

THIRTY FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME B2024

I want to start this homily with a story. This is a personal history that has allowed me to better understand this portion of the Gospel when our Lord is talking about the love of God as the greatest of the commandments. This story is about my oldest sister, Marie Claire. She is already dead, but in heaven where she is now, I am sure she is listening to me as I talk about her.

One time my sister was in love with a young man who later became her husband. As they were dating, my father did not want my sister to go alone meet her boyfriend. For that reason, I often accompanied her to her meetings. (It seems archaic, but that is the way it was that time. And I can only tell the truth). At that time, I did not understand why my father was doing so. But, later on, I came to understand that my father did not want that young man to break the heart of my sister if he did not have any intention of marrying her.

As my sister grew up in dating her boyfriend, I saw a sudden change in her. She was saying words like: "If Al (that was the name of her fiancé) breaks with me, my life is over". She was talking only about that young man; she was singing only the name of that man; she was laughing only about him; she was dreaming only of him. She was completely transformed, inhabited by a strange feeling for that young man.

I would say that all the cells of her body and mind were invaded by the passionate feeling of love for Al. There was nothing of her that was left outside of Al. Al had become everything for her. Her breath, her conversation, her smile, her dream, her whole life was for Al. Al was everything for her and meant everything to her.

When our Lord says that the greatest of the commandments is to love God "with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength", he is wishing that something similar to what happened to my sister may happen to you. He is appealing to you, to me, to us to surrender to God totally, completely and entirely and to be transformed by his love. He wants that nothing of us might be left outside of the love of God. He wants that no cell of our body or mind, no an inch of who we are, might live independently from him.

What our Lord was saying that day was not something totally new. To the ears of his listeners, it was just a repetition of the faith of Israel as expressed in Deuteronomy 6: 4-5, "*Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*". Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and all your strength." But, what was new that day was what he added: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself".

The intensity of the love of God within us is shown in our propensity to love our fellow human beings. The love of God and the love of our fellows are one. We cannot separate them except for reason of explanation. For that reason, there is no spirituality without humanism and there is no humanism without God. To support one and to reject the other is a contradiction.

We can only love God and our fellows at the same time. That is why we should not neglect the fate of our fellows with whom we live. We cannot care for the things of God and neglect the things of this world. The consequence to draw from such a vision is very simple: the fulfillment of our duties in society and in the Church should always be evaluated with regard to the law of love. Otherwise we would simply be satisfied with what we regularly do even if it does not correspond to the love of God and neighbor.

I take this point from the suggestion made in the Gospel that to love God and the neighbor is worth more than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. In fact, as human beings, we are men and women of duty. There are many duties we have to fulfill for our church, for our country, for our families, for ourselves, for our business, etc. Anytime people, including myself, have fulfilled their duty, they feel satisfaction and contentment. Sometimes, we easily and proudly say: I made it; it is over now; I can have some rest.

To fulfill one's duty is certainly important and even required if we do not want to appear negligent and lazy people. Each one of us, indeed, should be capable of fulfilling his duty without pretense or laziness. In some circumstances, to fulfill our duty is even the measure of our commitment and the expression of our character. And it may be true that people sometimes judge us by the way we fulfill our duties.

But, here is the test: why do we fulfill such a duty? What drives us in the fulfillment of that duty? My point is this: although the fulfillment of our duty is important and beneficial to us and to others, we better also examine the motivation that leads us. If we don't care about what animates us, we run the risk of doing everything because that is our job. There is a big difference between fulfilling a duty because it is a job and fulfilling a duty because of the love we have for our Lord, our country, our family or our business, etc.

The point is not the condemnation of offerings and sacrifices as though they were not important. The problem is that, though they are important, they should be the consequence of the love we have for God and our fellows. If we offer something, it should be as an expression of our love of God. If we give something for the needy, it should be as a consequence of our concern for the wellbeing of our fellows.

While our Lord is inviting us to love God with all our heart soul, mind and strength, we discover, however, that we are divided human beings, even in our ultimate choices. The simple measure we can give in this regard is about what happens to us when we go shopping in a store or want to buy a dress, a shirt or a suit, etc. It takes us time before we decide on which of those things we fix our mind.

Our Lord does not want us to love him with a divided heart, but rather completely and undividedly. God does not want us to love him as an object among many others, alongside the things of this world, but as someone to whom we give all we are, all we have, all our heart, all our mind, all our strength. We have to fix our being on him and to give ourselves exclusively to him. God is love. If it is so, by loving him we just return to our own very being, as we are created in his image. We cannot love God without loving our neighbor. Just as we are made for God, we are made for one another.

May God help us love him by loving one another! May he touch of all of us to elect people capable of respecting his laws, especially the integrity and dignity of human life!

Deuteronomy 6: 2-6; Hebrews 7: 23-28; Mark 12: 28b-34



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