

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time B - Love God and Love Thy Neighbour. Who are our Neighbours, and How?

October 31, 2021.

Happy and safe Halloween Day with abundant earthly and spiritual treats from our dear neighbours. The coming Monday, November 1 is All Saints Day. Through the Communion of the Saints and their intercession, may we be purified and sanctified. For the All Souls' Day on Tuesday, may the Lord remember our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection, and all who have died in God's mercy be welcomed into the light of God's face, Amen.

In this Sunday's Gospel (Mark 12:28b-34), Jesus links forever the commandment to love God with the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself. When asked for the greatest single commandment, he actually answers by naming two commandments – **loving God and loving neighbour**; they necessarily, intrinsically go together. In Jesus' time, this answer was surprising because it put love for neighbour on par with love for God. No one had ever done that before; everyone agreed that loving God should come before loving one's neighbour. Jesus challenges those assumptions: true love for God, he teaches, cannot exist apart from true love for neighbour. **If someone claims to love God, that invisible love can be verified in the visible way they treat their neighbour.** After all, Christian love is about getting out of ourselves and reaching towards the needy.

But who are our neighbours? The one next doors who mow our lawn and shovel our driveway, on the street, in the community? Venerable Bishop Fulton Sheen once told the story of a nun who was caring for a horribly ill patient whose leprosy was well-advanced, with putrid, rotting skin and the smell of decaying flesh. The nun attended to the patient with remarkable gentleness and kindness. It was as if she didn't even notice how grotesque the disease had made this person. A visitor to the hospital stood and watched for a few moments. When the nun had finished, the visitor went up to her with a grimace of disgust and said, "Sister, I wouldn't do what you just did for a million dollars." The nun smiled and said, "Neither would I." **True love is not an emotion. It is a determination! A determination to want the good of the other, to build a bonding relationship with the one we love, God first and then our neighbour. True love for our neighbour can only come from a true love for God, in whose image our neighbour is created.**

People asked Mother Theresa why she cared for the poor dying on the streets who weren't even Christians. Her response was, **"How can you love God and not care for his image?"** To this we can add, **"We don't help others according to whether they are Catholic or not. We help them because we are Catholic."** God doesn't expect us to leave our families and go to the poorest countries of the world to seek out those who need the most help, but **he does expect us to reverence His Presence in others. God doesn't want us to be bogged down in a quagmire of laws, but he does expect us to live out the one law of loving him with all our heart, mind and soul and loving our neighbours as ourselves.** But how? **Loving God and neighbour are the great commandments - they are the path to true happiness and fullness of life. All of us Christians love God, and we love our neighbour. But our love is still immature. It has room to grow; it can become stronger. And as it gets stronger, so will the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit at work in our own soul.** And that's what we are all hoping for. So what can we do to strengthen our love for God, to make it grow? Like all virtues, the virtue of love grows with exercise. This week, let's go to the spiritual gym; let's exercise our love for God and neighbour. We don't have to do anything crazy - just

something intentional. Traditionally, the Church gives us a lot of help by identifying ways we can exercise this love - they are called Works of Mercy.

The spiritual works of mercy are: instructing the ignorant, counselling the doubtful, admonishing sinners, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving offences willingly, comforting the afflicted, praying for the living and the dead. But as St. Paul of the Cross said, "If you cannot spend much time at prayer, no matter; to act well is always to pray well." We can act on the ***corporeal works of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, ransoming slaves, sheltering the homeless, and burying the dead.*** This isn't an exhaustive list, but most likely one or two of those works of mercy will strike a chord in our hearts. Then focus on that one or those two this week. **Don't let a day go by without consciously, intentionally exercising our love for God and neighbour - the love God himself has planted in our heart. Because if we exercise it, it will grow, and when love grows, so does everything else that is good.**

There is an old philosophical saying that says we cannot love what we do not know. And that's true. **To love something, we have to know it.** And so, **if we want to grow our love for God, which is the surest way to grow in our love for neighbour, the best thing to do is to get to know God better.** Here are three simple things we can do to know God better. First, spend fifteen minutes a day this week reading the Bible. The Bible is God's Word - he reveals himself there. Read through the Letters of St. Paul, or one of the Gospels, or even one of the books from the Old Testament. Second, do a holy hour in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Jesus is truly present in the Eucharist. When we spend time with him near the Tabernacle, in silence, in prayerful reflection or even in prayerful reading, he speaks to our hearts. He reveals himself to us. After all, he wants to be known: **"Yet because God would very much like to be known, he has revealed himself... In him [Jesus] God has poured out his heart to us and made his inmost being visible for us."** Third, go for a prayerful walk in a beautiful park. God created the world. The beauties of nature are his work of art. Just as any artist reveals himself in his works, so God does too. We all want to obey the two great commandments - that's why we are here. God wants to help us. **Let's make a decision today, that we will do something, anything, to get to know God better, so that we can love him better, and our neighbours too. With the evidence of this love in our community, the kingdom of God is continually proclaimed.**

Though it is the last day of October, the month of Our Lady of Rosary, we can continue praying and meditating on the Rosary daily to ask Our Mother to pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. As Pope Francis said, "Rosary is the spiritual medicine". ***Meditating upon these mysteries in the most holy Rosary of the Blessed Virgin Mary, we may imitate what they contain, and obtain what they promise, through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.***