

Love for God and Neighbor Cannot Be Separated 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time – A (2011)

The "law and the prophets" that Jesus refers to in today's Gospel (the Old Testament) were considered by the Jews to contain the **absolutely unique self-revelation** of the one, true God to his only Chosen People.

- Possessing this revelation made ancient Israel more **privileged** than all other nations and peoples.
- Therefore, when the Pharisee (who, like all Pharisees, was an **expert** in "the law and the prophets") asks Jesus to identify the greatest among the 613 commandments of the Old Testament, he is really **challenging** Christ to give an interpretation of the entire history and reality of the Israelite nation.
- We can imagine Christ **fixing his eyes** on those of the questioner, wondering how sincere the question really was.

St Matthew doesn't tell us how the Pharisee **reacted**, but we can imagine that he was surprised, if not downright **shocked**.

- Jesus had been asked to name **one** commandment, but then he listed **two**.
- The shrewd Pharisees would have **noticed** this.
- In listing two commandments, Jesus was pointing out that you **cannot separate** loving God from loving one's neighbor.
- And that's **exactly** what many of the Pharisees did every single day.

God is our Creator and Savior; his love is both **universal** and **personal**.

- He loves **every single human being** so much that he **gave his life** on the cross to pay the price for each person's sin, to **open the gates of heaven** to every single person who is willing to follow him.
- And so, if someone **truly loves God** with all their heart, it would be a **contradiction** not to treat one's **neighbors** - those very people whom God loves and suffered to save - with sincere and self-sacrificing **respect**.

- The old saying applies above all to God: A friend of **yours** is a friend of **mine**.

Rescuing the Abandoned in Ancient Rome

In ancient Rome, Christians used to use **Catacombs** for their burial places.

- The Catacombs consist of **miles of underground tunnels and chambers** that were painstakingly carved out of the unique tufa soil on the outskirts of Rome.
- Tufa is a mixture of normal topsoil and elements from volcanic ash and lava.
- As long as it is not **exposed to the air**, it shows no special characteristics, except that it is remarkably soft and easy to dig.
- But when you excavate into it, exposing it to the air, it gradually becomes almost as **hard as rock**.
- And so it was the **perfect environment** to create a vast network of underground cemeteries, chapels, and hiding places.

You can still visit these Catacombs today.

When you do, you notice that in addition to the **normal graves**, there are thousands of **little horizontal niches** dug into the walls of the passageways.

Two or three feet long, less than a foot high, and two or three feet deep, these niches are much **too small** to serve as a burial place for a full-grown body.

Archeologists recently discovered what they were used for.

- In ancient Rome, when Christianity was still a minority, outlawed religion, it was common practice for pagan women to **abandon by exposure** unwanted or crippled babies.
- Special clearings outside the city were used just for this purpose.
- As Christianity spread, Christian women started going out to those clearings to **rescue the unwanted babies**, convinced that they were loved by God and created in his image.

- Some of the babies would **die from exposure** before or soon after being rescued.
- When that happened, the Christians would **bury these babies in the little niches** in the Catacombs.

In this way, at great cost and inconvenience to themselves, they **actively lived out** Christ's commandment to love.

Making the Devil Mad

When we **reach out to our neighbors** with this kind of Christian love, **servicing** them and helping them simply because they are created in God's image and loved by him, **God himself works through us** to heal and inspire their souls.

This is one of the **two main reasons** that the **devil** tries to keep us from doing that.

- He knows that Christians are Christ's **ambassadors**,
- that we carry Christ and his grace **within** us,
- and so when we reach out to our neighbors in need, we are actually **putting them in touch with Christ**,
- who can give them **everlasting life** - exactly what the devil doesn't want to happen.

This week, let's spread Christ's saving grace and make the devil **mad**.

- Let's not leave this church without having **committed** to reaching out to a neighbor in need.
- It could be as simple as **visiting a sick or elderly relative** that we have been neglecting,
- or getting some friends together to visit those who are in **prison**, just to remind them that they are still human beings,
- or having a **cup of coffee with a friend who hasn't been to Mass** in a long time, just to find out why, and to remind them that God hasn't forgotten about them.

If we each do just one act of Christian charity this week, we will **expand Christ's Kingdom** by making ourselves into **channels, outlets** of his grace.

But there is **another reason** the devil doesn't want us to reach out to our neighbors.

It's because he knows that as long as we are **self-absorbed**, we won't really experience the interior **peace and freedom** that comes from following Christ's two great commandments.

Today, as Jesus renews his commitment to **us** in this holy Mass, let's renew **our** commitment to being his faithful **soldiers**, courageous **ambassadors** of his love.