

## **“Perceiving True Reality by Living Authentic Christian Stewardship”**

Homily for the 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

August 7, 2016, Pastoral Visit to Most Holy Redeemer Parish

### **Introduction**

Catholics who have spent time in Rome and are of the more devotional type, visiting all of the churches and holy sites, usually have their favorite churches. One that I always enjoy visiting when I am there, and showing to people I know when there are visiting there, is the church of St. Ignatius. It is a classic Roman basilica style church, cruciform with a dome at the center. When you walk into the church, you are immediately struck by beautiful art on the ceiling: a scene with Jesus at the center and souls going up into heaven – and a few others falling down – all in a very 3-D effect. But as you walk further into the church, you begin to notice that the art work begins to go out of proportion; it becomes more and more distorted, and then so does the dome. You finally realize that the dome is not a dome at all, but is actually flat and is only painted to look that way. And ceiling, too, is flat, but painted with a very striking and realistic 3-D effect.

I enjoy visiting and showing people this church not only because of the beauty of the art and the novelty of the effect, but also because of the moral lesson that it conveys. That is, it teaches us that you have to look beyond the surface in order to see the true reality of things.

### **True Reality**

This lesson, I believe, applies to many areas of life, but it begins with faith, specifically, the person of Jesus Christ. In the second reading for today’s Mass, the Letter to the Hebrews gives us a definition of faith: “Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.” “Realization” is best translated as “true reality.” Now, I don’t mean to give a theology lecture here, but it is worthwhile noting that the word in Greek is *hypostasis*. In those early centuries of the Church when our theology was being developed and defined using the categories of thought of Greek philosophy, this is exactly the word the theologians used to describe the relationship of the Son to the Father in the inner life of the Trinity: Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, is divine, the “true reality” of the Father.

Now, in order to perceive this, one needs to look beyond his physical body – that is, the people of his time had to, when he was present in this world in his physical body. And it is interesting to note who did, *and who did not*, perceive beyond the surface to recognize his divinity. The leaders of his own people did not, the very ones that you’d think *would* recognize it, as they were the experts in the sacred writings and the prophecies. Who did? The Roman centurion at the foot of the Cross: when our Lord dies, he is the one who exclaims, “Truly, this was the Son of God.”

“The Body of Christ” also refers to the Eucharist. Likewise here, we need the eyes of faith to perceive beyond the appearance of bread to recognize that the Lord, true to his word, has transformed this into the sacrament of his Body, that the true reality of this substance is that it is the Body of Christ.

Now, the term “Body of Christ” refers to yet something else: the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, as opposed to his physical body, when he was walking the earth. And here, too, we need to see beyond the surface: when put our faith into action, when we see with eyes of faith, we then perceive the “evidence of things not seen” – what we hope for, but is not yet (fully) realized.

In the Gospel reading for today’s Mass, Jesus teaches us about our place in all of this, who we are as members of his Body, the Church. He says: “Who, then, is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute the food allowance at the proper time?”

He speaks of us as stewards, a common image he uses in his parables. The steward is the servant to whom the master entrusts the administration of his goods. The steward administers the goods but they are not his, they belong to his master; and the master expects the steward to administer them

responsibly and in a way that yields an increase. “To distribute the food allowance at the proper time”: this is a reference to how we are to use the material things God has entrusted to us for exercising the works of charity.

## Stewardship

We speak, then, of the “spirituality of stewardship.” This begins with the recognition that everything we have is a gift from God and is meant to be used for God’s purposes, and returned to God with an increase, in the sense of spreading and increasing His love in the world. It is all really on loan to us, it is not really ours. We speak specifically about stewardship of time, talent and treasure because these are concrete realities that can be measured, and God has given all of these to everyone to some degree. It is all really a gift from God: even if you have earned what you have, it is because you have used wisely the gifts of intelligence and good health that God gave you; it all, ultimately, gets back to a free gift of God.

Stewardship is, then, essentially a spirituality of thanksgiving; it is the practical Christian spirituality for living our faith in the world: basically, loving the way God designed us to love, giving of ourselves without expecting to receive anything in return. It is *not*, then, giving to get, or giving with the attitude of, “I have and you don’t, so here take this from me because you need my help.” This can even become condescending, and engender a sense of superiority. Rather, when I engage in acts of charity with the Christ-like love of a Christian steward – investing myself in my gift, looking to encounter the other as a fellow human being, affirming the other’s human dignity – then it becomes a sacramental moment, one in which everyone gives and everyone receives, and so becomes an encounter with Christ. If you look beyond the surface, you can get a glimpse of God’s Kingdom; in such a situation one walks away changed, as they say in the advertising world, “new and improved.” This is the evidence of what we hope for, the true reality for which we long.

This, too, is how we heed words of our Lord in the Gospel: “Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.” When we live and love in this way, it is a sign of where our heart is. And, it never grows old: loving according to the way God designed us to love is always new and renewing.

