

Homily for the Twenty First Sunday in Ordinary Time

August 26, 2018

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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Reverend Fathers, deacons, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Father Carlo Carretto, who died in 1988, was an Italian priest and a member of the Little Brothers of Jesus. Having spent many years in the Saharan desert, leading a life of simplicity and prayer among the Bedouin, he wrote several books on spirituality. In one reflection, he penned a paradoxical love song about the Church. He begins the poem by saying, "How baffling you are, oh Church, and yet how I love you!" He then goes on to describe so many of the things that he has come to loathe about the Church. Despite all the negativity he feels, though, Father Carlo is overwhelmed by how the Church has also witnessed to him an incredible holiness. He says that, while the Church has made him suffer, still he owes her so much.

Even though, at times, he had felt the Church was more devoted to the world than to heaven, yet, he says, he has touched nothing "more pure, more

generous, more beautiful.” Even though the Church had given him scandal, it is that same Church that helped him to understand sanctity. It is as if, where there is light, there will always be darkness, but the light always overcomes the darkness.

The really telling line in the poem comes when Father Carlo asks whether he can free himself from the Church. “No, I cannot free myself from you, because I am you,” he cries, “though not completely. And besides, where would I go?” The Church may present challenges and obstacles, but ultimately God’s goodness shows through. Anyway, where else would one go to experience that truth and beauty?

Our readings today point to this same question. The first reading of today’s Mass recounts the moment when the Israelite people, having crossed the Jordan, are about to enter the promised land. We hear how Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel together and said to them:

If it does not please you to serve the LORD, decide today whom you will serve, the gods your fathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now dwelling. As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.¹

Then we hear of how all of those who had been gathered replied:

Far be it from us to forsake the LORD for the service of other gods. For it was the LORD, our God, who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, out of a state of slavery. He performed those great miracles before our very eyes and protected us along our entire journey and among the peoples through whom we passed. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.²

This account makes clear that the Israelite people made their free choice to follow the Lord God.

In our Gospel, we find our Lord posing this same question to His disciples. At the end of what has come to be known as the Bread of Life Discourse at the synagogue in Capernaum, many of our Lord's followers abandoned Him because they found His teaching about the mystery of the Eucharist too difficult to accept. Left with only His closest disciples, He asks them too: *Do you also want to leave?*³ To which Peter answers in the name of all the remaining disciples:

Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God.⁴

In this way, the disciples, much like the Israelite people in the first reading, made their free choice, for they understood that life without Christ would be life without meaning.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we are asked the same question today and are given the same free choice. In light of the recent news of the Grand Jury report describing sexual misconduct by clergy in the State of Pennsylvania and by former Cardinal, now Archbishop, Theodore McCarrick, our justifiable anger may make it hard for us to recognize our Lord's love and care for the Church. Nevertheless, we must remain convinced that Christ has not abandoned us, and so we must not give up on our commitment to live as His disciples. We must recognize that this is exactly what Satan wants, for he is the prince of darkness. He wants us to turn our back on our Lord and His Church. On the contrary, we must use this unfortunate set of circumstances to commit ourselves to live ever more fully for Christ as His disciples.

What is needed now more than ever is a profound spiritual renewal at all levels of the Church. We must dedicate our energy to grow in holiness by living as disciples of our Lord each and every day of our lives.

There are always going to be times when things do not seem to make sense; times when there is the temptation to turn away from God, when we are hurt, angry, and even scandalized. However, as difficult as the journey of life and the way of discipleship may be at times, there is the constant call to reflect on God's goodness, and to keep making positive choices for Jesus. Just as Father Carlo Carretto wrote, with regard to the Church, that he wanted "to shut the doors of my soul in your face," yet, paradoxically, would say, "how often I have prayed to die in the safety of your arms," so too we can put our negative reactions and angry feelings in perspective before the outweighing positive reality of God's love.

Jesus gave the disciples a choice. He presents us with that same choice. When Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, he asked them the same question that we are asked today. Whom do you wish to serve? Considering how Jesus has brought us liberation from sin, freedom from despair, and the promise of eternal life, perhaps we will be able to echo Peter's stunning statement regarding Jesus' challenge: He is the light of the world. He is the bread of life. His promises are true. Where else can we go? We will serve Him.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Joshua 24:15

² Joshua 24:16-17

³ John 6:67

⁴ John 6:68-69