

## THIRTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – 10/29/17

### WALKING IN HIS LOVE

My dear people of God,

I would like to start our reflection today with the Responsorial Psalm since it verbalizes our love for God Who is our strength: *“I love you Lord, my strength”*. If I truly love the Lord, my strength, then I should not be afraid to love and care for others because the Lord, my God, is also their God. He will not allow my good deeds to go unnoticed. And if I am constant in loving God, I know that He and His Son will come to me.

The acclamation before the gospel can inspire us: *Whoever loves me, will keep my word, says the Lord, and my Father will love him and we will come to him.*

This statement of the Lord is so appropriate while we talk about “Walking in His Love”. Yahweh has always insisted on making His people walk in His Love. In our First Reading, we heard from the Book of Exodus, chapter 22, verses 21 to 27, that Yahweh instructed the Israelites to have compassion towards those who were under-privileged: the aliens, the widows and orphans, and the poor. The Lord reminded the Israelites that once, they too were aliens while living in Egypt. Now, their Law commands them to be warm and helpful to those who are less fortunate as they once were less fortunate. These binding laws are found throughout the Old Testament: (1) Book of Leviticus 19:33-34, (2) Deuteronomy 1:16, (3) Deuteronomy 10:17-19, (4) Deuteronomy 14:28-29, (5) Deuteronomy 16:11-14, and (6) in the Book of Jeremiah 7:6.

As we heard during the reading, the Israelites were reminded of their loving obligation to take care of the needs of the widows and the orphans. God wanted their needs to be taken care of by those who were more fortunate. The Israelites were reminded that if the widows and orphans were neglected or abused, and their cries reached out to Heaven, God would hear them and His anger would punish the aggressors. Their families would suffer the same consequences: their wives becoming widows, their children becoming orphans.

Applying God's command to us today, we can start by assessing the needs of those who live in countries that are torn by wars. As we are aware, in those countries, many men die during the battles, leaving their families without a husband and father. God expects us to help the widows and orphans who are victims of war. He expects us to share with them what we have, in order to make their lives more comfortable.

Let us continue dissecting the first reading: here is an issue about granting loans. Based on the Books of Leviticus 25:35-36 and of Deuteronomy 23:19-20, the Sacred Scriptures refer to loans that were made to one's own people, their fellow Israelites. When a loan was made to one's countrymen, no interest was to be expected in return. At this point, allow me to say this: God wants all of us to grant Mercy beyond justice in our human dealings. Today, this law would be similar to a brother, a sister, a parent, a child or a relative asking for a loan. In love, we should lend or give from our hearts.

The people were reminded that if they abused the ancient Law and the victims of this abuse cried out to God in prayer, He would hear their cries and He would no longer answer the prayers of those who abused the Law. They would be denied the blessings that they had received in the past.

Now, to the Second Reading: Paul reminded the Thessalonians in his first letter, chapter 1, verses 5 to 10, of his living example among them for their sake so that they may grow in Christ. Paul's example is also the Lord's example: *"Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."* (1 Cor. 11:1).

To fully live one's Christian life, it is necessary to *"become imitators of God, as beloved children, to live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"* (Ephesians 5:1-2). The examples of St. Paul and many other Christians shone in the love of Christ so others may know the way of Christ. (1 Thessalonians 2:14) and (2 Thessalonians 3:7-9).

Paul acknowledged that through persecution, the Thessalonians ***persisted in their living faith***, receiving the Word of God with joy that was inspired by the Holy Spirit so that they could become as living models to others who heard about them in Macedonia and Achaia. These are the communities where Paul was residing when the good news about the Thessalonians reached him. Joy in the faith during persecution is the fruit of the Holy Spirit and true imitation of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:10; 1 Peter 2:21; Philippians 3:10). Here, we also perceive how salvation comes through suffering. (Matthew 24:9-13).

Today Saint Paul is telling us to be generous in our weekly offerings to the church. St. Paul is telling us that he did not find or hear that the Thessalonians were obsessed with the idols of this world. And what, my brothers and sisters, are the idols of this world? Our wealth and its pleasures. I pray that we, like the Thessalonians, may not be obsessed with idols either.

Paul continued by saying that it is by living one's faith in Christ that we are rescued from the justice of God that will befall the unrepentant sinners. He mentions how closely he mixed with his fellow Christians and the authority of his word among his converts seems

to have sprung from the quality of his life, the example he set them. His attitudes and work-habits were in tune with the message that he delivered. His commitment to the task was evidenced by the troubles he had to bear, while spreading the good news. There was an intrinsic link between what he said and how he lived. At this point, I ask you to pray for me and for other priests: that we may practice what we preach.

