

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

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St. Louis - St. Francis of Assisi Pastorate

Aug. 25, 2018

Joy and Hope, Grief and Anguish

When we come to Mass, we listen for a word that will inspire, encourage, console and direct us, no matter what our particular situation might be, no matter what our hope and joy, grief and anguish might be. How often the priests of this parish, Monsignor Luca, Father Peter and Father Bill, as well as your parish deacons – preach a message of hope and joy that gives you strength and inspiration for the week. And how blessed you are with the wonderful priests and deacons that serve this great parish of St. Louis.

It would be wonderful if we could always arrive for Mass with only joy and hope. Yet most of us, myself included, celebrate this Mass with a sense of grief and anguish. It is a grief and an anguish brought about by the sexual abuse crisis that continues to trouble deeply even the most faithful of Catholics, a crisis that lingers in spite of all that has been done in the last decades to create safe environments in the Church and to purify and strengthen seminary formation. It is a crisis that has left many victims in its wake and reopened old wounds, a crisis brought about by the deeply sinful behavior of many clerics, and by the failure of some bishops to address such behavior with thoroughness and candor.

This crisis of trust and of leadership has left us reeling, and has indeed put into our hearts, not joy and hope, but grief and anguish. As a bishop, I am deeply humbled by such abject failure as I stand here before you this morning, and not only humbled but haunted by the enormity and evil of this crisis. As best I can, I shall strive to listen to and walk with you, the laity in searching for and implementing meaningful further and ongoing reforms. Even now, however, what might the Word of God be saying to us today, in the midst of a grief and anguish likely to remain with us for a

long time to come? How does God's Word challenge us, enlighten us, and direct us at the present moment?

Ephesians

In search of an answer, let us turn to our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. It is a passage which is foundational to the Church's understanding of marriage. It is also a passage which is foundational for understanding what the Church is. In the fifth chapter of Ephesians, St. Paul describes for us the mutual love, deference and respect of husbands and wives, a love that is deep, pervasive and personal, a love that lasts through thick and thin, *a love just like Jesus' love for his Bride, which is the Church.*

"Husbands," St. Paul says, "love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church" - with a love that is total, sacrificial, and ennobling. As members of the Church, that is how Jesus loves us. This is the love we encounter and celebrate in the Eucharist, the Bread of Life.

For those of you who are married, this reading is a wonderful passage to reflect on and pray about. But at this moment I'd like to stress the point that Christ loves the Church. This may not be an easy message to hear at a time when the sins of its leaders have rendered the Church "un-loveable." Social media is filled with stories of people who say they are leaving the Church, and sadly, with fewer stories of people who say they are staying. When it's all said and done, though, there is one ultimate reason for staying: Christ loves his Church. Christ loves the Church with a merciful and purifying love.

Christ loves the Church not only its purest and most beautiful expressions, not only its richness of her spirituality and the goodness of her saints - but also the Church's sinners - even the worst. Christ even loves the Church in its perpetually flawed institutional form, a form which, throughout history, is constantly in need of renewal.

What an awful mess we who lead the Church can make of things. Nonetheless Christ still loves the Church even more than a good, virtuous, self-sacrificing husband loves his wife and children. And in her deepest identity, the Church loves Christ as a wife

loves her husband and in her union with Christ, the Church loves each of us. Which is why harming the innocent and vulnerable and the casting of a blind eye to such behavior is a betrayal of the very love that lies at the heart of salvation history. It is of this betrayal that we, your bishops, need to repent, a repentance that signals not just a change of heart and attitude but, as I said, ongoing change in how things are done, not just locally, but at every level in the Church's life.

Locally, I will be conducting listening sessions around the archdiocese with priests, deacons, seminarians, school leadership and parish lay leadership. Further, we are looking for ways to make it easier for parishioners to have interactive input into the administrative and pastoral life of the archdiocese. In addition, the archdiocese continues to work with the Independent Review Board made up of highly qualified individuals, to maintain and strengthen longstanding policies and procedures to protect young people, to reach out to victims and to cooperate fully with law enforcement. I recognize that these steps are but a beginning and not an end, and, to repeat, that more steps need to be taken at other levels in the Church.

A Moment of Decision

Both the reading from the Book of Joshua and the Bread of Life Discourse from the Gospel of John share a similar question. Joshua challenges the people with a question at the heart of the Covenant: Reminding the people of how God delivered them from slavery and death in Egypt, he says: 'Decide whom you will serve. Will you serve the living God or will you serve the gods of the surrounding cultures?' The gods of our surrounding culture tell that it's a no-brainer not only to leave the Church but even to forsake the God who gave us the Church and who still loves the Church and us, its members. This is the drama playing out in many hearts and around many kitchen tables.

In the Bread of Life Discourse, Jesus tells the people that he is the Bread of Life and that they cannot have eternal life unless they eat his Body and drink his Blood. Among his own disciples Jesus's words are met with disbelief, disbelief that he is the living Word of God in the flesh, the One who can give himself to us so completely and so intimately. Many walk away. Many go back to their former way of life. Jesus then puts to the Apostles a question similar to Joshua's: 'What about you? Will you

walk away?' Peter, who often misunderstood Jesus and would deny him in his Passion, answers: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life."

How I wish I could pose the question of Joshua and Jesus in another context – belief in the New Covenant sealed by the flesh and blood of the living Savior. Instead, I must ask of myself and of you the same question, amid the idolatry of sin and the misuse of power that has wormed its way into the Church: 'What about you? Will you walk away?' Like Peter prior to Pentecost, I cannot reply out of a storehouse of virtue. It is only because the Lord loves the Church, loves each of you, and gives himself to us in the Eucharist, that I can reply: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!" Please, God, may you and your families find it in your hearts to say the same. May God bless you and keep you always in his love!