



ARCHDIOCESE OF DENVER

HOMILY

by Bishop-elect James D. Conley

1st Vespers: Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus

May 29, 2008

Christ the King Catholic Church, Denver, CO

Tonight the Catholic Church around the world begins the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus by celebrating “First Vespers” or Evening Prayer 1. As with the Jewish Sabbath, the Catholic Church always begins her major feast days at dusk, the evening before the feast, with the praying of First Vespers.

The Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus draws our attention to the love that Jesus has for each of us. In our reading from Ephesians, Saint Paul tells us that Christ so loved the Church, “that he gave himself up for her that she might be holy.”

The wider context of this reading is, of course, Saint Paul’s famous exhortation on marriage. Paul likens Christ to the bridegroom and we, the Church, to his bride. Just as the bridegroom will lay down his life for his bride, so we too must lay down our lives, in charity, for one another. In doing this, we imitate Jesus, who laid down his life on the cross to save us from our sins and so “to present to himself a glorious church, holy and immaculate, without stain or wrinkle or anything of that sort.”

This desire to lay down his life to save us and to redeem the whole world, rests in Christ’s Sacred Heart and is symbolized in the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Modern devotion to the Sacred Heart can be traced back to the 17th century with the apparition of Jesus to Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque at Paray la Monial in France.

I first encountered the Sacred Heart of Jesus nearly 30 years ago, shortly after my conversion to the Catholic Church. I had just graduated from college and had spent the following winter at a Benedictine monastery in France, trying to figure out just what God wanted me to do with my life. After a wonderful extended pilgrimage with these holy monks of Saint Benedict, two of whom are with us this evening, I had pretty much discerned that I did not have a vocation to be a monk. So I left the monastery to visit and pray at some of the famous Catholic shrines in France.

I had heard about the apparitions of the Sacred Heart to Saint Margaret Mary, and so I set out on foot with backpack in tow, for Paray le Monial. I ended up hitch-hiking most of the way, and I

arrived at the little French village in the late afternoon in the pouring rain. I had not made any prior reservations, of course, and so I did the logical thing. I knocked on the door of the Rectory where the parish priest lived. He was a kind old priest, and he told me that there were some empty rooms over in the old seminary which had since closed down.

He gave me a key, and I made my way over to the seminary. I found one of the rooms and changed out of my wet clothes. The room was very old, but it was warm and dry. There was a small wooden desk against one wall, and so I sat down and began to write a letter to my mother. I pulled out the desk drawer, and the only thing in it was a small crucifix -- this crucifix. I took the crucifix in my hand and turned it over. And there on the back of the crucifix, in French, was engraved a date. The date was June 6, 1878. I thought nothing of it until I realized that the present date was also June 6 -- of 1978, exactly 100 years later to the day, from the date on the back of the crucifix!

I didn't have a clue as to the date's significance, but I did know that the crucifix was meant for me -- and so I took it with me and have kept that crucifix to this day.

For me, this story from Paray le Monial, the home of the Sacred Heart and the coincidence of the date on the back of the crucifix, was an affirmation that Jesus loved me, that he laid down his life for me and that his guiding hand was with me, even though I didn't know where he was leading me. It came at a time in my life when I wasn't sure where to turn to next. It gave me the confidence to forge on, in faith and in trust, knowing that God was watching over me and guiding me and that I was on the right path.

Every time we look at a crucifix or a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, we should be convinced that God loves us. He sent his only son who died for us to save us. He continues to draw us into the love of his Sacred Heart. He beckons us to lay down our lives in service to the Lord and to each other.

And this is the vocation of a bishop, to lay down his life, like Jesus the Good Shepherd, for the good of the flock entrusted to his care -- to love his people, with the heart of the Good Shepherd.

In doing so, in the words of Saint Paul from tonight's reading, the bishop sanctifies himself and the church, "making her holy, purifying her in the bath of water by the power of the word, to present himself a glorious church, holy and immaculate, without stain or wrinkle or anything of that sort."

John Paul II once wrote that while it is an honor to be called to the episcopate, a bishop is not chosen "for having distinguished himself among many others as an outstanding person and Christian... the honor comes from his mission to stand at the heart of the Church as the first in faith, first in love, first in fidelity, and first in service."

