

The news of Msgr. Tom Cassidy's death calls all of us to remember and celebrate his faith and dedicated service to the pastoral and justice ministries of the Diocese of Arlington. I had the privilege of following him as a Director of Catholic Charities and of serving with him in our Diocesan Mission in the Dominican Republic.

A recent homily delivered by him at his beloved St Mark's went viral. It addresses immigration and cultural issues that are central to the church in our time. I believe it is a suitable memorial to him and a welcome resource to our Diocesan Peace and Justice Website.

Fr Gerry Creedon,

Chair, Peace and Justice Commission.

Msgr. Tom Cassidy's Homily

My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. (Isaiah 56)

St. Matthew's gospel (Mt 15:21-28) provides another illustration of how Jesus' earthly mission of bringing grace and salvation was not limited to the people of Israel. Rather, it was extended to women and men of every nation and religious persuasion. We are familiar with other gospel narratives which confirm this reality – e.g., the Samaritan woman at the well; the Good Samaritan who cared for the man who had fallen prey to the viciousness of robbers.

In Matthew's gospel account, it appears that Jesus and his disciples are irritated by the impertinence of the Canaanite woman, a pagan, who asks Jesus to heal her daughter. "Get rid of her," the disciples urge, "she keeps shouting after us." Jesus' response seems to confirm the animosity which existed between the Israelites and Canaanites: "*My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" (Mt 15) Jesus' tense response was consistent with the division which clearly drew the lines of appropriate association within the culture of that day. But then Matthew went further, to show that Jesus was a person who was willing to "step over the line."

When we seek to make practical application of Matthew's gospel narrative, we can easily recognize that even in our day we still run into biases, prejudices and vilifications within the community of Faith. It is sometimes difficult, even for "good-living" Catholics, to be open and sharing with people who are of different ethnic, racial or religious backgrounds. I recall, for example, just several years ago when I was pastor of St. Anthony parish in Falls Church. It was difficult for the "old guard" there to accept the demographic fact that the Culmore area was fast becoming an enclave of Spanish-speaking Catholics. How often I heard the

expression: “These people are coming in here and taking over our church!” Just think about that expression: “...taking over our church!” Excuse me!! That seems to run counter to what the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” (Isaiah 56)

A decade ago terrorist attacks in New York, at the Pentagon and in Pennsylvania took the lives of several thousand American citizens. Since then Arabs and other Muslims have been subjected to all sorts of vilification and mistrust. Even the condemnation of terrorism by devout Muslims has been viewed with skepticism.

Having grown up in Philadelphia, the so-called “City of Brotherly love,” I experienced the racial riots which racked the city. The National Guard was ordered to ride the trolley cars and elevated trains with rifles and fixed bayonets. Areas of the city were populated by separate groups of blacks and whites – segregation was rampant. When I was in the Seminary I thought that I had learned to cast-off racially negative fears and attitudes. I was shocked, years later, to discover that they were (and still are somewhat) part of my psychological conditioning which needs constant monitoring or correcting.

Your prejudices and biases may be somewhat different than mine. I suspect, however, that each of us has a few areas of concern relating to persons who are simply “different.” Racism, ethnic biases and cultural influences are frequently like “the worm that never dies.” (Mark 9:48) In our Eucharistic liturgies we often sing: “One bread, one body, one Lord of all. One cup of blessing which we bless; and we, though many, throughout the earth, we are one body in this one Lord.”

It isn’t always easy to accomplish such unity; but it is the Lord’s command that we keep trying.