

Homily for the 16th International Congress of Medieval Canon Law
16th Sunday of the Year - Cycle C
St. Francis Xavier College Church on the campus of St. Louis University
St. Louis, Missouri
July 17, 2022

† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated religious, fellow canon lawyers, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: It is good to be with you as we celebrate this Mass to open the 16th International Congress of Medieval Canon Law. Having obtained my doctorate in canon law at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, I have served as Chancellor and canonical advisor to two Cardinal Archbishops of Chicago, the late Joseph Cardinal Bernardin and Francis Cardinal George. I have taught canon law for several years as Adjunct Professor of Law at Loyola University Chicago School of Law and Notre Dame Law School. Beginning this Fall, I will teach as Adjunct Professor of Law, Business, and Bioethics in the MBA program at Quincy University's Oakley School of Business, located in my own Diocese of Springfield in Illinois. So, as a student, practitioner, and professor of canon law, I look forward to attending many of the sessions of this 16th International Congress and learning more about medieval canon law.

Before we get into our discussions of medieval canon law, I wish to call our attention to a work of medieval iconography that is pertinent to our first reading from Scripture this evening. Andrei Rublev was a renowned icon painter who was born in the 1360s, is said to have lived near Moscow, and died around the year 1430. Little is known about his life for certain, although in 1966 an epic film drama based on his life was made by the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky; it was highly rated by critics as an outstanding film.

There is a very famous icon by Rublev based on the story in our Old Testament reading today. It depicts the three angelic visitors received by Abraham and Sarah at the Oak of Mamre. They are sitting around three sides of a rectangular table, with a cup on the table between them. The space on the fourth side of the table, at the front of the icon, is vacant. Like all icons, it is full of symbolism. It is known as the icon of the Trinity – the three visitors seated around the table being interpreted as symbolizing the three persons of the Holy Trinity, and the space at the front as being left free for the viewer. It shows how we are all invited to share the hospitality of communion with God the Holy Trinity.

Hospitality is the willingness to open homes and share food and even lodging with visitors of all kinds, friends and strangers, especially those in need. As the Old Testament story demonstrates, hospitality is a basic and practical way of putting love of neighbor into practice. It is this deeply human way of friendship that is at the heart of the ways in which God comes to people in today's readings. When Abraham invited those three travelers to stay for a meal, it ended up being an encounter with God Himself. For Abraham and Sarah, their hospitality to the mysterious visitors marks a turning point in their lives, as the gift of the child the couple thought they could never have is promised to them. A whole people is born from this simple act of welcoming the strangers and tending to their needs.

In today's familiar Gospel passage, Martha and Mary exhibit their hospitality in different but complementary ways. It is beautiful to realize that Jesus comes to both of them, and they begin to learn from each other what it means both to listen and to love.

In our world today, we see a wonderful example of hospitality being put into practice in Poland, where many people have opened their homes to refugees fleeing from the war in Ukraine. We can also practice the virtue of hospitality in the more commonplace activities of our daily lives.

The Latin word *hospes* is a classic “Janus word,” that is, a word whose two meanings are directly opposite to each other. Cicero used the word *hospes* to refer to both the host and the guest. As such, the essence of hospitality is mutual relationships, which brings us back to the Holy Trinity as the epitome of the perfect relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It is no coincidence that we are baptized in the name of this Trinitarian relationship. As such, we are called to emulate that perfect relationship in our relationship with others.

As a canon lawyer and as a professor of canon law, I have always taught my students and have myself sought to abide by the maxim, “law follows theology” – that is, law does not emerge *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, nor does it exist in a vacuum isolated from its moral and theological underpinnings. In canon law, the highest good is expressed in the phrase, *salus animarum suprema lex*, which is found in the very last canon of the *Code of Canon Law* as promulgated for the Latin Church by Pope St. John Paul II in 1983. This phrase is based on the maxim of Roman law as articulated by Cicero, *salus populi suprema lex*, which means, “The health or well-being of the people is the highest law.” The adaptation of this maxim in canon law is translated as, “The salvation of souls is the supreme law.” Our consideration

of canon law, then must always be seen in relation to this *suprema lex* of eternal salvation. In other words, the ultimate purpose of the law is to foster our relationship with God, so that we might forever enjoy the reward of eternal beatitude in the heavenly Kingdom of God.

Mindful of this, I chose as my episcopal motto the Latin phrase "*Lex Cordis Caritas*," which in English is translated as "the Law of the Heart is Love." This phrase is based on the texts from the Prophet Jeremiah, who tells us that the Lord will write the law of the new covenant upon our hearts (Jer. 31:33), and Saint Paul's Epistle to the Romans, where we read that "love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

As we receive into our hearts in this Eucharist the Real Presence of Our Lord who is Love, may we be mindful in our relationships with everyone we meet that indeed the "the Law of the Heart is Love."

May God give us this grace. Amen.