

Here's a trick question for you: What is our duty? What would you say is the duty of a Catholic?

There are several ways of answering: You might say obeying the ten commandments, surely if people did that they'd be good Catholics. Yes, but they'd also be good Jews, because the commandments come from the Old Testament. Or you might answer "It is the duty of a Catholic to obey the six precepts of the Church." Does anyone remember the six precepts of the Church? Does anyone remember that there are six precepts of the Church? To attend Mass on Sundays and holy days, to avoid unnecessary and inappropriate work on those days, to lead a regular sacramental life, to observe the marriage laws of the Church, to strengthen and support the Church, to do penance at the appointed times. Maybe you even think to remember the six precepts of the Church is to do your duty as a Catholic.

"What is our duty?" is a trick question because however you describe our duty is incomplete. Our duty, says Jesus, is to do more than our duty. Once you have done all you have been commanded to do, say, "We are worthless servants, we have done no more than our duty."

To show how tricky this can be, I want to tell you about two American Catholics who have been making the news lately. One is Fr. Charles Curran, a teacher at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. Some years ago, Fr. Curran taught moral theology and held what most would call "liberal views" about issues such as birth control, masturbation, homosexuality, divorce, and other areas. Several weeks ago, the Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith in Vatican City forbade Fr. Curran to teach at Catholic University since they judged his teaching to be "not Catholic." The two sides squared off on an issue of duty: Fr. Curran thought it was his duty as a theologian to question the assumptions of Catholic teaching; the Vatican thought it was its duty to preserve the assumptions of Catholic teaching.

The other Catholic in the news recently is Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle, Washington. Last month, in an unusual move, the Vatican assigned to the auxiliary bishop five major areas of Hunthausen's care. To be frank, the reasons are not very clear and we may never know them, but one may judge from five areas, including service to the gay community and the liturgical ministry, that the Vatican disapproved of Archbishop Hunthausen's handling of those issues. Again, it looks like a question of duty: An American bishop answers the duty to his vocation through one style of pastoral leadership and the Vatican saw its duty to question what it interpreted that leadership to be.

These two examples are complicated issues. I raise them today not to resolve them but to make you aware of them and to stress the point from today's Gospel that just doing our duty often isn't enough.

I'm sure many of you have experienced situations with a conflict in duty. Do you keep a life support system going for a member of the family who is brain-dead? Do you keep the marriage laws of the Church when the marriage is destructive? Doing our duty will get us so far in answering questions, and then our duty is to look again.