

I'll keep it a little shorter than usual today because of the baptisms. "They did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him." In today's homily I want to look at our reluctance to ask the tough but necessary questions in life, and the costs of that failure. I want to start with what moral theology calls "invincible" and "vincible" ignorance. The civil law tells us ignorance of the law is no excuse. But God is more merciful. Sometimes ignorance of evil due to one's circumstances is a valid excuse – but sometimes not. What's the difference and how does it apply to our lives?

First, some simplified background on the difference between evil and sin. Catholics believe that evil is objective. Something being good or evil doesn't depend on our personal beliefs. It depends on whether the act is according to God's will or not. Whether something is sinful, on the other hand, depends, not only on it violating God's will, but on the knowledge and consent of the one doing the action.

For instance, a person might do an evil act, say, have an abortion, but whether the act is a sin depends on whether that person, given the pressures placed on her by circumstances, could grasp and freely choose what she was doing. In other words, doing evil is sometimes not culpable because of a person's unavoidable ignorance of the evil of the act at the moment it was done. We call such ignorance "invincible."

But not all ignorance is invincible. Let's look again at Mk 9:32, How often are we like the disciples, not understanding Jesus and the situation we're in because we're afraid to ask the obvious questions – because the answer might be something we don't want to hear?

Sometimes the questions we avoid are those that we should ask God. We are always morally responsible to form our consciences. That means actively seeking out information about what God's mind is on the question at hand. If the disciples didn't understand what Jesus meant by His prediction of His death and resurrection, they had a perfect chance to ask him. God was literally right beside them. If we're

uncertain about what is right or wrong in a situation we should also ask God: which means pray about it, consult the resources God provides for us – scripture, the Church’s teaching, a priest, knowledgeable friends.

But often the big questions we’re afraid to ask aren’t about deciding what is good or evil. They arise in our every day life. For example, think about how often parents of teens don’t ask questions about their children’s friendships, evening activities, social media use, etc. because they don’t really want to know. Knowing the truth would mean another ugly confrontation. It’s easier on them mentally to pretend ignorance. But that also means their children go without guidance and help in avoiding sin and suffering.

Or maybe your question is about where your dating relationship is going, or about a spouse you may suspect is unfaithful. Do you want to know? Or what about those of us who supervise employees? We can be good at not asking questions, as well, because if we ask that question we might learn something that would be inconvenient or maybe we

would have to call to HR. Think about Jesus' question to His disciples, "What were you arguing about on the way?"

Worse, a significant factor in the Church scandals involves priests and bishops not asking the tough, awkward questions of those clergy they may have suspected of sins and crimes, because doing so would have involved them in painful conflict. These are all examples of "vincible," or perhaps a better phrase is "culpable," ignorance. Such ignorance does not excuse us in the eyes of God.

"They did not understand . . . but they were afraid to question him." One of the root causes of sin is our running away from the suffering of the cross. The disciples in Mk 9:32 didn't want to know about the cross – but the cross found them anyway – and, being unprepared, they ran away. We all have responsibilities to, and for, the people whom God gave us to care for in life. And that means we all have painful moral dilemmas in dealing with them where we are uncertain of our next step. But ignoring our crosses, by not looking at

them, doesn't mean we won't suffer from them. It just means we won't see Jesus in our suffering. If our consciences have raised questions in our lives that we're afraid to ask, we need to ask Jesus for the courage and faith to ask them. Let's get to the truth. No more culpable silence. No matter how inconvenient or painful the answers might be, let's ask that question. It's the only way we can know and do the good.