

**Feast of the Most Holy Trinity
30 May 2021**

“Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”

Today we celebrate the feast of the Most Holy Trinity. The Trinity is the central mystery of Christianity because it is God’s revelation of his innermost being, his innermost identity. Like a lover revealing his most intimate secret to his beloved, Jesus Christ revealed to us that the one God is three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit united in an eternal gift of love, a gift of self to one another. Just as mysterious, and just as remarkable, we are invited to share in that great circle of Trinitarian love for all eternity—to enter permanently into that community, that family, of divine persons. It is the reason we were created; it is our destiny, but not one which we can achieve on our own. Rather, because of the sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ, that destiny is available to us and is within our reach.

How do we take advantage of this amazing invitation, this once-for-a-lifetime offer? Today’s readings provide an answer. As I’m sure all of you recall, our Sunday Old Testament and Gospel readings are usually linked by a common theme. Today, *obeying commandments* is the one theme found in both the passages from Matthew’s Gospel and Deuteronomy. In the Gospel, just before Jesus ascends, he instructs his disciples to baptize all nations, using the Trinitarian formula, “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Jesus then adds that they must teach everyone “to observe all that I have commanded you.” In our Old Testament passage, Moses instructs the Israelites, “You must keep [God’s] statutes and commandments.”

So, with the theme of obedience linking our readings today, we might ask, “What *are* the commandments which we must observe?” In other words, what must we do to accept the Lord’s invitation into the eternal current of divine Trinitarian love? Throughout the recent Easter season, we read through John’s first letter, and John makes God’s central commandment crystal clear: “His commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us.” So, belief and love are the joint commitments by which we acknowledge and accept God’s invitation to eternal life. St. Paul recognized this as well when he wrote to the Galatians, “only faith working through love” “counts for anything.”

John and Paul followed Jesus himself who summarized all of the Law and the Prophets with the two great commandments: we must love God with our whole mind, heart, soul, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves. We show that love *for* God *by* loving our neighbors, families, friends, fellow parishioners, and even our enemies. But what does that mean? What does it mean to *love* others?

The answer to that question is not nearly as straightforward as we might think. In our culture today, there are some very serious misunderstandings about what it means to share God’s love. Three of these mistaken perceptions are particularly dangerous. Taken together, they dilute the true meaning and power of divine love, because all three implicitly deny that we humans are in need of radical healing—healing that only our Trinitarian God can provide.

The first of these myths is that Christian love means being nice to others—being agreeable and accommodating, being pleasant and polite. Of course, you might ask, “Why do you call this a myth? Wasn’t Jesus

nice?” Well, no, he wasn’t. He regularly used harsh and occasionally insulting language, he often provoked controversy intentionally, and he spoke repeatedly about the frightening consequences of unrepented sins. As Father Mike Schmidt noted in the Catholic Herald recently, nobody in the Bible talks about hell more than Jesus does. Jesus *was* merciful and compassionate, and he regularly exercised his divine power in remarkable ways to heal people physically and spiritually—but all of that is much more than, and very different from, being nice. In fact, to emphasize this point, a theology professor from Marquette University recently published a book titled, “God is not Nice”!

A second myth is that Jesus was a model of tolerance, and thus tolerance must be a quintessential Christian virtue—except that’s not what Scripture says. For example, Isaiah does not include tolerance among the seven gifts of the Spirit, and Paul does not include it among the fruits of the Spirit. In Jesus’ single greatest moral exhortation—the Sermon on the Mount—there is no mention of tolerance. Jesus *does* admonish us not to judge others—which means that we should not assume that we know the state of somebody else’s soul—but that is a far cry from tolerating sin in ourselves or others. Jesus was, in fact, emphatically intolerant—of sin, hypocrisy, and the spiritually obtuse. He didn’t tolerate his disciples’ ignorance or the Pharisees’ obstinance. In fact, Jesus was decidedly intolerant of these things *because* he loves us so much. He came to set us free, so he won’t tolerate anybody or anything which might enslave us.