He goes on to say that because of this role: "a bishop is called to personal holiness in a particular way so that the holiness of the Church community entrusted to his care may increase and deepen".

Just as a father shapes the faith of his children by his example of prayer and virtue, so too should

a bishop inspire the faithful by his behavior and example of goodness! This is why St. Peter begs bishops to lead their flocks “not as domineering over those in your charge but by being a living example to the flock (1Pet. 5:3)”.

How does one do this? I have chosen for my episcopal motto “Cor ad cor loquitur” (heart speaks to heart). This isn’t an original quotation. I stole it from my mentor, the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman, the great 19th century English convert to the Catholic faith. My first encounter with Newman was during my sophomore year in college when I had to write an essay on an English prose writer, and I chose Newman. It wasn’t even a religious essay. My mom typed the paper for me. I’m not sure she remembers that. But it began for me a life-long love affair with Newman that continues to this day. In fact, tomorrow, May 30, will mark the 161st anniversary of Newman’s ordination to the priesthood which took place in Rome on May 30, 1847. For me, this is another sign of Newman’s influence in my life.

But that line, “heart speaks to heart”, was not even original to Newman. He borrowed it for his motto when he was named a cardinal in 1879, from a letter written by the great 17th century spiritual writer and Bishop of Geneva, Saint Francis de Sales.

These words “heart speaks to heart” can first be understood as the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Heart of God, speaking to our heart, calling us to holiness, leading and guiding us to the Father.

But “heart speaks to heart” can also describe a type of pastoral charity where an individual leads another individual to God, through love and kindness. One heart at a time, person to person, heart to heart.

Newman believed that, next to the power of supernatural grace, the greatest influence over the human soul is the example of goodness in another person.

We might think of the people in our own lives who have shaped us the most. Perhaps our parents, a teacher, a priest, a good friend, someone we wanted to emulate. This happens every day. It is through friendship that we are moved to rise above our own weakness, our own vanity and pride, to embrace holiness and virtue, to strive for goodness, truth and beauty. I think we have all experienced this in our lives.

And ultimately, it is the example of love and virtue in Jesus, the friendship of the soul with Christ, that draws us to want to lay down our lives for our beloved, to do great things, to love in a heroic way.

In his address to young people and seminarians at Saint Joseph’s Seminary in Yonkers, New York, on April 18, Pope Benedict spoke these words to the young people: “I urge you to deepen your friendship with Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Talk heart to heart with him”.

Even though Newman was a great believer in a faith rooted in dogmatic principles, he writes that

no one ever died for a proposition, but thousands have laid down their lives for a person, the person of Jesus Christ.

This is what a bishop is called to do, to lay down his life for his flock. Like the good shepherd, a bishop must lay down his life for his people.

Ultimately, the Christian life consists in the reproduction of Jesus in our souls; and perfection and holiness, the most faithful and perfect reproduction, consists in the transformation of souls into Jesus. This is the doctrine of the great Saint Paul: “Do you not know yourselves that Christ Jesus is in you? (2 Cor. 13:5)”; “For you who have been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ (Gal. 3:27)”, “those whom He has foreknown He has also predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son (Rom. 8:29)”, “it is no longer I that live, but Christ who lives in me (Gal. 2:20)”.

The most perfect reproduction of Jesus in the human soul took place, of course, in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary at the incarnation through the action of the Holy Spirit – when heaven and earth came together in perfect harmony. Mary helps us to say “yes” to God, just as she did, so that the grace of the Holy Spirit might transform us into other Christs – “alter Christus”. And she teaches us the secrets of the Heart of her Son. For no one knows the heart of a son, better than his mother. She can open up for us, the treasures of the Sacred Heart of her Son, Jesus.

In the preface for the Mass of the Sacred Heart we hear these words:

“Lifted high on the cross, Christ gave his life for us, so much did he love us. From his wounded side flowed blood and water, the fountain of sacramental life in the Church. To his open heart the Savior invites all men, to draw water in joy from the springs of salvation.” This is prayer I have chosen for my prayer card.

May we all be drawn to his open Heart, to that Sacred Heart which is the source of all love in the world! Heart of Jesus, make us capable of loving with your love, of giving with your Heart, of serving with your light, and of working with your gifts.

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