

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Votive Mass of the Sacred Heart

*Votive Mass of the Sacred Heart
Knights of Columbus State Deputies' Meeting
St. Mary's Church; New Haven, CT
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Years ago, when I was a seminarian at Mt. St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, Maryland, the world-famous Mother Teresa of Calcutta came for a visit. Naturally, we were excited, and anxious to talk with her. Because the seminary rector knew what we were like, he warned us, within an inch of our life, to be on our best behavior. To the best of my recollection, we complied!

Truth to tell, we were hoping she'd talk about her amazing exploits. "What was it like to win the Nobel Peace Prize?" "Tell us how you got started serving the poorest of the poor in India." We wanted to know how her mission was going in Eastern Europe -behind the Iron Curtain, as it was then called. We wanted to know how she attracted so many vocations to the Missionaries of Charity.

Mother Teresa didn't tell us any of that. Instead, she spoke about the vine and the branches. Her words were simple and profound at the same time. She wanted to impress upon us the utter necessity of prayer. She wanted us to become priests who are deeply connected to Christ's love, as closely connected as a fruitful branch is to the vine. Only in this way, she told us, would our priestly ministry bear fruit.

While I too had hoped Mother Teresa would speak of her exciting adventures, I suddenly found myself, a second theologian, sitting in the back of chapel, reassured.

Mother Teresa's words prompted me to realize that my vocation did not rest on my own good will or my desire to serve but rather on a love - deeper, wider, and more beautiful than I ever imagined. She taught me that my vocation was not my own project. Rather, the Lord was calling me, "to be rooted and grounded in love" - in his love. Only in this way would my life and ministry bear the good fruit of the Holy Spirit!

How appropriate this same message is for all of us here this morning, especially for our new and continuing state deputies and for all of those involved in the leadership of the Knights of Columbus. After all, the first principle we are called to uphold and live is charity -and not just any charity but rather the love that flows from the Sacred Heart of Jesus. We can fully live the Gospel principle of charity only by being connected to Jesus, only by our being in a close, life-giving, prayerful relationship with Christ just as a healthy, fruit-bearing branch is connected to its vine. If you and I are to proclaim charity and live charity, we must be, in the words of St. Paul, "rooted and grounded in love"; we must hear and heed Jesus' words, "Remain in my love!"

At the end of today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells us to ask for anything in his name, and it will be granted to us. What should we ask for? What request should well up in our hearts? Looking at today's first reading, don't we find it is a prayer that St. Paul is offering for the members of the Church at Ephesus. And what is he praying for? What does he want for his beloved Ephesians? It simply that they would be more completely connected to Jesus and his love. He is praying that they would welcome the love of Jesus more deeply, more completely into their lives -both as individuals and as a community of faith. And Paul is praying for them intensely - he says - "For this reason I kneel before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name" (3:14-15). I am sure that long ago Fr. McGivney knelt in this very church and uttered the same prayer for his parishioners and for his newfound Order.

Following his example, I think that's also my first job as your chaplain -to kneel before the Father and to pray for you, just as Paul prayed for the Ephesians.

Paul's prayer, in fact, includes five petitions - five heartfelt requests - prayers which I also offer on your behalf as you assume the emblems of an office that is dedicated to manifesting and living the love of Christ ...and what are they?

That, in accord with the riches of God's glory, you may be strengthened with power through the Spirit in your inner self.

We often pray to God for strength when we face problems and challenges but here we're asking to be strengthened with power - not physical power or political power but the power of God's love, revealed in the heart of Christ, communicated to us by the Spirit - a love that overcomes evil with good, sin with grace, death with life; a love that comes to rest in our inner selves, in the depth of our being.

[I pray] that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that . . . grounded and rooted in love, you may have strength." Now, in making my own St. Paul's prayer, I do not wish to imply that Christ is not already dwelling in your hearts through faith. I only want to recognize that Jesus and his love live in us by degrees. What I'm praying for is that Christ will dwell in our hearts, that is, our souls, with ever greater degrees of intensity and completeness - so that no area of our lives will be untouched, unredeemed by his love. Thus may we believe, trust, obey, and be faithful to Jesus in everything!

Then I pray that we will comprehend with all the saints "what is the breadth and length and height and depth" of God's love. Now that's quite a prayer, for in it, we ask to comprehend the greatness of God's love - yet who can begin really to grasp the depth and beauty of God's love?

This side of eternity we really can't fathom the dimensions of his love but we have

some idea when we look upon the Cross of Jesus the arms of which branch out in all directions. As we contemplate the dimensions of God's love, may it transform us - and may we become missionaries who spread the news of his love in all directions.

Next, with St. Paul I shall pray that we will "know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge." In a sense, I'm asking that we be overwhelmed with the knowledge of his love, a love which goes way beyond our capacity to explain. I'm praying that you and I may have, not merely an intellectual knowledge of Jesus, but an *experiential* knowledge of his love for us, a love that changes everything. It's the love St. Paul evinces in his own life when he exclaims in Galatians: "He loves me and he gave his life for me!"

Finally, I shall pray with St. Paul that we "be filled with all the fullness of God" - again, a prayer that goes beyond our understanding. How can we, limited as we are, be filled with all the fullness of God? If I may say, St. Paul is asking that we be like containers that are overflowing, so filled with God's love in Christ Jesus that our overflowing love reaches others, most especially the widow, the orphan, and the outcast.

"Lord Jesus, we believe. Help our unbelief and make your home in our hearts. As we gaze upon your cross and adore you in your sacrament, let us understand as Paul did, that you loved us and gave yourself for us!"

Vivat Jesus!