The third myth is that “acceptance” is a Christian virtue. Many contemporary Christians suggest that we shouldn’t admonish sinners because, after all, Jesus hung out with sinners and accepted them as

they were. Well, again, no, he didn't, if by "accepting" we mean ignoring their sins and not trying to change them. On the contrary, his entire mission was about changing people, about transforming them. He didn't "hang out" with sinners; he ministered to them because, as He said, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick." Jesus *encountered* sinners where they were; he *met* them in the darkest depths of their sins, but he did not *accept* them there, for he loved them too much to just leave them trapped in their sins.

Just look at the Lord's track record. After the miraculous catch of fish, Simon pleaded with Jesus, "Leave me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." To his credit, Peter recognized his sinfulness, but Jesus refused to accept Peter's request; he refused to leave him alone wallowing in his sins. Instead, he called him out of his old life and into a new one when he said, "Do not be afraid. From now on you will be catching men." When he passed Matthew at his tax station, Jesus didn't wave and say, "Keep up the good work!" Rather, He refused to accept Matthew as the sinful man that he was by calling him to something greater, to something better. When the blood-thirsty crowd dropped their stones and left the adulteress alone with Jesus, he didn't casually accept her adultery and concede that it was OK to keep on doing what she was doing. Instead, he met her with true mercy and compassion by simultaneously acknowledging her sin and encouraging her to leave her sinful life behind: "Go, and sin no more." So, *we* might accept spiritual decay or spiritual mediocrity in ourselves or others, but the Good Shepherd does not. He seeks out the lost to transform them; he rescues us from our sins and leads us home.

So, if love does not consist of niceness, tolerance, and acceptance, what is it? First, God’s love, the love we are called to share, is not a feeling or emotion. It is a decision, an act of the will. To love means to will the good of another—wanting what’s best for someone and then doing something about it. In the ultimate sense, what *is* “best” for another person? Whatever draws them toward, rather than away from, their God-given destiny, which is to dwell with the Trinity forever.

So, what does that mean in practice? We are called to share God’s mercy and because we are both body and spirit, what is best for someone at any given moment, the mercy they most need, might involve either body or spirit. That’s why our Catholic Church teaches us to perform both corporal—or bodily—works of mercy and spiritual works of mercy. The seven corporal works of mercy are to feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked and shelter the homeless, visit the sick and imprisoned, and bury the dead. Perhaps of even greater ultimate significance are the seven spiritual works of mercy: to counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish the sinner, comfort the afflicted, forgive offenses, bear wrongs patiently, and pray for both the living and the dead.

Obedying Jesus’ commandments, sharing the love of the Trinity through these works of mercy, can be extraordinarily demanding—far more difficult than simply being nice or accepting people as they are and leaving it at that. True mercy takes energy, time, creativity, commitment, an act of will—a decision to intercede in a holy and gracious way in the lives of other people. Now, given one’s health, family situation, or financial status, supporting others through the corporal works of mercy might be very challenging, so we must

prayerfully discern how God wishes us to share his mercy with those in physical need despite our own limitations. Sharing spiritual works of mercy can be even more taxing—admonishing a sinner, but doing it with mercy, humility, and justice; bearing injustices patiently without complaint or bitterness; forgiving offenses by, and praying for, those who have wounded us, those we dislike or even despise.

Through it all, however, we are not alone. As we struggle to obey the divine commandments, the Father and Son stand side by side, ever ready to pour their loving Spirit into us. We don't need to conjure up mercy and compassion out of the barren dryness of our own hearts. We simply need to get our egos out of the way, so that the Lord can give us new hearts, alive and infused with Trinitarian love. We are commanded to love, and we do that not by clinging to the love God pours out on us, but by giving it away—by passing it on to others, particularly those with broken bodies and wounded souls.

By obeying the Lord's commands, by loving others, we enter into the love of the Triune God. Thus, love is both the path and the goal, the journey and the destiny. As St. Augustine wrote over 1500 years ago, "Love is itself the fulfillment of all our works. There is the goal; that is why we run: we run toward it and once we reach it, in it we shall find rest." So, may the Holy Trinity—"Father of majesty unbounded, the true and only Son, worthy of all worship, and the Holy Spirit, advocate and guide"—inspire all of you to love God with everything you have, everything you are, by sharing the light and richness of his mercy with a dark and impoverished world.