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July 23, 2019

HARDENING OF HEARTS

Message by Archbishop Byrnes regarding abortion

A couple of years ago about 200 Catholics and Evangelicals gathered together at Paseo Stadium for a Pro-Life rally.

One of the speakers was National Guard Chaplain and pastor of Temple Baptist Church, Captain Richard Kelley. He reflected on some of his expectations when he was assigned to Guam in 2008. He recounted that, knowing that Guam was a predominantly Catholic island, he expected that the practice of abortion on the island would be practically non-existent and so one less social ill he would have to deal with. He was greatly surprised at the reality.

Over the two and a half years since my arrival in Guam I have had cause to reflect on why this might be so. In brief, I suggest that over the past several decades there has been the steady development of what the Bible calls “hardness of heart.”

In the book of Exodus, hardness of heart led Pharaoh to refuse to let the enslaved Hebrews return to their homeland after 400 years of servitude. He had no apparent capacity for mercy. Jesus reproved the Pharisees of hardness of heart, as they objected to the mercy of Jesus to cure a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. When Jesus appeared to the 11 disciples on Easter Sunday, he “rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen” (Mark 16:14).

Our little survey of the Scripture indicates that the social consequences of hardness of heart mostly affects the underprivileged, the wounded, the elderly and the vulnerable. It often manifests itself in an increase of violence, a loss of civility, neglect of the poor, and among other things, a weakening of family ties.

Though I have studied, to some degree, the history of our island, I am not competent in general to suggest historical factors that contribute to the diagnosis of hardness of heart. Except for a particularly sordid part of that history; that is, the decades of sexual abuse of minors by certain of the Catholic clergy. Though public awareness of that surreptitious

(Continued on next Page)

history is fairly recent, the hardness of heart manifested by certain of the priests and religious has undoubtedly contributed, along with the growing secularization of the western world, as a kind of cancer that has weakened our faith in God. When the shepherds betray the weakest of the flock, the faith of the flock grows small or even non-existent.

How do we deal with such a malaise as hardness of heart? I propose, as a beginning, that we recover the gift of the Holy Spirit, "the fear of the Lord." Fear of the Lord is comprised of two key facets: the most obvious one springs from the reality of final judgment by God at the end of our lives. Contrary to popular attitudes, there is a heaven, and there is a hell; and where we go depends on the cumulative choices we make throughout our lives. Fear of the Lord, on the other hand, is a gift of continual awareness of the Presence of loving Father. By living in that awareness of such a Father, we are drawn to that same kind of charity for our fellow human beings.

In living memory, the practice of abortion was usually viewed as a desperate last recourse for women who had no helper to participate in raising a child. In present times, it is described as a fundamental right. That is a monumental change of heart on the parts of our island and our nation. We have hardened our hearts even to the point of tolerating the notion that were an aborted baby were to survive delivery the doctors should "make the child comfortable" until they died. In the Judgment we will be judged according to how we treat "the least of my brethren." We have cause to fear.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Michael J. Byrnes". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small cross-like mark at the beginning.

Archbishop Michael Byrnes
Metropolitan Archbishop of Agaña