

Pentecost V

My beloved: as the Sunday cycle of Masses unfolds during this time after Pentecost the liturgy tends consistently toward one object: the deepening of our union of souls with Jesus Christ. There is, however, an indispensable prerequisite for this union – charity toward others. No one ever expressed this truth more clearly than St. John when he taught, “If any one says he loves God, and hates his brother, he is a liar.” A very searching and direct teaching. St. Paul puts it less bluntly when he says that we must “put on love which binds” all virtues “together and makes them perfect.” Charity, then, is that bond which unites the members of the Mystical Body under its Head, Jesus Christ. Hence there can be no genuine union with Christ without genuine charity towards others.

Beloved, faith demands that we examine our hearts as to this fundamental requirement of genuine, supernatural love of others, for Jesus tells us in a forceful manner that if we are not reconciled with our brother, God will not accept the gift we bring to Him at the altar; that is, He will not receive the offering of our hearts which we make in prayer.

Such reconciliation can be a real sacrifice of our wills: to ask pardon of God, suffer adversities, perform our duties of state all require sacrifice and self-control. But these may pale in comparison with seeking reconciliation with an equal or even our inferior and subject – especially one who has wounded us gravely. But this we must do or God will not accept us. And divine faith teaches that God will help us to accomplish this, which is His will, difficult as it may seem on the natural level.

Today’s collect cuts to the heart of the matter: it is an appeal for God’s love which kindles in us true love for our neighbor: “Fill our hearts with such a love that our desire for you in all things and above all things may lead us to what you have promised, which is far superior to anything we can desire.”

In today’s epistle St. Peter exhorts us to sincerity of heart towards our brethren, and to offer love and forgiveness in the face of wrong-doing. Jesus takes this even further in His Sermon on the Mount: He sets forth the program of genuine Christian conduct: it is all about *conversion*. In unmistakable language He draws sharp lines between the Old Law in its narrow Pharisaical interpretation of fear, and the New, which is the law of charity. Jesus stresses that His new covenant does not stop with external observances but reaches, rather, deep into the heart of man and his relation to others. In order to give proper sanction to this, the Master designates the highest punishment in the Old Law as the lowest punishment in the New!

In the Old Testament a murderer was “liable to judgment”: his crime was tried and sentence rendered by the court. The New Law penetrates more deeply: it punishes not merely the act, but the source of the act – *anger*. But the sin of anger has different degrees. “Raka” is an Aramaic word which means “empty headed fool.” It is a grave calumny, for the implication is that the individual lacks full human intelligence. Hence the Savior makes the culprit answerable to the Sanhedrin, which was the highest tribunal in the land. The greatest insult of all was to call a man a fool, for Scripturally a fool is one who blasphemes God and denies His existence. The crime is so great that there is no trial, and the proper punishment is the eternal punishment of “fiery Gehenna.” In effect, the sin of anger, if it arises from vindictiveness, is always grave. The Savior’s words imply as much, but He stresses the point that, whereas the Old Law merely punished the external act forbidden by the 5th Commandment, the New Law penetrates into the motives and purposes within and strikes the crime at its very root: the human will.

Our Lord wants true charity to reign in every heart: “Therefore, if at the moment you are bringing your gift to the altar, you recall that your brother has a grievance against you, leave your gift there at the altar. Go first and seek a reconciliation with your brother. Then come and offer your gift.”

These words of the Lord give focus to the power and dignity of the Eucharist. The altar is the central focus of churches because the altar is the heart of Christ's Mystical Body. If we come with religious duty to the altar how can we claim to love Christ *unless* we love His members? The love of God and love of neighbor must run in tandem: if they do not, then we are as St. John states, *liars*. For this reason Paul has charity in mind when he says, "A man should first examine himself. Only then should he eat of the bread and drink of the cup." (1 Cor. 11: 28)

Beloved, let us humbly ask this indispensable grace from God: that we may sincerely put into practice this great commandment of love. Jesus Himself said it is the 2nd of the two great commandments : it is the reverse side, the connatural effect flowing from a *true* love of God. Let us therefore, today, in this renewal of Christ's love for us in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, join our hearts and wills sincerely to the fruit of His Passion by putting into daily practice genuine, Christ-like love of our neighbor. This means not merely loving those who *please* us, but forgiving and wishing good for those who we consider as having done us ill. In doing this – loving as Christ loves – we are being fitted for the glory of the world to come where we will see God face to Face and live in the light of His *eternal* Love which knows no measure.