The word spoken gave meaning to the life lived; and the quality of the life guaranteed the sincerity of the word. ***The people of Thessalonika accepted his message and found that it had a power to change their own outlook on life. Paul names their experience "joy of the Holy Spirit." They touched the living Spirit of God in the midst of their own lives.***

The love of God is actually enfolded in the nitty-gritty of human interpersonal relationships. The authenticity of our religion is guaranteed by the value of our love for real people. We could use the image of the flower that is rooted in the soil; it grows slowly by transforming the elements of the soil into its own living cells and eventually reaches up to the beauty of the sky with its own form, color and scent. The one sap enlivens the root, the stalk, and the flower and produces the perfume.

A truly Christian life is rooted in the earth and yet reaches up to the mystery of God through living in love. Paul took notice of the reputation of the Thessalonians spreading through the surrounding area. People were drawn to the Christian faith by the way these people were leading their lives. The good news diffused itself quietly through people admiring the way the Christians lived.

Now, to the Gospel: In Matthew's gospel, Jesus is frequently involved in confrontational situations. This reflects the tensions in the early church when Matthew wrote his gospel: between ***conservative Jewish Christians*** and ***more liberal Gentile converts from paganism***. The Pharisees in this gospel represent in some sense a conservative position that emphasizes observance of the law. They want to draw Jesus into their own interminable, pointless and sterile disputes about the relative importance of their numerous, detailed, and sometimes, self contradictory meticulous legal prescriptions.

Matthew tells us in chapter 22, verses 34 to 40, that Jesus was asked by a teacher of the law from the group of the Pharisees "***what was the greatest Commandment***". This question was meant to trap Jesus. The Ten commandments were dissected into 613 different Commandments. 248 of them were positive while 365 were things that should not be done. Jesus answered by saying, "***You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.***"

Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6, verse 5. This is the first and most important Commandment. It summarizes the first three of the Ten Commandments given to Moses

in the Book of Exodus, chapter 20, verses 1 to 11. Placing God first in one's life means walking in faith and in the love of God.

The second greatest Commandment is, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*" This Commandment summarizes the last seven of the Ten Commandments given to Moses in Book of Exodus, in the same chapter 20, but now in verses, 12 to 17. The second Commandment means that if we have the love of God within us, it should shine towards others. Love is meant to be shared, not to be selfishly kept to oneself.

Brothers and sisters: I want you to see the quick wit of Jesus. Jesus does not pluck his summary teaching from the air. He quotes from Scriptures - from the Shema Yisrael (Deuteronomy 6), the great daily prayer of Judaism. He invokes Scriptures as the source of His response. The Pharisees never anticipated this. I would like to imagine how the expert or doctor of the law (*who wished to trap Jesus by that question*), shamefully retreated into the crowd to hide himself.

We heard how Jesus demonstrated such quick wit last Sunday when He demanded a coin from those Pharisees who wanted to trap Him. He appealed to Scriptures – a thing that His questioners never anticipated. They thought that **only they** had the monopoly of knowledge of the Scriptures. He demonstrated that they, despite being religious leaders, possessed a coin that bore the image of the emperor, a thing that was prohibited in the Book of Exodus, chapter 20, verse 4. And the obvious discovery is that these Pharisees themselves brought into the Temple something that smacked of paganism like a civil coin that bore the image of the emperor who declared that he was worthy to be worshipped. Please do not forget that all these discussions were done at the Temple. This happened the day after He drove out all those buying and selling, overturned the moneychangers' tables and told them: *It is written in the Scriptures that God said, 'My temple will be called a house of prayer.'* But you are making it a hideout for thieves. (Matthew 21: 12 -13). The day before that, Jesus triumphantly entered the city of Jerusalem as we can read from Matthew, chapter 21, where people acknowledged Him to be the Son of David, hence a King.

Now, back to the coin: To be "caught" in possession of such coin inside the Temple eroded the credibility of the Pharisees. Jesus did not possess a coin while His questioners possessed one. They were discovered with their hands in the cookie jar. That discovery was so telling.

Brothers and sisters: Jesus teaches us that on those two Commandments (Laws) are based the Law and the Prophets. The words mean that in those two Commandments are found the entire revelation of the Old Testament. Our acts of love should be towards God first and then to our neighbors. Our neighbors include everyone: our families, our friends and even strangers.

If we break the second commandment by not loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, then we do not love God. For as Jesus frequently said, what we do to others, we do to Him. If we give someone a drink of water, we are giving a drink of water to Jesus. If we clothe the naked, we are giving clothing to Jesus. If we feed the hungry, we are feeding Jesus. Through the second commandment shines the first commandment. If we love others by our actions, we love God.

Let us reflect on these words. If we can identify areas of weaknesses that need to be corrected, we need to pray to the Holy Spirit that He may come to us and sanctify us in Christ by the grace of the Heavenly Father, so *that we can walk with God in love and be transformed in the likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Amen.