

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

The world received encouraging news about Syria this week, as nations started working together to avoid a military attack. Last Saturday Pope Francis gathered 100,000 people at St. Peter's Square for a 5-hour prayer vigil, and he invited people around the world to join him in a day of fasting and prayer. He has said, "Violence and war are never the way to peace." The Catholic Bishops of the United States added this statement: "We call upon our nation and the international community to save lives by pressing for serious dialogue to end the conflict, by refraining from fueling further violence with military attacks or arms transfers, and by offering more humanitarian assistance."

It is widely believed that Syrian President Bashar Assad has used chemical weapons, a particularly evil form of warfare. This action cannot be tolerated. The situation in Syria is complicated, especially for the Christians who live there. Many Syrian Christians feel that their best hope is with President Assad. If he loses power to an Islamist rule, the oppression of Christians will grow worse. To achieve peace and justice in Syria will demand inspired leadership around the world. It will require the very people who have suffered from war to take actions for peace. Someone has to stop the spiral of retaliation.

Pope Francis emphasized this message in his remarks last weekend. The responsibility for peace and justice rests with each one of us, not just with world leaders. The pope talked about the story of Cain and Abel, the first murder in the bible. He said, "even today we raise our hands against our brother. Even today, we let ourselves be guided by idols, by selfishness, by our own interests, and this attitude persists. We have perfected our weapons, our conscience has fallen asleep, and we have sharpened our ideas to justify ourselves. As if it were normal, we continue to sow destruction, pain, death!"

Jesus' parable of the prodigal Son is an eloquent description of the beauty of reconciliation. It also acknowledges that reconciliation is hard work. For the refrain of our psalm today, we sang, "I will rise and go to my father." That refrain comes from today's gospel, not from today's psalm. They are the words of the prodigal son in his moment of conversion. Psalm 51 is a powerful prayer of repentance, and it concludes with this verse today: "a heart contrite and humbled, O God, you will not spurn." True reconciliation requires a contrite heart. When someone offends us, we probably want to retaliate. But that will not bring reconciliation. We do not condone what the other person has done, but we should never contribute to a cycle of violence.

With Pope Francis we should continue our prayers for peace in Syria, and we should be ready to do the hard work of building peace in our own lives, in our own nation, and in our families.