

Sunday, October 9, 2016
EXPRESSIONS by Father Ed

Wisdom

The first readings at daily Mass during the past few weeks have been selections from the Wisdom Literature. They are unique texts, different in style and content from the other Biblical books. Some are written in Greek but these are not included in the canon or list of books in the Hebrew Bible. Martin Luther, who followed the Hebrew canon, excluded the Greek books from the Protestant Bible. The Catholic Bible, however, follows the Septuagint, a Greek version, and recognizes the Greek books as Scriptural.

The Wisdom Literature, especially Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Ecclesiasticus or Ben Sira, is filled with wise sayings, maxims, admonitions, paradoxes and short verses intended to assist people in their ordinary lives. All the Wisdom Literature, in essence, is a textbook to instill values, particularly in the young, and to offer practical advice about dealing with others. Some of this was based on precepts of Jewish law, and some was borrowed from secular sources. Much was really just common sense and lived experience. Primarily addressed to young future leaders, the Wisdom Literature speaks of personal honesty, human decency, commitment to service, knowledge, hospitality, generosity, and compassion. During this election, Americans may want to apply these standards to those seeking political office.

The Wisdom Literature, particularly in Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus, also focuses on issues of family and domestic life, relations with neighbors and friends, professional integrity, and public reputation. The personal character of an individual is a central motif through all the Wisdom Literature. Wisdom is proven through deeds, especially by taking care of the poor, the immigrant, the homeless, and sick, the same priorities Jesus preached. Bullying, cheating, arrogance, and succeeding on the backs of others evidence selfishness and vanity. All of the books of the Wisdom Literature are thoughtful and hope to promote personal reflection. The Book of Job even challenges conventional religious thinking, questioning the motives of God and the origins of good and evil. While it fails to provide satisfactory answers, it validates the practice of thinking, not just believing. These books, therefore, merit reading and serious consideration, and can be a positive inspiration for spiritual and practical growth.