

Homily – Easter 5 – (Year C) – May 19, 2019

ACTS 14:21-27; PS 145:8-9, 10-11, 12-13; REV 21:1-5A; JN 13:31-33A, 34-35

The lives of the Saints are a great source of encouragement for us as we struggle to live lives of **holiness** in a very **unholy world**. But they can also be great sources of **discouragement** if we compare ourselves as we are—**today**—with the Saints as they were **when they were almost...or already...the “finished products”** that qualified them for canonization. In other words, nobody is **born** a Saint, yet we often don't **consider** the full extent of what the Saints experienced and suffered to **approach the peak of perfection** which we call “holy”. Allow me to illustrate this dilemma with an **example**:

Pope John XXXIII, in his homily for the canonization of **St. Martin de Porres**, wrote the following words:

When Martin had *come to realize* that Christ Jesus “suffered for us and that he carried our sins on his body to the cross, he would meditate with remarkable ardor and affection about Christ on the cross.”

<http://www.liturgies.net/saints/martindeporres/readings.htm>

I don't know about you, but when I read words like these, and have to admit that I don't often **“meditate with remarkable ardor and affection about Christ on the cross”**, I am tempted to wonder whether or not I **really** do love Jesus, or if I have even a remote chance of becoming a Saint when I don't experience what St. Martin experienced when I look at the Crucifix.

When this kind of discouragement sets in, it helps to consider something that was written about **St. Catherine Laboure**, the 24-year old novice of the **Daughters of Charity** in Paris, France, to whom the **Virgin Mary** appeared three times in 1830 and which apparitions led to the creation of and devotion to the **Miraculous Medal**...also known as the **Medal of Our Lady of Graces**:

Catherine was in the chapel in the evening, when a glorious apparition of Our Lady standing on a globe appeared in the sanctuary. The Blessed Virgin...wore a white silk dress with a white veil that fell to her feet; in her hands she held a golden ball...The young Sister saw rings on Our Lady's fingers encrusted with precious stones, which flashed and glittered. Then she heard an inner voice: “The ball which you see represents the whole world, especially France, and each person in particular. These rays symbolize the graces I shed upon those who ask for

them. The gems from which rays do not fall are the graces for which souls forget to ask.”

<https://www.bluearmy.com/the-miraculous-medal-a-reminder-to-ask-with-confidence-for-graces-needed/>

Now these two things are certainly related—the **holiness of the Saints**...and the **need to ask for particular graces from God**...particularly *through* Mary.

We'll come back to **both** of these points in a bit. For now, let's listen again to what Jesus said in **today's Gospel passage** from the **13th Chapter of John's Gospel**:

I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. (Jn 13:34)

Now, isn't this just a repeat of the “**dual Commandment**” that Jesus taught in response to the question posed to him in the **Gospel of Matthew**?? Let's revisit **that** incident:

...a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt 22:35-39)

Why, then, does Jesus say, in today's Gospel, “**I give you a new commandment**” if it's just a repeat of what he said here in Matthew's Gospel?

Because he's **not** saying the same thing.

In the second part of his “**dual Commandment**” from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus said we are to “love our neighbor **as ourselves**”. In today's Gospel passage from John, he **raises the bar significantly**. Jesus disciples are not only to love **others** as they love **themselves**, but to love others “**as Jesus has loved them**”... as Jesus loves **us**. That's a whole different level of love, summarized by something else Jesus said in the Gospel of John:

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (Jn 15:13)

Now, we're getting into "Saint territory"—*loving as Jesus loved*. Here it's good to consider what others have said—just this past week, in fact—about this kind of sacrificial love:

“He died for us...now it's time for us to live for him.”

“If I had to describe him in a certain way: Love for anybody he met...There's risk in love...and [he] knew those risks.”

“The best way to honor and celebrate [him] is to be more like him.”

<https://www.thedenverchannel.com/news/local-news/remembering-kendrick-castillo-memorial-service-underway-for-stem-school-shooting-hero>

Now, there's a catch to these quotes.

They're not about **Jesus**.

They're about the young man—**Kendrick Castillo**—who rushed a school shooter in Colorado recently in order to save his classmates, and who died from the gunfire as he helped successfully subdue to killer.

Reading stories of this remarkable 18-year old—how he allowed his Catholic faith to permeate his life, and especially his interactions with others—I felt “**great ardor and affection**” for him, not to mention an **inspiration** to be more **like** him. His father said that Kendrick had once told him that if someone ever brought a gun to school and started shooting, he would not hesitate to do whatever he could to stop the shooter. He walked the talk...not only **his own** talk...but **Jesus'** talk:

Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. (Jn 15:13)

At his funeral, the Auxiliary Bishop of Denver, Jorge Rodriguez called Kendrick:

“...a holy young man...A young man who was a good disciple of Jesus Christ... Kendrick gave everything he is, and everything he had—family, a future, a degree, his life—so other young men and women could go back to their families, have a future, graduate and live.”

<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/the-young-man-with-a-big-good-heart-stem-hero-kendrick-castillo-laid-to-rest-95223>

Pondering the Gospel passage for today's Mass while reading about Kendrick—it finally occurred to me! It's not that we don't love Jesus because we cry more readily

reading articles about people like Kendrick Castillo than we do while contemplating Christ on the Cross.

