

Serenity Its not Passivity

The so-called “Serenity Prayer” made famous by AA and common to all 12-step programs for recovery from addiction came to my mind with respect to a number of current events. The prayer goes as follows:

God GRANT ME THE *Serenity*
TO ACCEPT THE THINGS I CANNOT CHANGE
Courage TO CHANGE THE THINGS I CAN
AND THE *Wisdom* TO KNOW
THE DIFFERENCE.

This is an inspired and profound prayer in its incisive distinction between those things over which we have the ability to effect change, and those over which we have none. It is a mightily important distinction in that it provides us a necessary pause to turn to God before we act and a moment of contemplation to consider our real position in life.

Another important aspect of this prayer is that it prevents us from two extremes: Obviously, one extreme response would be **passive-resignation** (essentially a sort of self-imposed helplessness). I would call the other extreme “**grandiosity;**” It is a failure to know the difference between what you can actually change and what you cannot: No one can be the Messiah except the Messiah.

Here I am reminded of that bumper-sticker sentiment “Think Globally, Act Locally:” This sentiment touches upon an aspect of the prayer in the sense that we are, most often, not situated well to get at root causes or complex, global problems.

Of course, there are people like St. Paul, Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day and Gandhi as extraordinary change-agents in society: It turns out that there was much that they could change and much that did change as a result of their actions. Most of us, however, are “ordinary,” and yet it is no less important for us to focus on the change that is attainable according to one’s state in life.

Like many of you, I would like to solve the really big problems of our world such as ending abortion, solving climate change, making healthcare affordable, saving immigrants and refugees, and ending wars, (among other things). The tools at my disposal seem lame: I can go to the polls and vote, I can drive my car less, I can write letters and express my opinion, and I can send some money to organizations who promote what is true and good. At the end of the day it all seems like shoveling sawdust into the wind. I will go to the polls and I will vote out of civic duty, but my heart tells me that its almost meaningless: I believe that our political system is profoundly broken.

Where I can be the most effective change-agent is in the shaping of my own character. From the perspective of faith, this means exposure to the riches of our Sacred Tradition and openness to the grace which flows from all of those sources. I realize that this does not directly address the huge problem of something like the clergy abuse crisis. But, if I can help people see the holiness, splendor and grace of the Church emerge through the muck and mire, I will have done something positive. Moreover, growing in an ability to wrap my mind around the infiltration of such evil from the perspective of faith, and helping others to do so, may be a small way to promote changes to problematic aspects of Catholic Culture.



In all of this I am reminded of a Psalm of David, Psalm 131 wherein David says the following:

*O LORD, my heart is not proud,
nor are my eyes haughty;
I busy not myself with great things,
nor with things too sublime for me.*

I think that the Serenity Prayer, though a human composition, (Reinhold Niebuhr), is a very inspired work to help us focus our energies where they can best be focused, and to surrender our weaknesses and inadequacies to the care of our Lord who alone can save us from our trials.