

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 4th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Knights of Columbus Board Meeting

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Knights of Columbus Board Meeting

North Miami Beach, Florida

Feb. 3, 2019

Introduction

As a newly ordained priest serving in Prince George's County, Maryland, I was helping an engaged couple to plan their wedding liturgy. Among other things, we discussed their choice of Scripture readings. The bride-to-be quickly chose St. Paul's inspired hymn on love —today's second reading from First Corinthians. Leading with my chin, I asked her why she chose that reading. "Because," she replied, "it's like a Hallmark card right there in the Bible!" "Oh good," said I, checking off the appropriate box on the planning sheet and fuming that she had confused St. Paul for Helen Steiner Rice, Hallmark's poet laureate.

Especially for us, as members and leaders of the Knights of Columbus, St. Paul's ode to love has nothing to do with mere sentimentality. Founded as we are on the principle of charity, this hymn ought to be our Magna Carta, our divine charter, our *raison d'être*. In our culture, of course, love is often reduced to a fleeting emotion and charity is thought of solely as an activity. Of course, there is more than a grain of truth in both descriptions. For no one loves without engaging the emotions and no one is charitable without doing good things for other people. Yet, the emotional appeal of love and the attractiveness of doing good, do not take us to the heart of what love really is; they do not lead us to love's interior. But in today's second reading, St. Paul does just that. He gets to the root of the matter and thus to the root of why our Order exists.

From Sentiment to Reality

What jolts St. Paul's hymn to love out of the realm of sentimentality and places it rather in the realm of truth, beauty, and goodness is this: St. Paul isn't describing mere human love, but indeed, divine love, and more specifically, the traits of Christ's love – his mutual love with God the Father and his redeeming love for us. And just as Christ's humanity is the measure of our humanity, so too Christ's love is the measure of our love, and his mercy is the measure of our charity.

The challenge of being measured by Christ's love comes home to us when we consider the precise word St. Paul chose for our English word "love": Not the word *eros* which is the Greek word for romantic, passionate love; nor *philia* which is the Greek word for brotherly or sisterly love; nor *storgē* (jay) which is the Greek word for the love parents have for their children. Instead, St. Paul employs the Greek word *agapē* which describes a love that is wholly untainted by selfishness, a love that seeks no reward or return except in the measure that it benefits the other. It is not a self-seeking love but rather a self-giving love. Here, I might add an insight from Pope Benedict XVI who taught us that while God's love for us is pure and untainted, it is no less passionate. God loves us in Christ with a wholly generous love but also a love that is enflamed. So, *agapē*, thus understood is the quintessential New Testament word that challenges me and you to examine the quality of our love. Do we love to get something out of it or do we love for the sake of the other? Are we passionate about loving God and others in a selfless way?

Note what St. Paul is saying to us today. *Agapē* is not merely a nice quality to acquire, an optional extra, as it were, nor is it a special trait reserved only for canonized saints. No, this kind of love should be the mark of every follower of Christ, so much so that every gift, every talent, every effort amounts to nothing, nothing at all, unless it proceeds from a heart that has been shaped and enflamed by the pure and passionate love of Jesus poured into our depths by the Spirit. You can speak in tongues, you can prophecy, you can comprehend mysteries, you can move mountains – but none of that is anything without *agapē*!

How instructive for us as the family of the Knights of Columbus. Our Order is blessed with an abundance of authentic spiritual gifts and if there is any organization in the Church that can move mountains, this is it! But all that we are and all that we can do hinges on love, on *agapē* – It hinges on our participation in

Christ's love, so that, in turn, we might love others as Christ has first loved us. That is the secret to a charity that evangelizes and its inner core.

The Dimensions of Christ's Love

What, then, are the characteristics of Christ's love, traits that should be ours if truly we are participating in his life and love? First, Paul tells us that love is patient - and by this he means that Christ did not merely put up with the annoyances of life rather, he suffered patiently for sinners, as we see in his passion and death. St. Paul tells us that love is kind - and here he means more than courtesy. No, the kindness Paul is referring to is the Lord's unbounded generosity, a greatness of heart coupled with a longing to share with us his saving love. Already, the bar is set pretty high for the kind of love that ought to be ours.

Yet, the love Christ revealed is so stupendous, so luminous, so beyond description that St. Paul devotes most of his hymn to telling us what *agapē* is not. Maybe that's the only way he could bring such heavenly love down to earth for us! So this is what he proceeds to teach us about love: It's not jealous - competitive, envious, isolating - Jesus was none of those things. It's not pompous or boastful - Jesus was meek and humble of heart. It's not inflated - full of one's self-importance, all puffed up - the Son of Man came to do the will of the Father. Nor is it rude, and while Jesus showed flashes of righteous anger, he never ran roughshod over the people he sought to redeem. Love, St. Paul says, doesn't seek its own interests - its own advantage - thus did the Son of God empty himself, become like us, and lay down his life for us. Not letting up, St. Paul says that love is not-quick tempered in the face of injury. Instead of being petulant, the person who loves as Christ loves knows how to turn wounds into intercessory prayer and forgiveness. Love does not brood over injury, St. Paul adds, just as Jesus forgave his persecutors and taught us the parable of the prodigal son. Love doesn't rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth - Like Jesus, we should mourn and pray for those who do evil and rejoice when they and we embrace the truth that sets our humanity free.

Let's think for a moment about how many fraternal disputes are rooted in envy, inflated self-importance, excessive self-interest, petulance, grudges & more. All these things fly in the face of the utterly pure and generous love of Jesus which

Father McGivney made the sure foundation of our Order. As those antonyms to love are by God's grace eliminated from our hearts, our love for God, our concern for one another, & our charity become more Christ-like.

Conclusion

All of which brings us to the source of that charity upon which we were founded, viz., the Eucharist, wherein the One Sacrifice of Christ is celebrated & made present, wherein we receive the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ. As Jesus, the embodiment of agapē, comes into our midst, let us receive Him in faith, asking to participate more deeply in that love which exceeds every other love, that love which is the heart of our charity. And may God bless us and keep us always in his love! Vivat Jesus!