17th Sunday after Pentecost (Suspicions)

“Grant, we beseech Thee, O Lord, that Thy people may shun all the wiles of the devil: and with pure mind follow Thee, the only God” —Collect

“With all humility and mildness, with patience, supporting one another in charity, careful to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”—Lesson

1. “There was a man in the land of Hus, whose name was Job, and that man was simple and upright, and fearing God, and avoiding evil.” So starts the book of Job. Yet, as the story relates over many chapters, some friends came to comfort him, but instead became suspicious that he was guilty of something grave. They had convinced themselves that this was so... and they knew their theology well. Thus, they spent all their time trying to get Job to confess... to own up. At the end, after much trial, including a sort open examination of conscience by Job himself, the Lord came and told the “troublesome comforters” how wrong they really were. He revealed how Job had not sinned at all but rather they themselves had sinned and were in need of a mediator, namely Job himself, to get back into God’s good graces. What causes this sort of situation to develop? Suspicion. Suspicion is the mortal enemy of a happy community... mortal enemy of recollection and peace of soul. (N.B. reason for this sermon: we are picking up a bookmark on suspicion we left a couple of Sundays ago... )

2. St. Thomas Aquinas in a discussion of just judgments teaches: “suspicion denotes evil thinking based on slight indications.” Let us note at the start that we are dealing with natural law issues... such a right of reputation. Thus, unjust judgments flowing from suspicion or slight indications are not just uncharitable but unjust. To judge justly of our neighbor our minds must be fully informed, our reason must be certain and our motive solid and this requires much information. This is why the Scriptures speak of the need for two or three witnesses before accusations can be taken seriously. Consequently, those who judge without recourse to prudent reason very often judge on slight indications... little things that make them suspicious.

3. That such judgments are made so easily in our time should not surprise us because this is the age of conspiracy. The explanations given for major happenings seem hollow. Couple that with fake news and the repeated failures and scandals of those in positions of authority, trust begins to wane. What is more, we are very much influenced by modern thought
which says with Emmanuel Kant, “have the courage to use your own understanding.” Or Rene Descartes: “I think, therefore, I am.” We figure we know... we can rely on our own powers of judgment. Add on to this the impatience built into our daily life in this technological age as well as the victim mentality so prevalent, where everyone points the finger at someone else for the cause of his woes, ... we have a diabolical formula for suspicion to germinate and grow like noxious weeds.

4. Turning again to St. Thomas, he lists three main causes of suspicion, i.e., evil thinking based on too little information. “First, from a man being evil in himself, and from this very fact, as though conscious of his own wickedness, he is prone to think evil of others.” This is the proverbial log in the eye that sees the speck everywhere outside itself. I have found that time and time again suspicious people have serious issues in their own life that they have not been successful in dealing with...thus, they look to solve problems elsewhere to satisfy themselves that they are okay.

5. St. Thomas: “Secondly, this is due to a man being ill-disposed towards another: for when a man hates or despises another, or is angry with or envious of him, he is led by slight indications to think evil of him, because everyone easily believes what he desires.” Anger and frustration act like magnifying lens... making specks (slight indications) become logs, mole hills become mountains.

6. St. Thomas: “Thirdly, this is due to long experience: wherefore the Philosopher (i.e., Aristotle) says that ‘old people are very suspicious, for they have often experienced the faults of others.’” Those who have seen combat are leery

7. St. Thomas continues: “Consequently suspicion denotes a certain amount of vice, and the further it goes, the more vicious it is.” Here he names “three degrees of suspicion. The first degree is when a man begins to doubt of another’s goodness from slight indications. This is a venial and a light sin; for ‘it belongs to human temptation without which no man can go through this life...’ The second degree is when a man, from slight indications, esteems another man’s wickedness as certain. This is a mortal sin, if it be about a grave matter, since it cannot be without contempt of one’s neighbor. ... ‘If then we cannot avoid suspicions, because we are human, we must nevertheless restrain our judgment, and
refrain from forming a definite and fixed opinion.’ [my grandfather would
get out this trap by often saying, “We’ll see... We’ll see.”] The third
degree is when a judge goes so far as to condemn a man on suspicion:
this pertains directly to injustice, and consequently is a mortal sin.”

