

Mass for the Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Honoring Respect Life Essay Contest Winners
Cathedral of St. Mary of the Assumption
February 9, 2020

Most Rev. Salvatore J. Cordileone

I'm very happy to welcome to our cathedral today, the students who are participating in the Respect Life Essay Contest. This is something we do in the archdiocese every year at this time. Students from throughout the archdiocese write essays about the importance of respect for the dignity of human life in all of its stages, all of its conditions from conception to natural death. I'm very happy and pleased to welcome you here today and I look forward to joining you at the reception afterwards where I can recognize you in a more personal way.

These students are giving one example of many ways we can live what our Lord is calling us to in the gospel for today's Mass. He uses these images for His disciples. One image he uses here is that of salt. Now, salt might seem strange to us nowadays as an image for discipleship because it's such an ordinary commodity, something almost nondescript. It's an everyday item. But not so much so in the ancient world. One thing we can understand or where it makes some sense to us as was the case in ancient times, is how salt gives food flavor. And we know that - food without salt, it's flat. There's no flavor to it, so there's no enjoyment to the food. Salt changes all of that.

But in addition to that, in the ancient world, salt was used for preserving food. So remember, there's no refrigeration. The only way they had to preserve food was using salt for that. So salt had a very high value; in fact, so much so that in ancient Rome, when the Empire was short on cash, they would pay the soldiers with salt. In fact, this is where we get our word in English 'salary' from.

Another example, you know the old saying, "All roads lead to Rome," and in ancient Rome there were roads that led from all directions into the city. To this day, the road that comes from the Northeast into the city, it's still called the Via Solaria because that was the road on which they would bring the supply of salt into the city of Rome.

So we see how important, what a value salt had in the ancient world. And so this image really resonated with the people then, as it still does for us today if we consider this aspect of salt giving food its flavor. In the ancient Jewish world, salt was also used as an image. For them it was an image of the law, the Torah, the Mosaic Law, God's law that gave flavor to life and preserved our life, to live life well.

Now, it might seem odd to us, to use an image such as that for law, giving flavor to life and preserving as well, because law to us, I think, seems something more of a burden or of a constraint even if necessarily so, a body of rules and regulations. But that's not what law means in the biblical mind. In the biblical mind, law means revelation. It is God's teaching; God communicating to us His truth.

We see our Lord teaching about discipleship here in the gospel at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. And the church at this time has different excerpts of these three chapters from St. Matthew's gospel, which is sort of a compendium of his moral teaching. It begins with the beatitudes. Remember the scene, he goes up on the mountain to begin this teaching of the Sermon on the Mount and begins with the list of the beatitudes. That actually would have been the gospel reading for last week, for the Fourth Sunday of ordinary time, except that last week was February 2nd, so the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple took precedent over the regular Sunday Mass of ordinary time.

But it's within this context of our Lord teaching this sort of compendium of His moral teaching when He's giving this teaching on discipleship. The point is that to be a true disciple of His, it's not a matter of external observance. That by itself means nothing. What really matters is adherence to God's truth, so law in this deeper sense as the Bible would understand it. Not just observing rules and regulations in an external sense, but putting the heart into it, observing the true spirit of the law, putting that into practice and especially with regard to care for the poor.

And on this, our Lord was in keeping with the prophets who came before him in the Old Testament times, who are constantly calling the people back to fidelity to the covenant by living the true spirit of the law and caring for the poor. We hear this message again today in our first reading from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah here, within this context, he's speaking about true fasting. True fasting means caring for the poor, as he said, sharing your bread with the hungry, caring for those in need. We will certainly be hearing more about this soon, as Lent is soon upon us.

St. Paul too learned a similar lesson, not exactly the same thing, but a similar lesson in his own experience. When he tells the Christians in Corinth, in our second reading, "My message and my proclamation, were not with the persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of Spirit and power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God," he is speaking out of an experience he had just had. We know from the Acts of the Apostles that St. Paul went to Corinth after he was in Athens. In Athens, he had this experience where he went to what they called the Areopagus. This was kind of like the public forum where philosophers would meet - of course, Greeks were the great philosophers in the ancient world. And they would debate and discuss what these lofty philosophical ideas.

So St. Paul being very well educated, he was a Jew, a very observant Jew, but also a Roman citizen, so well educated in the ways of the Romans and the Greeks. So he thought he would go there and try to communicate the truth of the gospel in philosophical terms and the way that these Greeks could understand. But surprisingly enough, he did not have much success. He did acquire a few souls for Christ, a few came over and became followers, but most did not. They especially were not convinced by a savior who was crucified. They could not accept that. So he found that using that kind of language didn't work, and that's what he's referring to here when he says human wisdom, he's referring to the philosophy of the Greeks. And that is why he tells them "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." It is the witness of a pure, simple Holy, life that proclaims God's truth far more than eloquent speeches and sophisticated arguments.

We have much to learn from his experience, even in our own day. We speak a lot about evangelization these days and we're trying to figure out, how can we effectively communicate it. We do need good arguments, but that falls far short, especially by itself. It's the witness of a Holy life. It's engaging in an authentic human relationship. It has to come out of love. I often think of the line of the great Archbishop Fulton Sheen that - speak about someone who was able to win converts for Christ, he was a master at it. And speak about someone who was a great orator and could give eloquent speeches. But even he, the great orator Fulton Sheen, used to say, "When an argument loses salt, it has to come out of an authentic human relationship, out of love."

This, I think, has a special application to the event our cathedral is hosting today with the Respect Life Essay contest and the recognitions we'll give to these students after Mass. It has a special application when it comes to defending the equal dignity of life in the womb. Yes, we have the arguments, we have science on our side, we especially have the sonograms on our side. But it seems that that alone doesn't get us across the finish line. It's really important, but what really matters is the inner conviction of the justice of this cause, the inner conviction of the rightness of this and the urgency of it, coupled with compassion for those who are suffering because of it, who have been victimized, especially by the abortion industry, and also compassion for those who disagree with us on this issue, recognizing about how misled they are and reaching out in compassion again out of an authentic relationship.

This brings us to the other image our Lord uses in the gospel today for his disciples, that of light. "You are the light of the world... Your light must shine before others that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father." The light means we must portray this light. We must manifest this light. We must speak out. We must be public about this. So manifestations for the goodness of life, such as the Walk for Life - we hosted it here yet again two weeks ago as we do every year here in our Archdiocese. To speak out when the need arises, not to remain silent, not to cower in fear. There are those who would try to intimidate us into silence about this, but not cowering to that, but rather speaking out with firmness of conviction and in charity, and also what we are about today. Yes, communicating this truth in writing as well, as the students have done who participated in the essay contest.

But again, we must always remember, none of this will work without doing the inner work, purity of heart and purity of motivation, single-hearted love of God and wanting to please him, living according to his teaching, according to his law in the biblical sense, according to his revelation and his love for us. This is the life of beatitude, beatitude which means true happiness, not fleeting pleasures, but the true deep, abiding and lasting happiness that only God can give.

The true disciple is the one who understands that living according to God's way is what gives zest and flavor to life. It is what preserves us for life eternal, and that the world's way is flat, insipid and leads to doom.

I want to take this opportunity, then, to thank you, the students who have participated in the essay contest, and to congratulate you for doing so. You are all winners in God's eyes. And let us all take to heart the teaching we receive from St. Paul in our second reading today, his First Letter to the Corinthians. Let us all resolve to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified, so that our faith will rest not on human wisdom, but on the spirit and power of God.