Homily.31OrdB.10.31.21

Saint Bernard Church

Deacon Tim Sullivan

We all know that we have a problem with many people leaving the Catholic Church. This has been going on for decades. There are different opinions on why this is happening.

Some say, “Catholics don’t know their faith.” They point to what some call “flowers and butterflies” religious education for our young people, which was especially common in the 1980’s. They call for a return to the Baltimore Catechism, which was used very commonly in Catholic education up to the mid-1960’s. Students in the old days memorized sections of the Baltimore Catechism.

Other people emphasize the need for greater reverence at Mass. They believe that the Church would be in much better shape if Catholics received Communion on the tongue, if the Mass were more solemn, if women wore veils.

Well, I was among the generation that learned the Catholic faith using the Baltimore Catechism, and I attended Mass when there was much more outward reverence. I went to Catholic schools from kindergarten through law school. And I can tell you that the number of my classmates who are still active Catholics is very, very small.

In all my years of formal Catholic education, no one ever suggested that I needed to commit my life to Jesus. I learned virtually nothing about the work of the Holy Spirit. I was never told that God communicates to us all the time. There was very little said about how we are saved, how we obtain our salvation.

The real, the deepest, problem in the Catholic Church is addressed in today’s Gospel. Jesus is challenged by a lawyer, a Jew who is very familiar with all of the external requirements followed by faithful Jews. When he asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment, Jesus zeroes in on the two most important, most basic requirements for having a profound union with God.

Requirement number 1: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

How many of us have that kind of love for God?

If we don’t have that kind of love for God, how can we get it? How can we get it?

Well, first of all, we have to know, not just in our brain, but also in our heart, that God loves us. Saint John tells us in 1 John 4:19: “We love God because He first loved us.”

How do we know God loves us?

To start with, He created us. We didn’t ask to be created. He didn’t have to bring any one of us into the world. Why would He do so? Entirely out of love. God’s nature is to love, and so each of us is created out of this love. Each of us is an unrepeatable human being, uniquely made by our Creator. And made for a specific mission and purpose.

To reinforce His love for us, God sent His Son, Jesus, to be one of us. To teach us how to live, how to love. To die for us, to make up for our sinfulness. To make it possible for each one of us to enjoy everlasting bliss in heaven, an existence which none of us could ever deserve as a matter of justice.

In addition to all this, God communicates His love for us and His desire for us by revealing to us His unique will for each of our lives. If we surrender our lives to God, if we put Him in charge of everything we do, we find that His plan for our lives is so much better than any plan we could come up with on our own.

We experience an intimate friendship with God, a friendship in which we learn to love Him and trust Him more and more as He leads us, guides us and pours out His grace upon us in the everyday events of our lives.

So much of the religious education in our Church is focused on providing information. What is needed is for all of us to focus on transformation, on continued growth in a loving relationship with each member of the Trinity. Our faith is not a collection of facts but is a way to live.

I’m pretty sure the Pharisees and Sadducees knew their catechism. I’m pretty sure they were reverent in the synagogue. But Jesus confronts their observance of the externals of their faith and challenges them to examine what was in their hearts.

If we’re following the First Commandment and loving God, then our experience in loving God will spill over into loving our neighbors, which is Requirement number 2. As written in 1 John 4:20: “Whomever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”

Loving God leads us into loving all that He has created, especially our fellow human beings. Christianity is at its core a conspiracy of love.

If all of us here at St. Bernard’s were in good standing with the two great commandments, no one would voluntarily walk away from our community. Quite the opposite. We’d have to tear the walls of the church down to make room for all the new people.

I’ll close with this prayer, written by Saint Anselm, which I say every day, because I realize I have a lot more room for growth in loving God:

“O God, let me know you and love you so that I may find my joy in you; and if I cannot do so fully in this life, let me at least make some progress every day, until at last that knowledge, love and joy come to me in all their fullness.”