Seeing this disconnect in ourselves is actually a sign of this same Jesus' **love** for us; and his **understanding** of our limitations to grasp the immensity of **his own sacrifice**—not to save our lives from a crazed school shooter, but rather, to save our souls from **slavery to sin** and the **eternal separation from all love**—which we call “**Hell**”—so he can lead us to **the place in his Father's House in heaven that he has prepared for each one of us from the foundation of the world** (cf. Jn 14:2-3).

Jesus knows how difficult it is for us to grasp how he, a human being, is also God—not half human and half God—**100% human and 100% God at the same time**. This is not something we could ever have concluded on our own, but something that had to be **revealed** to us...by God.

Until recently, I struggled to reconcile the full reality of Jesus' suffering with the fact that he is God. In the back of my mind, I would always think that his suffering was somehow **minimized** by his divinity—that the fact that he is God somehow made his pain **less real** that it would be for you or me hanging on the Cross. I felt like I was betraying Jesus for thinking like this and would never talk to Jesus directly about my doubts.

But then I realized—not all that long ago—that Jesus **knew** that I struggled with such doubts. He understood these doubts better than I did because he understands me better than I understand myself. And he still loves me—not **in spite of** such defects—but precisely **because of** such defects. He knew—he knows—that these kinds of doubts about his love and his sacrifice are in me precisely because I—because we—are broken human beings as a result of **Original Sin**.

So, he brings us along gradually, at the **proper pace** for each one of us. And he uses situations like this tragic school shooting in Colorado to teach us. He doesn't **engineer** the tragedies. Fallen humanity—corrupted by sin—is the catalyst for these incidents. But he will **make use of** even the greatest evil to bring about—and to help us see—an even greater good.

Original Sin is the easiest thing in the world to demonstrate. A couple of years ago, I had several conversations with a self-proclaimed atheist. In one of those conversations, I said, “**There's something wrong with us.**” He said that that particular

statement rocked his world, because he knew it was true. When he described the interior battle of good and evil that he recognized **in his own life**, he sounded just like **St. Paul in Romans, Chapter 7**. In fact, when I read Romans, Chapter 7 to him in a later conversation, it was like reading something back to him that he had written. If you don't know what Romans Chapter 7 says, go read it today after Mass!

But this conversation with an atheist didn't end with the bad news—Original Sin. We started discussing how, when we see people doing remarkable good—and Mother Teresa is always a go-to example of this, even for atheists—when we see ridiculous good being done in such a dark world as ours—something inside us tells us, “**That's how it's supposed to be.**” And here, in these little insights, is where Jesus begins to **pull back the veil** and to reveal that **he**—and his **Father**...and his **Holy Spirit**—are the engineers of this great, ridiculous good.

As we grasp the contrast between the “**something is wrong with us**” when we see great evil...and the “**that's how it's supposed to be**” when we see great good...then Jesus has succeeded in bringing us to a place where we can **better appreciate** his sacrifice for us.

Sometimes he uses incidents and individuals like **school shootings** and **Kendrick Castillos** as starting points to lead us to deeper contemplation of *his* love. With our hearts a little bit softened by the heroic love of an 18-year old high school student, we're in a better position to then consider facts such as these:

If Jesus—being God—could minimize his pain on the Cross (which he did not do)—then couldn't Jesus—being God—also choose to **forgo any divine protection from pain** and **enter more fully and more completely** into human pain and suffering than even we are capable of experiencing? Here's a quick Scriptural example from **Mark's Gospel**:

They gave him wine drugged with myrrh, but he did not take it. (Mark 15:23)

Myrrh was a painkiller that Jesus was offered right before he was nailed to the Cross. He refused it...so as **to voluntarily enter fully into the pain of his Passion**—so we would not have to. Jesus gave us all the **benefit** of his Passion—eternal life—but he took the **full brunt** of the pain—we could say, spiritually speaking, that he “**took the bullet**” for us.

But Jesus didn't **just** "take the bullet"—spiritually speaking—for his **friends** either. When the soldiers were beating, mocking, scourging and spitting on Jesus, **they were beating, mocking, scourging and spitting upon their Creator!** He endured this treatment from the soldiers in order to save *them too*. If greater love does not exist for human beings than "**laying down one's life for one's friends**", then we must realize that Jesus still took on more than he asks of us in today's Gospel because he laid down his life for his **enemies** too.

And then there's the **Eucharist**. Jesus hides his royal beauty and power under the appearance of bread—and then entrusts himself into the **unworthy hands of sinners like me** in order to make him **present** to you...and to give him to you as your **food**.

When we start to grasp these facts, then we have started down the same path that Saints like Martin de Porres followed.

Let's finish, then, with a consideration of **the need to ask God for what we lack**. When the disciples recognized deficiencies in themselves, they asked Jesus to supply them with what they needed. Here are two examples from the **Gospel of Luke**:

[Jesus] was praying in a certain place, and when he ceased, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." (Lk 11:1)

And six chapters later:

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" (Lk 17:5)

Like the Apostles, we have to ask for what we lack. And this means asking for things like the grace to understand the magnitude of Jesus's self-sacrifice and the grace to imitate it.

We don't make ourselves Saints.

Jesus does.

But there are some aspects of holiness that will only come to us if we ask for them.

So...what are we waiting for?