

Fr. Curtis Miller

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Homily for the 5th Sunday of Easter

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Jesus said these comforting words at the Last Supper. They probably sound familiar if you’ve been following the readings for Mass during the past couple days, or if you’ve been to a funeral recently (when this passage is very often read). These words are comforting, but they can also be confounding, especially when we we’re going through a particularly challenging time when our hearts are very troubled. Maybe your heart has been feeling troubled a lot lately with the current crisis. It seems too easy for Jesus to tell us to not be troubled; after all, He’s the Son of God, and we’re not. Yet it’s important for us to remember that Jesus said these words to us when His heart was most troubled, on the night before He knew that He would be betrayed and suffer death on the cross. Jesus knew what it was to have a troubled heart and He can relate to the troubles that you and I go through every day. Yet He still tells us to not let our hearts be troubled. Jesus earned the right to say that because He laid His life down for us on the cross in an act of perfect, self-sacrificial love. Jesus embraced the cross not as something troubling, but as a way to reveal His complete love for us.

When we are confronted with challenges or trials in life, we can chose to either let our hearts to be troubled, or to see these moments as opportunities to place our trust in Jesus, and to follow Him, by imitating His self-sacrificial love. One of the most powerful examples of someone doing just that comes from the life of St. Damien of Molokai. (Today, May 10, is his feast day, but when these feasts fall on a Sunday, they get superseded by the celebration of the regular Sunday Mass). St. Damien was a Belgian priest in the late Nineteenth Century who volunteered to serve as a missionary in Hawaii, serving the poor lepers in the colony on the island of Molokai. When someone first showed signs of leprosy, people were so fearful of catching this terrible disease that they were completely shunned from society, abandoned by their family and friends, and sent to a leper colony. It was a death sentence. There was only one way to leave a leper colony. All that awaited these poor victims was the horror of watching their own bodies slowly fall apart around them. This place of suffering was hell on earth. Yet just as Christ, after His death on the cross, chose to go down into hell to save the souls there, so St. Damien chose to go to Molokai to show love and compassion for these suffering lepers. He knew the high risk he ran of contracting leprosy himself, but he still went and remained among them. He preached to them, by word and action, the love of Christ, bandaging their wounds, building homes for them, and praying with them. St. Damien helped bring Christ’s light into that dark place. (He was later joined in his mission by some Franciscan sisters, led by St. Marianne Cope, and by a lay brother, Joseph Dutton, from Vermont). When St. Damien preached at Mass, he addressed his congregation as “you lepers,” until one day the people were surprised to hear him say “*we* lepers.” St. Damien had so identified himself with the lepers that he no longer shared their burdens just by way of compassion; he shared in their disease himself. In his remaining time, he

stayed just as devoted and hardworking as he had been before, as long as his strength held out. He died in 1889.

To take an example that reaches even closer to our hearts, today, Mother's Day, gives us an opportunity to thank our own mothers for the self-sacrificial love that they've shown for us. I am blessed to have a wonderful mother (and I'm not just saying that because I know she's probably watching this Mass). She and my father made many sacrifices to raise my sister and me. If I have any good qualities, I own them to my mother and father. Our mothers make a million sacrifices of themselves to care for us, their children. Mothers work day in and day out, even when they are sick, or tired, or depressed, often without receiving thanks. We should take time to thank them, and if they have gone home to God, to pray for them with gratitude.

Sadly, I know that not everyone has had such a good relationship with their own mothers. Even as imperfect as these women might have been, still they gave you life, and gave something to you. If they struggled, then that's all the more reason to pray for them. And perhaps God sent another woman into your life, a grandmother, aunt, godmother, or a spiritual mother who showed you love. And all of us are blessed to have Mary, the mother of Jesus, as our mother, too. She is attentive to our needs, as she was when she noticed the couple running out of wine at the wedding feast at Cana, and asked her Son to provide for their need. Mary asks Jesus to provide for our needs, too, and her motherly advice to us is the same as she said to the stewards at Cana: "Do whatever He tells you."

Our mothers are models of self-sacrificial love, showing us by example what God's love looks like. When we see the ways that our mothers have faced sorrows and challenges, and have still responded with love, we are taught how to not let our hearts be troubled, and instead to trust in God, and continue to pour forth His love.