarity, opting for the poor and vulnerable, and caring for God's creation. If we don't do these things, the secular world will- and they will do it in a secular way!

God likes to work in the world not in place of humans, but with and through humans.

Question: Instead of blaming God that nothing is getting done, let's start by asking, 'what is it that I can do?'

God does want to act. God does want to do something. The next time we forget this and try to blame and push off responsibility to God, let us hear Jesus say to us, "give them some food yourselves."