8. Note the common thread is slight indications... not enough information to
make a sound judgment! To avoid this, then, we must strive to delay,
distract, or restrain our judgment. St. Philip Neri wisely stated: “The
sanctity of a man lies in the breadth of three fingers, (the forehead,) that
is to say, in mortifying the understanding, which would fain reason upon
things.” If we think too much on the slight indications, or have too much
free time to ponder such things, we will soon be making judgments that
are unjust and sinful.

9. St. Thomas then indicates in a follow up article another way to escape
from the trap of suspicion... namely always to give the benefit of the
doubt... to put things in the best light possible. He points out that in
giving the facts a happy interpretation, we may occasionally, or even
often, make wrong judgments, but at the same time we will not commit
sins of injustice: “it is better to err frequently through thinking well of a
wicked man than to err less frequently by having an evil opinion of a
good man, because in the latter case an injury is inflicted, but not in the
former” (STA, Summa, II-II, 60, a4ad1).

10. Another solution that we are taught from the earliest times in the
Church is to seek the proper channels for concerns. Time and time again
it has been proven that when the soul laboring under suspicion seeks the
proper authority, they regain their peace and the devil is disarmed. If
anyone has a concern, the Church and the state both have paths through
which resolution can be sought.

11. In his Precautions, St. John of the Cross has us avoid suspicion of
others altogether by not examining or considering what others are doing
so much but rather to flee from these things lest the devil start to work
on us and deceive us (cf. no. 6 & 8). “Do not think about others, neither
good things nor bad [unless we are required by our position]. Flee them
inasmuch as possible. And if you do not observe this practice, you will not
... be able to reach holy recollection or deliver yourself from
imperfections. And if you should wish to allow yourself some freedom in
this matter, the devil will deceive you in one way or another, or you will deceive yourself under some guise of good or evil.”

12. In another place he exhorts: “very carefully guard yourself against thinking about what happens in the community, and even more against speaking of it, of anything in the past or present concerning a particular [person]: nothing about his or her character or conduct or deeds no matter how serious any of this seems. Do not say anything under the color of zeal or of correcting a wrong, unless at the proper time to whomever by right you ought to tell. Never be scandalized or astonished at anything you happen to see or learn of, endeavoring to preserve your soul in forgetfulness of all that.”

13. St. John knows what he is talking about as he was false accused and rashly judged. The Carmelites resisting his reforms were convinced he and the other reformed friars were up to no good. After capturing St. John, they imprisoned him in a tiny dungeon in the Toledo Carmel, feeding him only bread and water for the most part, beating him daily all to break him down and make him confess. Yet, they could not find anything wrong with him. He did not complain. He kept his peace. They could not get him to confess to anything or to return to their mitigated way of life. After some time, many started to doubt the accusations especially when they saw unnatural lights coming from the tiny dungeon… they decided he must either be a saint or a sorcerer. Where there was no love, he put love… And his jailor lightened up on him and he escaped like a bird from the fowler. Later he would say, “God has a terrible way of treating his friends and in truth He does them no wrong, since that was the way He treated His Son” (Auclair, p. 337)... and instead of complaining about his treatment and near death by starvation, he said, “They are free now from the faults which my wretchedness made them commit” (Auclair, p. 342). He considered the mitigated friars his benefactors. In that cell he formulated the poems upon which he wrote the Ascent of Mount Carmel and the Dark Night of the Soul.

14. Let’s strive to avoid the disturbances suspicions cause us and others... by seeking out the proper channels or our superiors when we are laboring under suspicions... by being suspicious of our own motives and thoughts before considering things wrong with those around us... by putting things in their best light, striving to prevent ourselves from making any definite
conclusions... “Grant, we beseech Thee, O Lord, that Thy people may shun all the wiles of the devil: and with pure mind follow Thee, the only God” ... “With all humility and mildness, with patience, supporting one another in charity, careful to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”