

**Homily for Knights of Columbus Council 1580
Annual Fundraiser for Vocations, Pro-Life and Newman Apostolate
St. Paul Parish - Highland, IL**

**7th Sunday of Ordinary Time - Year A
February 19, 2017**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, for the past few weeks, our Sunday Gospel passages have come from the section of St. Matthew's Gospel known as the Sermon on the Mount. Its name derives from the very first verse, which indicates that when He saw the crowds, "He went up to the mountain" (Matthew 5:1). If you go to the Holy Land, you can go to this very mountain and see the place where Jesus first spoke those words which have become the "*magna carta* of Gospel morality."¹

From the mountain, one is treated to a breathtaking view of the Sea of Galilee. It is no wonder that Jesus chose such a beautiful setting to proclaim this important message in which He presents to us "all the precepts needed to shape one's life."²

Aside from providing a nice view from which to preach, it was fitting for Jesus to have preached from a mountain. Throughout the Scriptures, some of the most significant events took place on mountaintops. The

testing of Abraham, in which Abraham showed his fidelity to God by his willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, took place on Mount Moriah. The Ten Commandments, upon which Jesus expands in this sermon, were given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. In the New Testament, Jesus revealed His glory to Peter, James, and John at the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. It was then on Mount Calvary that Jesus died on the Cross for the salvation of mankind.

In a very fitting way, as though ascending a mountain, the section of the Sermon on the Mount which we hear in today's Gospel reaches a sort of climax as Jesus sums up His message up by saying: "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). When we leave these moral teachings of the Lord, we approach the summit of the Christian life, the life of perfection in holiness.

When we hear these words, we may tend to feel a sense of despair, for just the mention of the word 'perfection' seems impossible to achieve. We may think of the various ways in which the word 'perfect' is used in our common experiences and feel somewhat overwhelmed at what we feel the Lord is asking of us. Think of the many ways in which the concept of perfection is applied in the world of sports. From a perfect season in

football to a perfect score in the Olympics, only the very best of the best seem to be qualified to fit into the category of being perfect.

Since Spring Training is underway, we can consider a few examples from the sport of baseball. One of the more elusive feats for a pitcher is to throw a perfect game in which no opposing player reaches base. In the long history of baseball, only 23 pitchers have achieved this nearly impossible feat.³ On the hitting side of the game, many sports writers have considered hitting four home runs in a game “baseball's greatest single-game accomplishment.”⁴ This remarkable accomplishment has happened only 16 times.⁵ These forms of perfection are indeed rare and belong to a privileged few.

Other worldly uses of the term ‘perfect’ further challenge us to see how far off the mark we are in achieving perfection. The media make use of models who are held up to be perfect, thus setting a standard which people feel unable to achieve. Students in school are constantly battling the competitive nature of grade point averages and test scores to the point that if one does not have a ‘perfect’ score, they can feel like they are a failure. There are so many ways in which we embrace standards of perfection that leave us feeling miserable because we cannot achieve such lofty goals.

As Christians, we can easily fall victim to the same trap of seeing perfection as something that is out of reach, except for a select few. We think of the many times that we have sinned and fallen short of the mark. We may wonder if the words of Jesus to us to be perfect may actually be for somebody else, because it seems for us, it is impossible.

But before we make such a conclusion, it would be helpful to be reminded of the words of St. Paul from our second reading when he writes: "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in the eyes of God" (1 Corinthians 3:19). We need to avoid seeing Jesus' call to perfection through worldly eyes which, in human wisdom, shows us that we are destined to fail. The worldly wisdom sees any slip or fall as a sign of failure, thus disqualifying us from achieving the status of being a saint.

If this were the case, then Heaven would be virtually empty, for there is only one saint apart from God who can truly be considered to be perfect, and that is the Blessed Virgin Mary. Yet, we know that the Church has officially recognized thousands of people who have gone before us and have reached their destination of perfect happiness in Heaven. And those are the ones we know by name. The Church also recognizes a countless multitude of those who are in Heaven, yet whose names are known to God.

Their lives, held up as models for us to imitate, were not without failure. Yet, they would be considered to have reached a level of perfection that has earned them the reward of eternal life.

In order to see that this perfection is not so impossible to achieve, it is helpful to return to Jesus' words and see the context in which they were spoken. The final piece of direction Jesus gives before inviting His listeners to be perfect has to do with our call to love others. He reminds us that it is not good enough just to love those with whom we agree or like to be around, we must strive to love everybody, even our enemies. Love, therefore, is at the heart of the call to perfection. It is not about having special talents or great intelligence so that we can do things without any mistakes or without failing along with way. It is about infusing all of our actions with love, something of which, with God's grace, all of us are capable.

When seen from this perspective, we should be renewed with a sense of hope that the perfection to which the Lord calls may actually be within our reach with the help that He so freely gives to us, especially in the Sacraments. We should not get discouraged when we sin, thinking that we have lost the battle. Rather, with trust and confidence in the goodness of

the Lord, we confess our sins and ask for His forgiveness in the Sacrament of Penance, and we begin again. His willingness to forgive us over and over again should instill within us a deep awareness of His profound love for us and His desire for us to continue to grow toward that ideal of perfection to which He calls us.

The more we foster an awareness of being God's beloved children, the more we will develop that childlike trust that we can do anything, for we know that God, our loving Father, is there to assist us. His call to perfect holiness in love is not given to us so that He can watch us fail, but to give us the opportunity to experience the deep peace and joy that comes from living according to His ways. No longer will we see His commands as depriving us of our freedom, but rather, they are at the service of a greater freedom and a greater experience of the abundant life that He has won for us through His death on the Cross, the greatest sign of His love for us.

Therefore, let us rid ourselves of the worldly way of looking at what it means to be perfect and what it means to be holy. Rather, let us see that living this way of life is a life rooted in love. The words of a modern Spanish author sum it up well:

God could not care less for “self-perfection”; he only desires to see us grow in love. That is why we should focus, not so much on the physical fulfillment of a given virtue, as on the love for Christ invested in the struggle to achieve it. The object is not to end the fray with nary a misstep but to commit ourselves to fulfill lovingly God's will in everything.⁶

As we prepare to receive the sacrament of love in the Eucharist, let us ask the Lord to give us the encouragement to trust that we can indeed reach the heights of perfection and holiness by giving ourselves more and more to a life rooted in love. By doing this, we will have a very real hope that when our journey through this life comes to an end, He will welcome us with great joy into that fullness of life with Him and all of the saints in the glory of Heaven.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* §15.

² St. Augustine, *De serm. Dom.* 1,1:PL 34,1229-1230.

³ “Perfect Games”, MLB.com, http://mlb.mlb.com/mlb/history/rare_feats/.

⁴ Jim, Hoppel; Meier, Jim; Deveney, Sean (August 10, 1999). "Four homers in one game". *Sporting News*. Archived from the original on April 8, 2004. Retrieved February 16, 2017.

⁵ “Four home runs in a game”, MLB.com, http://mlb.mlb.com/mlb/history/rare_feats/.

⁶ Francis Fernandez-Carvajal, *Children of God*, Scepter Publishers (2005), 34-35.