Tonight we are going to discuss the Great Commandment. These two verses, in my opinion, express the very essence of Christianity. They capture our relationship with God the Father and with one another. They are the basis, in part, of Catholic Morality and are the backbone of Catholic Social Teachings (CST). But most importantly they underscore the message and being of the Holy Trinity, which is LOVE.

Where better to begin than with the scripture:

Matthew 22:34-40

“When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them [a scholar of the law] tested him by asking, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

[Jesus] said to him, "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments."

Jesus was presented with the question, which of the 613 Jewish laws was the greatest. This was a topic commonly proposed to Jewish teachers in the 1st century. It was a major bone of contention and divided Jewish leaders into rival camps. As was typical of the interactions between the Pharisees and Jesus, it was intended to be a trap.

The question actually posed a request for a summary of the law or even deeper its center or core.

Jesus' answer combines two quotations from the Torah:

- Deuteronomy 6:5 “Therefore, you shall love the LORD, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.”
- Leviticus 19:18 ... “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

To the Jewish religious leaders: Jesus’ answer underscores his orthodoxy as a Jewish teacher.

To his followers, he presented a new inner disposition and a way of life. What we would call Christian Love.

The quotation from Deuteronomy 6:5 is part of the Shema Yisrael, which is considered one of the holiest of Jewish prayers.
It is an affirmation of Judaism and a declaration of faith in one God.

The nouns (heart, soul, mind) refer not to various parts of the person but are a way to stress that the whole person should love God with all available resources. The rabbis stressed this part of the commandment where:
- Heart meant will
- Soul meant life
- Strength meant wealth

In other words, we should love God as he loves us...unconditionally.


In John we find the New Commandment that is similar to the Great Commandment:

“Before his death on the cross, Jesus gave his disciples a new commandment: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (John 13:34).

The two commandments are connected to each other by the word 'love' and their juxtaposition by Jesus was an original theological concept.

The “Love of God” is not an emotional feeling but faithfulness to the covenant, a matter of doing God’s will.

The three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) present the Great Commandment somewhat differently.

In Matthew and Mark, we see Jesus responding to questioning by a Pharisaic scribe. This is set in the context of Jesus being tested by the Pharisees in an attempt to trip him up.

In the Gospel of Luke, the Great Commandment is set in the context of a discussion on discipleship. Jesus is asked by the scribe, how to achieve eternal life. Jesus asks the scribe how he interpreted the law. The scribe responds with the great commandment.

Jesus is then asked by the scribe, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus answers with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The Parable of the Good Samaritan is a powerful lesson about mercy towards those in need and posed question about the conduct of the religious leadership of God's chosen people.

As stated previously both of the verses quoted by Jesus were well known in Jewish circles. The distinctive feature of the reply given by Jesus is that he connected the two. There is no evidence for the combination of the two texts by any teacher prior to Jesus.
- Love to God finds its only fulfillment in love of neighbor
- Love to one's neighbor must be rooted in the Love of God
The two are inseparable.

**Karl Rahner** (20th century Jesuit theologian): “A person’s love for his neighbor is evidence of his love for God. More to the point, the Scriptures teach that God regards the love shown to a neighbor as love shown to Him. Therefore, in a real sense, the loving relationship between a person and his neighbor indicates a loving relationship between that person and God.”

…Love of neighbor is given in St Matthew as the only explicit standard by which man will be judged (Mt 25:34-46):

*Then the king will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' These acts of love are in fact evidence of God’s activity in the person.

- The Great Commandment is a summary and fulfillment of the 10 Commandments. The first three commandments deal with the Love of God and the remaining 7 with the Love of Neighbor.

You shall have no other Gods before me
You shall not take the Lord's name in vain
Keep the Sabbath Holy

Honor your father and mother
You shall not kill
You shall not commit adultery
You shall not steal
You shall not bear false witness
You shall not covet your neighbor's wife
You shall not covet your neighbor's possessions

- The Great Commandment is considered a formal moral imperative. It is a command not a suggestion or request. The statement is made with authority, not as just a teacher but as Lord.

The emphasis on the inseparability of love of God and love of neighbor is the key to making love the correct interpretation of the law and the prophets.

This love of neighbor requires responding to another out of being caught up in the feelings and the meaning of what the other person is experiencing.
This not a romantic love but a caring love. We must care about the wellbeing and good of others.

To Jesus the distinctive characteristic of this love is the mutual self-giving which breaks down relationships marked by the superiority/inferiority structure.

Jesus establishes a relationship built on equality. He commands us to love one another as he loves us,
that is, with the love that has no room for one to be superior or better than another.

The spiritual life of the Christian is really a life that is lived in ways pleasing to God under the Great Commandment. How we treat one another really matters. It touches not only the neighbor but reaches deep into the larger society.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI declares, “Love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind is as essential to [the Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel. The church cannot neglect the service of charity anymore than she can neglect the sacraments and the word”.

This emphatic call is an extension of the great commandment to love our neighbor. In fact, Pope Emeritus Benedict insists: “Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: In the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God.”

Our neighbor is anyone who needs our help and whom we can help. The pope states that today loving our neighbor has global dimensions since we see and respond to people’s struggles and needs almost instantaneously.

With global communication satellites and the internet we have real time views of disasters as they unfold anywhere on our planet. This global worldview is at the core of Catholic Social Teachings that centers on our love for our fellow man. This is a global issue and should not be limited by boundaries of any type.

- The Great Commandment along with the 10 Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount and specifically the Beatitudes forms the foundation of Catholic Christian Morality. Christian morality places Christ in the center of our moral decision-making. Our conscience should be formed based on the teachings and life of Christ.

This sometimes puts us at odds with our secular society but Jesus warns us that this would happen.

As the Parable of the Good Samaritan teaches we have choices and each of us must assume responsibility for our actions. The old WWJD evolves into what would Jesus want me to do.

I will end where I began that the two verses of the Great Commandment reflect the essence of Christianity.

It is a moral imperative of Christian behavior.

It is the blueprint of Christian love.
The two commandments are inseparable.

You cannot love God without loving your neighbor.
And you cannot love your neighbor without the Grace and Love of God.