

# The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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I recently had a conversation with a friend whom I've known almost all my life. We went through grade school together, college together, and we shared an apartment for a while right after we graduated. Our parents and families were mutual friends for decades and I knew them all well, though I haven't seen them in quite some time now. So it wasn't all that strange for me to ask him, during the course of our chat, how his brother is doing these days. His response stunned me. He told me that the two of them hadn't spoken to one another in a few years, and his brother had disowned him and would no longer regard him as family. What possibly could have caused all that, I asked? I discovered the still greater tragedy that it was all about money and property. They had disagreed about a plan for some jointly-owned family real estate. After some negotiations seem to have failed, my friend awoke one morning to a scathing e-mail from his brother, a message that had now become deeply personal and deliberately vicious. It was the end of their relationship. Obviously, my friend is hurt and angry about this, but mostly he's been bewildered by it. How can something like property serve as the reason for a family to become estranged? It seems so irrational, but I'm betting that there are plenty of people sitting right here, right now who know from personal experience just exactly what I'm talking about. When possessions take priority over love, over family, something is very wrong. And it happens all the time.

In one sense, Jesus' instruction to his disciples in today's gospel about conflict resolution seems like plain old common sense: When you disagree with one whom you regard as a brother or sister, sit down and talk about it together. Jesus would not have been the one to bless the idea of settling disputes via e-mail, but very often today that is the very first recourse, compounding the injuries because the two brothers aren't in the same room together having to speak those words. It is increasingly obvious how much electronic communication can be the occasion for sin, because it is often gossipy, slanderous, disembodied and sometimes anonymous. It can make people feel falsely courageous or noble because they can type out harsh words from a safe distance, when in fact they would never have the courage or the gall to say the same things face-to-face. I'm guilty of it too. What can be more humbling than to realize you've accidentally hit "reply all" or "forward" to an uncharitable statement? Suddenly, Jesus' command to direct encounter seems surprisingly radical and necessary. And there is still more wisdom in his words here. If the two people cannot settle the matter themselves, they should next call in one or two others, so that witnesses can vouch for the truth of what is going on here. But just as importantly, a trusted friend or two can help determine whether the dispute is important enough to put relationships at risk. Some of them are. Many of them are not, and material possessions are almost *never* among them. A trusted friend can point out just exactly what is being put at risk for the sake of imagined gain. To trade away a brotherly bond for the sake a piece of real estate is something that a witness may be able to see as terrible, whereas the brothers involved may be too close to appreciate that.

A few years ago, one of my relatives was in a particularly difficult financial situation and asked me to lend him some money. It was not a small amount, well into four figures. It forced me to ask all kinds of important questions about values. In this case, the crisis was brought on by an unexpected medical emergency, rather than by foolish behavior. I had to decide which was more important...my savings account or his need. In the end, I gave him the money, and in the process, I said that I'd prefer to consider it a loan rather than a gift. "Oh yes," he said, "I will repay you."

That was three years ago, and fortunately things have stabilized for him and his family since then. And not only have I not been repaid at all, but the whole thing has never been mentioned again. I no longer expect to see that money. And I will never be the one to remind him again. He knows.

I share this story not to congratulate me for being a generous relative, but rather to offer an example of how essential it is to really know what is worth being in dispute about, and this just isn't. And again, I'm certain that I am speaking to people right here who know and have experienced just exactly what I'm talking about. Sometimes a trusted witness can reassure us of that too. And the time to discern those priorities of value is *now, before* those hard choices are thrown in our laps and we have to decide what is of greater importance. It's why we gather regularly to reflect of this gospel, not only when the hard choices are staring us in the face at a time of crisis, but especially when they are not. What is worth fighting for in this life? What is worthy of conflict and hard words?

But Jesus doesn't stop his teaching here, either. He continues his lesson by saying that when even witnesses can't resolve a dispute, it should be brought to the church. And here "church" does not mean the canon lawyers or the professional theologians or the Bishop's Committee on Doctrine. It means what it always meant in biblical times—it means the whole community of believers—us. Here in this church we have, over the course of centuries, under the guidance of scripture and Holy Spirit and a great Tradition, including our official teachers, here we have come to recognize the things that are of true and basic importance to our faith, and to recognize the many, many other things that are not.

If you wish to dispute whether God is a Trinity, or whether Jesus is the Messiah, or whether the Holy Spirit truly lives here in sacraments and beyond; if you wish dispute that, then you need to find a different community with which to pray. But if you want to dispute questions of church law or liturgical rubrics or music or piety or politics, then by all means stay among us—the church—and we can talk about it. Some things really are worthy of conflict and even separation. Many are not.

Let us pray, as Pope St. John XXII so well said, to be people who abide by this motto: In essentials, Unity; In doubtful matters: liberty; In all things, charity.