

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Blessing of New Statue and Welcoming Terrace

St. John the Evangelist, Long Green Valley

October 29, 2017

I am delighted to return to St. John's to celebrate Holy Mass and to bless the improvements that have been made to your church – especially the beautiful new welcoming terrace which, unfortunately, is not so welcoming today due to the inclement weather. But be of good cheer – and think of the rain as holy water for the blessing!

Today I also want to offer my warmest congratulations on your school's receiving the Blue Ribbon of Excellence. Only a very small number of schools receive this award which places St. John's among the best schools in the United States. My warmest thanks to your principal, Christian Blake and her team!

It is also a moment for me to join with you in expressing very special thanks to your Pastor, Msgr. Cramblitt for his long and loving service to this parish and to the Archdiocese. Monsignor Cramblitt, you have led this parish with wisdom and grace; you have built a wonderful team to assist in the mission of the parish; in the process you have touched many minds and hearts with the joy of the Gospel. You remain a wise and trusted advisor in the mission of the whole Archdiocese and for your wise counsel and support, I also want to thank you personally. May God bless you in the work of ministry that lies ahead!

Let us turn now to the Scripture readings for this Sunday, readings that speak to us about the law of love. But before we talk about love, let's talk about law, for we are a law-abiding people living in a land governed by laws and some might even say we live in a highly regulated society.

Unfortunately, people sometimes think about religion in the same way. They reduce

religious faith to ethics, perhaps even just a set of rules, superimposed on all the other rules that our society sets before us. In fact, some would say the Church itself can give this impression for it has its own highly-developed system of law known as Canon Law and most every diocese and parish as its rules and policies. So when we read that the Torah, the Jewish Law, has 615 rules, we might say that they don't have anything on us. We have a Code of Canon Law divided into seven books with 1,752 canons, not to mention church laws that come from various popes and bishops! When you add it up, it seems like a lot, doesn't it? So, there is a danger in reducing our faith to legalities and moral strictures. To do so impoverishes our understanding of the faith and tarnishes the attractiveness of the Gospel.

In addressing this danger, let us pay attention to the teaching of the Old Testament. For the Jews did not regard the Torah, the Law of Moses and the Prophets, merely as a set of detailed rules to be followed. Rather, the people of Israel rejoiced over the law and prophets because they saw the Torah almost like a personal intervention on the part of God who revealed himself to them and delivered them from the slavery of Egypt, establishing them in the land he promised to their forebears, and in the process mapping out for them a way of life. So the Torah, the Law of Moses formed the basis for the covenant, the relationship of love, between God and the people of Israel. Thus, if you read Psalm 119, for example, you see that it is a long celebration of the wisdom and goodness of God's Law. It presents God's Law not as stifling rules but as a way of freedom and love.

In their wisdom, the Jewish people divided God's Commandments into those that were major and those that were minor. This is what was behind the Pharisee's question to Jesus in today's Gospel: "Which is the greatest commandment of the law?" Jesus' answer should have been no surprise to a scholar of the law. For of all the major commandments in the Torah love of God and love of neighbor stand out as the most prominent. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength." And today's first reading from Exodus speaks to the law of love for one's neighbor, describing in some detail what it means for a righteous Israelite to treat the poor and vulnerable with compassion. And all the other laws, all 615 of them, are reducible to those two. Indeed, Jesus' disputes with the scholars of law often turn on the way they obscure or even overturn the heart of the law. Instead of presenting the Torah as a revelation

of God's wisdom and love, they represent it instead as a roadblock, as mountain too high to climb. Thus the Lord accuses the Scribes and Pharisees of tying up heavy burdens and laying them on people's shoulders, not lifting a finger to move them (Mt. 23:4)...words that should resonate in the hearts of any and all of us in ministry!

What, then, is different about Jesus and his teaching? Today some people say that the only thing they know for sure about Jesus is that he was a great teacher of ethics and that following Jesus means observing his ethics. Certainly Jesus was a brilliant teacher but he was much more. Jesus was and is the Word made flesh. He embodies the wisdom and love of God in our humanity, our nature. Sent by the Father he came into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit and gave up his life for us and for our salvation. Jesus gave himself to us and to the Father in love, delivering us from the slavery of sin and made us free to worship the Father in spirit and truth, free from fear. In this way Jesus established the New and Eternal Covenant in his Blood.

The heart of our Catholic faith is participating in Jesus' gift of self - By opening our hearts to the Word of God, by taking part in the Mass and the Sacraments, we share, a real and deeply personal way, in the love that prompted God the Father to send us his only Son for the forgiveness of our sins. This is God's passionate and utterly generous love poured out for us lavishly. In the Eucharist we are steeped and formed in this generous love, this *agape*, and by participating in this love, we are enabled to make a genuine gift of ourselves to God and to others. Thus in the III Eucharistic Prayer, addressing the Father, we ask that in Jesus our lives might become an everlasting gift to you to God and others...." We ask that our sharing in Jesus make our lives ... our mind, our soul, our body ...a total and irrevocable gift to the Father and to our neighbor, whether friend or foe. Rightly, then, does the Church teach us that the Eucharist is "the source and summit" of our faith, of the new life we have found in Christ Jesus.

So, when we hear Jesus say, "If you love me you will keep my commandments" and when we encounter moral teachings that are challenging and even church laws we may find a bit nettlesome - let us resort neither to legalism nor to antinomianism, that is, a penchant for lawlessness. Rather, let us see the law of love through the eyes of the Christ of the Beatitudes and respond generously with the grace of the

Holy Spirit to what is asked of us. For moral teaching and laws are rightly given us, not so that we would be lost in a thicket of rules, but rather so that we might be guided in making our lives a genuine gift to God and to others, living our lives not for ourselves for him who loved us first. If the love of God poured in our hearts by the Spirit finds a home there, God's love will shine forth in our hearts and through our hearts, and those commands that govern our relationship with God and others will be not a burden but a joy. May God bless us and keep us always in his love!