

Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

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

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Are you a follower of Christ or just an admirer of Christ? This distinction between followers of Christ and mere admirers of Our Savior is explained in a recently published book by Rod Dreher entitled, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents*. He tells the story of an artist who is painting images of Bible stories on the wall of the village church. The artist laments his own inability to paint a true representation of Christ. He says that his images comfort believers, but do not lead them to repentance and conversion. The painter says regretfully, "We create admirers. We do not create followers."¹

Dreher traces this distinction between admirers of Jesus and followers of Christ to the nineteenth-century Christian existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who wrote that

The admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe. Though in words, phrases, songs, he is inexhaustible about

how highly he prizes Christ, he renounces nothing, will not reconstruct his life, and will not let his life express what it is he supposedly admires. Not so for the follower. No, no. The follower aspires with all his strength to be what he admires.²

In other words, as Dreher puts it, “Admirers love being associated with Jesus, but when trouble comes, they either turn on him or in some way try to put distance between themselves and the Lord. The admirer wants the comfort and advantage that comes with being a Christian, but when times change and Jesus becomes a scandal or worse, the admirer folds. . . . The follower recognizes the cost of discipleship and is willing to pay it.”³

Three years ago, on the Solemnity of Christ the King, we concluded our Fourth Diocesan Synod at which representatives from each of our 129 parishes voted overwhelmingly to declare that the “mission of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield in Illinois is to build a fervent community of intentional and dedicated missionary disciples of the Risen Lord and steadfast stewards of God’s creation who seek to become saints. Accordingly, the community of Catholic faithful in this Diocese is committed to the discipleship and stewardship way of life as commanded by Christ Our Savior and as revealed by Sacred Scripture and Tradition.”⁴

The fourth Declaration of our Fourth Diocesan Synod declared, “To be a disciple means to accept Jesus Christ as one’s Lord and Savior. Disciples are those who ‘make a conscious, firm decision, carried out in action, to be followers of Jesus Christ no matter the cost to themselves.’⁵ Catholic discipleship refers to a committed approach to living a Christian life within the Catholic Church.”⁶

Today the Church celebrates the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord. Obviously, the Son of God did not need to be baptized, but He asked to be baptized by St. John the Baptist to provide an example for us on the significance of being baptized. At the moment of Christ’s baptism, as we heard in today’s Gospel passage, the voice of God the Father came from the heavens, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11).

On the day of our baptism, we too are adopted as sons and daughters of God. As such, we are also beloved by God, who is pleased to welcome us into His family. As Jesus loves His Father, we are called to love God as well.

Today’s second reading from the First Letter of Saint John tells us that “the love of God is this, that we keep his commandments” (1 John 5:3). I have heard some Christians congratulate themselves on being good Christians because they have not murdered anyone or robbed a bank. Murder and

robbery involve a couple of very important commandments, but there are eight more commandments in the Decalogue besides those two. The Third Commandment, for example, says “to keep holy the Sabbath.” For Catholics, that means to go to Mass every Sunday. Does a person really love God if he or she goes to Mass only when it is convenient but not every Sunday? Is such a person truly a follower of Jesus, or just an occasional admirer?

Here is a more difficult test of discipleship. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave us this commandment:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same? So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.⁷

As children of our heavenly Father, we are commanded to love our enemies. Indeed, this remarkable teaching is what distinguished the first Christians and set Christianity apart from other religions. If followers of

Christ really loved their enemies, this love would be contagious, more people would be inspired to become Christians, and we would live in a peaceful world. Unfortunately, too many people who call themselves Christian do not live by this fundamental commandment. As G.K. Chesterton said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."⁸

Are you a follower of Christ or just an admirer of Christ?

If you think that you are very good at loving your enemies and therefore are a true follower of Christ, I pose this question to you:

If you voted for Joe Biden for President, can you say that you love Donald Trump and his supporters?

If you voted to re-elect Donald Trump, can you say that you love Joe Biden and his supporters?

The question makes people uncomfortable because we tend to equate love with a warm feeling of affection. Loving someone does not mean, however, that you must agree with them or even like them. Love involves something much more profound than that. Saint Thomas Aquinas said that "to love is to will the good of the other."⁹

Even if you do not have warm feelings of affection for your enemies, you can still pray for and seek the good for that person. In politics, rather than seeking the destruction of your opponents, people with different views should earnestly strive for the conversion of their adversaries through reason and persuasion, not through violence.

Our country has been rocked by violence from both the left and the right over the last several months and indeed during this past week. As a nation, we have strayed far from the Judeo-Christian roots of our founders. The first amendment of the United States Constitution protects “the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” We need to reemphasize the word “peaceably” in exercising that right.

Just a little over two weeks ago, we celebrated the birth of Our Savior, whose coming was foretold by the prophet Isaiah: “For a child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:5). Christ is the Prince of Peace. If we want to live in a peaceful world, we must be true followers of the Prince of Peace, not just admirers from a distance. We must love one another, even our enemies, for God has written a law upon

our hearts (cf. Jeremiah 13:33), which is fulfilled in love (Romans 13:8-10), hence, the Law of the Heart is Love, who comes to us now in this Eucharist.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Rod Dreher, *Live Not by Lies: A Manual for Christian Dissidents* (New York City: Sentinel, 2020), p. 189.

² Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard* (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing, 1999), p. 85; quoted in Dreher, *Live Not by Lies*, p. 190.

³ Dreher, *Live Not by Lies*, p. 190.

⁴ Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, 2017 Synodal Declarations, Declaration 1, p. 24; online at <https://diospringfield.cld.bz/FourthSynodCompiledActsDeclarationsandStatutes/24/>.

⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Stewardship: A Disciple's Response*, 1992.

⁶ Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, 2017 Synodal Declarations, Declaration 4, p. 25; online at <https://diospringfield.cld.bz/FourthSynodCompiledActsDeclarationsandStatutes/24/>.

⁷ Matthew 5:43-48.

⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (1910), Part I, Chapter 5, "The Unfinished Temple."

⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 26 4; quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1766.