

November 4-5, 2006

1. An article in the Providence Journal this past Friday by M.J. Anderson, a member of its editorial board, speaks of the challenge which the Amish community in PA has given American society, especially the members of the Christian moral majority who, in his opinion, have been strident bullies forcing their values on the rest of society. The Amish, on the other hand, simply go about quietly living out their understanding of the Gospel. What he has in mind is their reaction to the murder of five young girls of their community by an outsider last month. The Amish did not grandstand for the press. They did not talk of suits. Instead they reached out immediately to the widow of the murderer. That is indeed impressive. They were living out the Lord's commandment to love one's enemies by giving comfort and support to their enemy's wife, the widow of the man who murdered their children.

2. Today's first reading and Gospel talk about commandments. The Jewish people have given the world the Ten Commandments, although they will tell us that they did not give them to us. They simply passed on the gift which God had given them. Over the centuries, in the attempt to live God's will more completely in their everyday lives, the Jews added to the Ten Commandments so that

in time there came to be some 613 precepts. Obviously, when there are so many laws or rules, people want to know which one are the more or even most important ones. And that is what we see in today's Gospel. Jesus answers the question of one of the scribes about what is the first of all the commandments. His answer, it would seem, was a no-brainer, for pious Jews wore this first commandment, called the Shema (Deut. 6:4) in little prayer boxes attached to their wrists and foreheads. It was also quoted at the beginning of morning and evening prayers. But Jesus went on to join another commandment (Lev. 19), considered to be less weighty, with this first commandment. He was not the first to do this. But he was the first to make the two commandments, love of God and love of neighbor, equal and therefore dependent on each other. On this basis the First Letter of John can say: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar "(4:20).

3. As you may know, some of us are meeting after the 9am Mass on Wednesdays to talk about the new Catechism for Adults which the US Catholic bishops have published. The discussion of the use of sacramentals came up. We used to have all sorts of pious practices which reminded us of our religion. We had crosses on doors in our houses. When men wore hats, they tipped them when passing a church. There was the rosary and novenas and abstaining

from fish on Friday. Many of these pious customs and practices have disappeared from our lives. In one sense this is not unnatural, for tastes change even in the expression of faith. But in another sense it can be frightening, for if we do not give expression to our faith in our daily lives, it is more than likely that it is not operating there, is not coming to expression there, and that which does not express itself is dead.

4. By all means we should check homes to see if there is a crucifix in it someplace. By all means we should pray the rosary if that form of devotion nourishes our faith. But I don't think we will want to write our put these two great commandments and then put this piece of paper in a little box and attach it to our wrists or foreheads. But somehow or other we have to remind ourselves that these two great commandments have to embrace all our lives and actions, all our thoughts and desires. They have to be the way we live. And they have to be that so powerfully that they affect even the smallest details of our lives. What do you think? If we try to be polite to each other and to all we meet, could not this effort be for us our way of attempting to live out these two great commandments? If I don't shout at someone, if I don't cut others off in mid-sentence, if I try to say my prayers each day and take my daily responsibilities seriously, if I don't cut the person off at

the stop light and hold the door for the person behind me at the Stop and Shop, could not all these small actions be a modest but constant expression of living out the two great commandments in daily life? And will they not over time change the way I think and feel? Jesus says, if we can be faithful in these small ways, then we will also be faithful in the great things. May God help us to live these two great commandments in our daily lives!