

**Encuentro Mass  
St. Boniface, Edwardsville**

**October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2021  
31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B**

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My dear brother priests and deacons, beloved consecrated [men and] women religious, and my lay brothers and sisters in Christ, it is *good* to be here as we join to celebrate Our Lord's resurrection this Sunday, and to have our yearly *Encuentro* Mass.

I enjoy looking into the etymology of words and we have as fodder for our reflection this afternoon the purpose of this Mass: "encounter"/"encuentro". In both English and Spanish "encounter" has at its root the two Latin words "*in*" and "*contra*." "In" of course means in / inside / into - it has the idea of two things that are linked together, almost to the point of merging, or at least a close union of some sort. "Contra", on the other hand, means against / opposite / contrary / counter to - and has the idea of something going up against, or being opposed in some way to something else. "En-counter" then is a bit of a paradox in itself. It is word that speaks of togetherness, *and* contrariness; of something that is both within, *and* opposed to, something else.

But isn't the Christian life sometimes like that? Earlier today I had the chance to speak to you about the Lord's call to follow Him as disciples, to commit our lives to Jesus not as merely admirers, so to speak, but true followers. Yet, we do sometimes find it difficult to give ourselves whole-

heartedly to Jesus! Paradoxically, we sometimes feel that we are “*in*” Christ – we are friends with Him, and feel close to Him – but other times our hearts tilt away, “*contra*,” from Him – we find His words difficult, His call hard, and feel His presence is far from us. Do not fear this paradox! St. Paul spoke of this to the Romans in his famous words: “*I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing*” (Romans 7:18-19).

This is, it seems to me, the precise dilemma that the scribe brings to Jesus in our Gospel today: “*Which is the first of all the commandments?*” (Mark 12:28). It was a famous conundrum to propose to any rabbi, since all the many commands of the Law were sacred, and so it put any rabbi in a bit of a bind to pick out one of them above the others. Still different schools of Jewish thought, led by various rabbis, chose different commandments as the chief of all of them – the one that sets the stage, or offers a key or foundation for all the others – and so, this scribe was both placing the puzzle before Our Lord, and also desiring to hear what He would say.

“Why does this scribe ask this question, though?” Jesus ends up praising the man for his candor and understanding, so it seems he came with an open disposition and perhaps for that reason can be an example to us. But it seems to me that this question was so central precisely the conundrum we found in that word *en-counter*, and which we discover running through our own hearts: it is not easy to keep all the commandments. If we’re struggling to stay faithful, where should we start? Where should we focus our efforts?

Jesus' answer was no surprise to the scribe. The Lord turns to one of the most precious of the laws of the whole Old Testament, the *shema* prayer of Deuteronomy 6:4 that we also heard today in our first reading, "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*" This is the prayer that devout Jews would pray every day, carefully teaching it to their children, and relying on in times of persecution or temptation to stay faithful to the One True God. As Deuteronomy explicates, it is in fidelity to this creed that the Israelites, and us their spiritual descendants, will find ourselves blessed by God.

Of course, Jesus combines this obvious "greatest law" with another, effortlessly citing Leviticus 19:18: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" This teaching is somewhat novel. Jesus is not content with one law, but speaks of this second one, of the requirement to love our neighbor, as an essential corollary to the first. So much has and could be said about this answer, much of which fits perfectly with the conversation we had earlier today on discipleship and the four pillars of hospitality, prayer, formation, and service, by which our diocese is committed to being disciples of Christ. Those pillars are four fundamental ways that we put into action Christ's double-commission to love God first, and love our neighbor as ourselves. As Christians and disciples, we can *always* grow in love, and Our Lord's words should always remain before our minds as the summation of His call above all others.

Today, though, with the paradox brought up by that word "encounter" on my mind, I turn to Christ not so much asking *what* His

commandment entails – I think we all have an idea of the areas where we could love more like Him – but instead I ask Him *how* we can better live out His Love in our lives. Every saint, and bishop, and Christian person down the ages has struggled to live according to love like Christ, we all find ourselves partly “in” and partly “counter”; half of our hearts willing, and half of us not willing to love as He loves. We are sinners, a fact all too evident to each of us every day. What do we do then?!

Christ offers us the answer, as he did to that scribe: “*You are not far from the kingdom of God*” (Mark 12:34). On the one hand, He is praising the man for his question and willingness to agree with Jesus – “you’re on the right track!” Jesus commends him – but there is more here than just a compliment. Pope Benedict, in the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, speaks vividly of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims and then offers the astonishing insight that, in the end, Jesus *is* the Kingdom in its fullness. When we are united with Jesus, we are in His Kingdom; when we listen to Him, we are not far from the Kingdom. As much as we worry about living according to the law of His Kingdom, in a wonderful way, if we are with Jesus, we are in the Kingdom. To put it in the words of our Christian family prayer, if we are united to Jesus, His Kingdom *is coming*. He offers these words to us as an encouragement as well: “*stay faithful! You’re on the right track!*”, but they are also words of invitation: “*I am the Kingdom. Trust me. Stay with me! I know your struggles, but I also know how to make you a saint!*”

This is the great truth that the Letter to the Hebrews proclaims: “*Jesus, because he remains forever, has a priesthood that does not pass away. Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to*

*make intercession for them*" (7:24-25). None of us can bring ourselves to God. No matter how much we try, we will not be able to convert our hearts from our own efforts. *But*, even if *our* hearts are split, Jesus' heart is *not* divided. He is wholeheartedly, perfectly, given over in obedient love to His Father, and with Him interceding on our behalf, and always offering us God's mercy in Confession, and God's unending love in the Eucharist, we have nothing to fear in this walk and struggle to follow God. The sacraments of the Church offer us a guaranteed place of closeness with Jesus. If I might put it this way, they are *the* place of *encounter*. Each of the sacraments is a place we bring ourselves – as we are; faithful, if still struggling; following, though we fall; choosing love, even if we still have to fight sin – and each offers us the grace and presence of Christ to continue His work of redemption in our hearts.

This Encuentro Mass often takes place towards the end of the liturgical year – this year we have only two more Sundays in Ordinary Time, then the Solemnity of Christ, the King of the Universe, and then we will be entering the beautiful season of Advent and beginning a new year walking through the mysteries of Our Lord. At the end of each day, the Church recommends that we examine our consciences, reviewing those 24 hours for moments we received the Lord's love, and moments we failed to live out of it. Today, as we near the end of this year in the Church's life, I wonder if Jesus is inviting us to zoom out even more and review this past year of 2021 for moments we were near to Him, and times that we were far from faithful followers. To look into our hearts for those areas where we are "in," that is, with Christ, and areas where we are "contra," that is, un-surrendered to Him. To

examine ourselves in light of that word *en-counter*, but then to turn to Jesus in hope, looking for the *encounter* with Him that will continue His love's conquering work in our hearts and homes.

May God give us this grace. Amen.