

**Homily for a Parish Visit to
Saint John the Evangelist Parish, Medora, Illinois
30th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A**

October 26, 2014

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

As Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, it is a privilege for me to celebrate and preach at this Mass with you today at Saint John the Evangelist Church here in Medora, Illinois. Usually when a bishop comes to a parish, it is a special occasion, like administering the Sacrament of Confirmation or celebrating a parish jubilee. I am not here for any of those reasons today. I am here for a regular Sunday Mass because I want at some time to visit every parish in our diocese, in order to get to know the people and the places that make up our Catholic community in central Illinois.

What does a bishop look for when he comes to a parish? Well, I didn't come to see if the floors were cleaned and the pews were polished! I take my cue from the Gospel passage where Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

First and foremost, when a bishop comes to a parish, he looks for the presence of the Catholic **faith**, to see whether it is strong and vibrant, whether it is growing, and if the conditions are present for its continued growth in the future. So it is good to see people of faith gathered here.

At the same time, a pastoral visit is not just a time for a bishop to see the parish, but also for the parish to see the bishop. The Church is all about relationships. As the three persons of the Trinity are an intimate communion of Father, Son and Spirit in relationship to each other, the Church exists as a communion in relationship to God and in relation to each other, the People of God, the Body of Christ. As a bishop, I have a special relationship with you, and you have a special relationship with me, and one of my roles is to bridge the relationship between you and the Pope and the rest of the universal Church, so that we may all be one in Christ's Body, into which we have been incorporated by the grace of Baptism.

In today's Gospel, the Pharisees try Jesus with the question: "Which is the greatest commandment of the Law?" The issue was not actually about which commandment took precedence over all others. Rather, Jesus was being asked to express an opinion on whether there was a single commandment whose greatness lay in its capacity to sum up the meaning

of the whole of the Law, with all 613 of its precepts. It's easy to imagine the endless debates on the subject among the great and the good of the religious leadership: everyone had an opinion on the matter. It is also easy to see how the question must have seemed perfect to trap Jesus.

Jesus doesn't give a direct answer to the question. Instead, he chooses two commandments: from Deuteronomy and from Leviticus. He says, "On these two commandments hang the whole of the Law and the Prophets." We are reminded of pictures in a gallery, suspended by two chains. Similarly, the two commandments chosen by Jesus are like two chains that uphold the entire Law.

The two commandments are well known. First comes a quotation from Deuteronomy 6: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." The second, from Leviticus 19, resembles it, says Jesus: "You must love your neighbor as yourself." We are left with the question of why Jesus chose these two, and why he says the second resembles the first. One way we can explore this is to consider Jesus' teaching on the conditions of discipleship. To be a disciple, says Jesus, it is necessary to renounce self and take up the cross and follow him. If we take these in reverse order, we see that these amount

to the two commandments Jesus cites as summing up the Law, because they are the way that he too lives the Law. Jesus' total commitment to his Father is shown through his taking up of the cross: the cross shows he loves his Father with all his heart, soul, strength and mind. In taking up the cross he renounces himself. He continually places the needs of humanity before his own needs: that is, he loves his neighbor as himself. To be a neighbor is to address the needs of others before one's own needs. So loving God with all our energy, and loving neighbor as self, sums up the Law because it describes perfectly the ministry of Jesus, who is the fulfilment of the Law.

The fact that Jesus is the fulfilment of the Law explains why decisions of human judges will always disappoint somebody, because only the Divine Judge administers true justice in its pure sense. Therefore everyone here on earth will, at some time or another, experience dissatisfaction with human and thus imperfect attempts to administer justice. What should we do when that happens?

The answer to the question of how to deal with the injustices of an imperfect legal system is not simple or one-dimensional. That is because law is at times a matter of knowledge, a matter of intellect, a matter of

reason, a matter of will, a matter of emotions, and a matter of conscience that is, a matter of the mind, the heart and the soul.

Most of the time, we should comply with civil laws even if we do not like them, unless there is a moral objection. A person who has a valid moral objection must refuse to comply with the demands of human laws even if that means paying whatever penalties may result from such civil disobedience. This is in keeping with the scriptural admonition articulated by Saint Peter and the other apostles before the authorities of their time, when they said, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). In normal circumstances when there is no moral objection, again it is the first Pope, Saint Peter, who instructs Christians how to relate to civil authorities when he wrote, "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God, that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men" (1 Peter 2:13-14).

Even when we obey the law, that does not mean that we have given the affection of our heart to any particular civil law. While the law may coerce the body through imprisonment or financial penalty, the only law

that can compel the heart is Christ's command to "love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself" (cf. Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30-31, and Luke 10:27). This law is written on our heart (cf. Jeremiah 31:33) the fulfillment of which is found in love (cf. Romans 13:10). This is why I chose as my episcopal motto, *Lex cordis caritas*, "The Law of the Heart is Love."

In a few minutes we will receive Love Himself into our hearts. May our reception of the Eucharist always fill us with an awareness of the grace and peace that comes to us from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

May God give us this grace. Amen.