

Intro/Love as the Essence of the Christian life

I first want to applaud you all for coming out today to participate in this parish mission, or parish retreat. In addition to our everyday prayers which we say and our weekly or daily attendance at Holy Mass, it is a very wise thing at least once a year to make a little retreat—a time when we can step back a bit from our everyday cares and spend some extra time with our Lord, reflecting on the wonderful things He has given us in our Catholic Faith. Your pastor, Fr. Hastings, is certainly aware of this need; and that's why he so prudently scheduled this parish mission for you all.

I said that from time to time we need to step back and consider the wonderful things God has given us in our Catholic Faith, because so often we fail to see its immense beauty and goodness, and the great mysteries contained therein for us. That's why God founded His one Church: precisely for us.

Bishop Fulton Sheen used to say that there are probably not 10 people out there who hate the Catholic Church, but there are millions who hate what they think is the Catholic Church—implying of course that so many out there do not really know what the Catholic Church is all about. If that was true 50 years ago, it is even more true today; and unfortunately it is true even among Catholics, even among practicing Catholics.

Even we practicing Catholics can sometimes forget what it's all about—and you can be sure that the secular press will be right there trying to help us forget what it's really all about. “All those rules, all those do's and don'ts, some old man in Rome telling you how to live your life, all that negativity and intolerance.” Yadda, yadda, yadda; and the list goes on and on... Yes, it's true, if that's all there is to our Catholic Faith, then it really is quite a miserable thing, then—to paraphrase St. Paul—we really are the biggest of all fools.

For those here who are parents, imagine if your children someday said to you (especially after years and years of raising them): “Mom, Dad, your whole relationship to me has been nothing but

rules, rules, rules, an endless list of do's and don'ts, a cold, heartless tyranny over my life." Well, I'm sure that you would be flabbergasted at such ingratitude, and that your response would be something like: "I have given you nothing but unconditional love; my whole life has been one of love shown for you; it was love that even brought you into being; it was out of love for you that I went to work everyday, fed you, sent you to a good school; it was out of love for you that I taught you what was right and what was wrong, and gave you rules to follow so that you would grow up to be a fine young man or woman." Well, this is the same response God our Father, and Holy Church our Mother, wants to make to us: it's all about love. Love is the end for which we were created and it ought to be the essence of our life as Catholics. That's what it's all about.

Love—charity—is a mutual benevolence between individuals, a mutual benevolence which is founded upon some communication, some common denominator, so to speak. The Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—have loved each other from all eternity. And since love automatically wants to spread itself around, wants to pour itself out, God created man and the angels, in order to share His love with us. He didn't have to do this. God was perfectly happy without us. He doesn't need us at all. But it was His own perfect love which moved Him to create us in order that He might share that same love with us.

Now, the chief effect of love is union. Now this bond of charity is such that it makes us one with the person we love. Think about your spouse or a good friend. St. Augustine one described his friend as "half my soul," so powerfully does love unite. And so the effect of God's love for us, provided we return that love, is union with Him, to enter into union with the Three Persons of the Most Blessed Trinity. And that's what heaven is. That perfect

union with God Himself, that sharing in His own life and love (which we call grace), produces perfect and unending joy. It is for this that we were created. As St. Augustine once said, “O Lord, Thou has made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

Now, the collection of all those men and angels united to God by love and grace is what we call Christ’s Mystical Body, the Catholic Church. The union produced by God’s love and grace is so strong that it forms a body: all of us have been made members of that body by our baptism and are united to each other and to Christ the Head of that body. And this supernatural charity that unites us to Christ is, you could say, the strongest force in the entire universe—more powerful than any Minnesota blizzard, or California forest fire, older than any galaxy, stronger than even death itself. In fact, it is so strong that even those who die still holding on, so to speak, to this bond of love are not separated from us. *Strong as death is love*, says Scripture. This is what it means to be a member of the Catholic Church: to be a member of Christ’s Mystical Body, to share in all the graces He wishes to give us, as He pulls us closer and closer to Himself until we are united to Him perfectly and forever in heaven. The Church, then, is the door to heaven.

Now as Christ is the Head of His Mystical Body the Church, the Holy Spirit is the Soul of the Church. It is to the Holy Spirit then that we owe the Church’s being and life, its divine nature, its growth, its order and beauty. This is why, despite our own sinfulness, Sacred Scripture calls the Church “holy and immaculate, without stain or wrinkle.” This is also why the Church will never die despite attacks from without, and will always be faithful to Christ the Head despite grievances from within. As Pope Benedict once said: *Do we have hope for the Church? I respond without hesitation: yes!...The Church is alive...We have 2,000 years of Church history, with much suffering and also many failures...[But despite things like]...the Muslim invasion, the Reformation, the Enlightenment...Adolph Hitler, the Marxists...all of whom claimed to be able to destroy the Church...the Church always rises again...and even grows stronger...[because] it is the life of*

Christ which triumphs in His Church. The Church's infallibility, indefectibility, and authority are the result of the Holy Spirit dwelling within her.

So then, if we are members of the Mystical Body, the Church, and the Holy Spirit is the Soul of the Church, does that mean that once we are baptized we can just sit back and wait for heaven? Of course not. For the Holy Spirit works in us through love, through divine charity. Charity, you might say, prepares the way for the Holy Spirit's indwelling in our souls: *If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word, and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and will dwell in him.* And so, the more we grow in charity, the more closely united we are to the Holy Spirit, the more spiritually alive we are, the more we put forth the fruits of the Spirit, as St. Paul teaches us. That is why we call grave sin, mortal sin, because if we commit even one, we become like a bodily member which is paralyzed, one which lacks life. A Catholic in the state of mortal sin is still, in a certain sense, a member of the Mystical Body the Church, but he has made himself a paralyzed member; the life force, the Holy Spirit and divine charity, no longer flow through him, until he goes to Confession and is revived.

Divine charity, then, along with the Holy Spirit, is the life of the Church. Without charity one cannot even be a living member of Christ's Body. And so we can say that the Church stands or falls on charity and the power of the Holy Spirit living in each of her members. And like any other living being, the Church has its good years and its bad years, its years of health and vigor, and those of trials when she seems to be limping along. And if it seems that the Mystical Body could use a good double-bypass or two to get the life flowing again through her members, know that it is up to each and every one of us to help make that happen. And so, let us not just sit back and watch as other members of this Mystical Body limp along, as the Mystical Body chokes and gasps for breath; but let us do our part as members of this Body by growing in charity each day, by working for the good of the whole, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, the soul of the Church. Let us ask God to

increase His love in us, and let us return that love to Him directly and to Him through our love for others.