Now, I realize that, when we look at the broader, global picture, when we consider all that is happening in the world and in our own country, this may all seem Pollyannaish. After all, Orlando is still fresh in our minds, it was only a few weeks ago. And yet, there has been so much violence since then, including here in our own country, I suppose that to some people even that may seem like a distant memory.

It is so hard to find answers to this mystery of iniquity. Yes, we do know that somehow God, in His own time and own way, will make it right, but perhaps we will never find a fully satisfactory answer in this life. One thing that we do know for sure, though, is that the answer to violence is not violence. Violence begets violence. No, the only adequate answer to any crisis – be it a crisis of violence or any other type – is love, love that always looks first to the good of the other.

This love of Christian stewardship is, I know, nothing new to you. It is what this parish has lived out in so many ways. Of course, I am immediately familiar with the Wednesday night suppers. But it is not only recently in the history of this parish; it is something that goes back a long way. I think especially of how this parish was among the first to mobilize in care for AIDS patients when that crisis first broke, offering them care and support at a time when most people wouldn’t even touch them for fear of the contagion. And the parish soon set up an AIDS hospice, one of the first – if not *the* first – in the city. This outreach to the wider community is how Christian stewardship puts into practical action the Church’s call to evangelize.

But you also care for each other. I know that in this parish you all know each, you notice each other, you care for each other, and when anyone is in need you reach out and offer help and support. This is real discipleship, the way a parish is supposed to be!

## **Communion**

This is the call to all of us in the Church, we all have a role to play in fulfilling the Church's mission. But we must do so working together in a spirit of communion, and this is the primary reason for the bishop's pastoral visit to the parishes of his diocese, and why he is required to do so every five years according to the Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops. (Yes, there is such a directory – it's basically our job description, about 300 pages long! Several pages describe the parish pastoral visit; it wouldn't be possible for the bishop to do it all in one weekend, and so we do some parts of it in other ways.) Yes, it has the immediately practical purpose of helping the bishop to get to know his diocese and to help his people to get to know him, but at a deeper, more fundamental level, it is meant to foster the sense of communion of the local church.

The bishop is really the focal point of that communion, and as the archbishop here, I am privileged to meet many wonderful people doing many wonderful things throughout our Archdiocese, in our parishes and in different movements and organizations. There is much good happening, and it often gets little attention or even goes unnoticed. And this parish is an example of that! But I find that you don't do what you do for the sake of calling attention to yourself, or getting credit for it, or winning esteem in the eyes of others. You do it for the sake of love, because this is what God calls us to do if we are to be faithful to Him. This is the true spirit of the Christian steward.

This idea of communion of the local church, then, is not just abstract theology; rather, it is how the Church operates on the practical level, how the Church concretely accomplishes her mission. As I like to say, "The principle of communion is the basic operating principle of the Church."

The bottom line, of course, is the ministries carried out in our parishes, because this is where the vast majority of our people are formed in the faith: it is where they are taught the truths of our faith that we have received from our Lord; it is where they pray and worship with their fellow parishioners, receiving the saving grace of the sacraments and growing in a deeper knowledge of Jesus Christ and a deeper love for him and friendship with him; it is where they serve with their fellow parishioners in the various ministries of the parish and in service to the wider community. However, the parishes do not have all of the resources they need to sustain all of their ministries; for many things, they depend up the Archdiocese. There are many examples, but just to cite a few we can begin with the whole area of formation, beginning with the formation of priests: the Archdiocese sees to the effective operation and maintenance of our seminary – St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park – so that we may have well-formed priests to serve in our parishes. We also have a program of formation for permanent deacons, and for different areas of lay ministry, catechists most especially. There are many other practical supports, too, that the parishes look to the Archdiocese for, such as management of personnel, of finances, legal issues, and the like.

This is why we have the central offices of the Archdiocese, sometimes referred to as the "chancery office." At the same time, though, the Archdiocese needs the support of you, the people in our parishes, so that we might have the resources we need to offer these supports and services back to the parishes. So you see, it really does all happen at the level of communion, sharing the blessings that God has given us for the sake of the proclamation of the Good News. Everyone has something to give, and when all give, all receive.

## **Conclusion**

In our second reading for Mass today, the Letter to the Hebrews speaks about Abraham by saying: "By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country." It likewise says about our other ancestors in the faith: "All these died in faith. They did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth, for those who speak thus show that they are seeking a homeland."

We are the spiritual descendants of Abraham and of all of these other ancestors in the faith. And we, too, then, are like them, we are pilgrims in this world, traveling toward our true homeland: heaven. The true follower of Jesus Christ is never completely at home in this world because our treasure is with him in the next life, and so that is where our heart is. But with the eyes of faith and the spirit of a Christian steward, we can see beyond the surface of the reality of this world to true reality; we can have glimpses of that life of heaven, and even get a little foretaste of it.

Thank you for all you do to serve the poor and needy in our community, for the care you give to each other, for the welcome you extend to me. With faith, hope and charity, let us travel together to build up God's Kingdom in this world, until we reach the end of our earthly pilgrimage and come to our true homeland where, in communion with all the saints, we will worship God face-to-face.