

**Homily for the Mass of the Easter Vigil  
April 18, 2014**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception  
Springfield**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

During the season of Lent, which ended on Holy Thursday with the beginning of the Paschal Triduum, many people had made penitential sacrifices such as giving up candy, dessert, alcohol, or other pleasures. Some people did proactive Lenten practices, for example, going to daily Mass, reading the Bible, saying the Rosary, making charitable gifts or serving at a soup kitchen or food pantry. Others did both, giving things up as well as adding some ascetical activity.

One practice that I did not hear anyone say was that their Lenten resolution was to try to love their enemies. It seems rather odd and even disappointing that this is not a common aspiration, either as a Lenten practice or as a New Year's resolution, given that Jesus made love of enemies one of the central elements of His teaching.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:43-44). This instruction from our Lord was very much on my mind in my prayer and meditation during this Lenten season. There are a number of conflict situations that have been the subject of my prayer in recent weeks, including spouses who do not love one another, children and their parents in tension with each other, employers and employees who cannot cooperate in a common enterprise, politicians who relentlessly and viciously attack their opponents, parishioners who cannot get along with their parish priests, and even people who write hate letters to me.

Perhaps “love your enemies” is not more commonly identified as a personal goal because most people don’t like to admit that they have enemies. To speak of “enemies” seems to apply to the military at war, not to everyday mundane conflicts. Enemies? No, not me! We like to think of ourselves as capable of getting along with everyone. If someone can’t get along with us, that must be the other person’s fault. But Jesus wasn’t just talking to aggressors; notice that our Lord was also talking to those who are persecuted: “I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,

bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27-28).

Saint Paul continued this theme in his instructions on the duties of Christians: “Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them” (Romans 12:14).

When we receive the Sacrament of Penance, do we ever confess not loving our enemies? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* includes love of enemies as an obligation of the fifth commandment (see paragraph 2262). Although the fifth commandment says simply, “You shall not kill” (Exodus 20:13; Deut. 5:17), Jesus amplified this as a positive duty, saying, “I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (Matthew 5:22).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also says, “Deliberate hatred is contrary to charity. Hatred of the neighbor is a sin when one deliberately wishes him evil. Hatred of the neighbor is a grave sin when one deliberately desires him grave harm” (par. 2303).

Jesus even went so far as to make reconciliation between enemies a prerequisite for divine worship, saying, “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you,

leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23-24).

Another reason why love of enemies is such a challenge is that our culture has come to understand “love” as a warm feeling toward another person, and it is hard to feel emotional warmth toward an enemy. But Christian love must be understood not just in its natural sense as an instinctual human emotion or sentimental feeling, but also in its supernatural sense as a willed, voluntary and conscious act that desires to perpetuate itself forever beyond the limits of time and survives intact even after death.

After I conclude this homily, we will have the Baptism and Confirmation of two adult catechumens. Baptism always has the meaning of dying to a life of sin and beginning a new life in the grace of the Holy Trinity, but that profound significance of a life-changing conversion is more readily apparent in the baptism of adults. Our celebration of Christ’s victory over death and the promise of eternal life does not focus only on our faith in what happens when the life of our physical bodies comes to an end, but also on the new life of grace that we receive here on earth when we die to sin and put on the life of Christ. As Saint Paul wrote in his Letter

to the Romans, which we heard as our Epistle this evening, "We know that Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him. As to his death, he died to sin once and for all; as to his life, he lives for God. Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:10-11).

As we celebrate Christ's resurrection, may Our Lord's victory over sin and death free us from the shackles of hatred and open us to share, even with our enemies, the endless stream of His merciful love. In this Eucharist, we give thanks to God for the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ. Through His death and Resurrection, He has redeemed us and has anointed us to be His beloved sons and daughters for all eternity.

May God give us this grace. Amen.