

**Homily for the Respect Life Conference Mass
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here for this Mass being celebrated in conjunction with the Respect Life Conference on aging and end-of-life issues. In light of the seminar's topic, it is very fitting that today's first reading is from the Book of Ruth, which tells us about the relationship between a woman named Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Reading the Book of Ruth can be very unsettling for the reader. You might say that the narrative shifts in such a way that it throws us, the audience, off-balance. The opening of the Book of Ruth takes us to three graves, one of them timeworn and other two freshly dug. The older one belongs to Naomi's husband and the two more recent ones to her only children, her sons, one being Ruth's husband.

Already within a few verses two secure and even well-to-do women have found themselves not only husbandless but manless and childless,

and therefore in the ancient world, destitute. Widows without fathers, brothers, or sons to care for them had no means of security and no manner of earning a living.

But it's not only their personal lives that were unsettled; the society around them suffered similarly. According to the last line of the Book of Judges, the book in the Bible just before Ruth that gives the context for the life of Ruth and Naomi, "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own sight."

This didn't mean lawlessness, but individualism. Society was fragmented and each person looked out for his or her own good and not that of others.

Knowing well the precariousness of their situation, Naomi plans to return to her hometown of Bethlehem, hoping that perhaps what is left of her family and friends may take pity on her and provide for her. But Ruth, a Moabite, has no chance of returning to Bethlehem with her Jewish mother-in-law. Born to an enemy tribe of Israel, the law of the Book of Deuteronomy forbids Ruth, or any Moabite, from joining Jewish society.

She is, the law says, from a pagan and vulgar people and therefore excluded from the congregation of the Lord.¹

Should she enter Naomi's homeland, she would remain forever a permanent stranger. No Jewish man will marry her. No Jewish family will take her in. She has no prospects, no future. Like Naomi, Ruth knows it. So three times Naomi pushes Ruth away for her own good, commanding her to go, to return to her father's house and to the possibility of a normal life: the life of a Moabite wife and mother.

But Ruth refuses. Ruth, whose name means friend, shows her devoted friendship for Naomi, telling her, "Do not press me to go back and abandon you! Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God. Where you die I will die, and there be buried."²

By the way, I have had couples choose this passage from the Book of Ruth for the first reading at their wedding, perhaps thinking that the line "Wherever you go I will go" is a good message for the bride and groom to pledge to each other. While it certainly is good for husband and wife to say to each other, "Wherever you go I will go," that promise is actually being

made by Ruth to her mother-in-law, Naomi. So while the Book of Ruth is certainly a good choice for a scriptural reading at a wedding, the real example being given for the newlyweds is how to treat your mother-in-law!

Ruth is essentially telling her mother-in-law, "Not only do I refuse to leave you, I don't expect any benefits from remaining. I don't expect another husband. I don't expect the normal satisfactions a middle-aged woman like me might be looking for. What I want instead is you, and what I sense through you: your God and your people."

Then the next verse adds, "Naomi then ceased to urge her, for she saw she was determined to go with her." Ruth had won her over. With the force of her personality, of her conviction, of the beauty that comes by way of sacrifice, Ruth has convinced Naomi to allow her to return with her to her people, a people who want no part of Ruth.

This particular power and form of persuasion is, I think, notable. Nowhere in the Book of Ruth does it say Ruth is beautiful, which is unusual. Biblical heroines are always beautiful. Ruth has passed the age of physical beauty and surely the lines of grief on her face disclose her

suffering. But it's her inner beauty, her force of her sincerity and passion for maintaining loving relationships that wins others over.

Ruth, by the force of her goodness and her desire to be with Naomi, her people, and her God, is willing to humiliate herself for the love of another, and does so in such a pleasing way that it's no longer humiliating, but attractive, and even magnetic, drawing others to her.

It explains her appeal to Boaz, her future husband. When he allows Ruth to harvest from his field, she asks why he would so favor a foreigner and a stranger. Boaz responds, "I know what you have done for your mother-in-law...that you have left all you have known and come to a people you did not know."

But Boaz is not the only citizen of Bethlehem to have noticed Ruth's loving-kindness. The elders and all the city have witnessed the devotion Ruth has shown her mother-in-law, and at Boaz's request, they recognize and sanction his marriage to Ruth.

Ruth, an eternal stranger to the Jewish people, has been forever accepted. As she did with Naomi and Boaz, Ruth has also won over these

people. She's united a fragmented people to agree on this one thing: the power of love.

Sincerity, a passion for people, and love of others are always appealing and often generative. It becomes the interpretive key of the Law, and produces a new marriage and generates new life. A story that began with a fragmented society and family, separation and sadness at the death of sons ends with the union of Jews and Moabites, marriage and the birth of sons.

Perhaps some of you here today know the suffering of Ruth and Naomi. Perhaps you've already lost a spouse, a father, a mother, and you are left to care for those who remain. Maybe, like them, you feel rejected by those who should accept you, be they family or a larger community.

Take the name of Ruth not only as a comfort, but take it as your own name. Be the one to bring friendship to those around you with loving-kindness, especially the elderly. Christians must refuse to do anything else, because it will be noticed. It will soften those around you and unite them with you, and its power and ability to challenge and change hearts will not end with you, as it did not end with Ruth.

The Book of Ruth finishes with her progeny, which itself concludes with a single name: David, which means beloved. So one could say that the Book of Ruth ends in love, but that it also ends with the union of a country under one man who is beloved, King David, who is a foreshadowing of Christ the King, who is the epitome of love.

David, a man after God's own heart, will, like his great-grandmother, fill the world with friendship and loving-kindness in the form of praise and worship of God through his composition of the Psalms. All of this points us now to the Eucharist, where we will encounter the very essence of Love, as we receive Christ into our hearts.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Deut. 23:3,4.

² Ruth 1:16-17a.