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“Catholic Educators in the Church’s School of Mercy”

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The Merciful Holiness By Which Our Life Will Be Judged

- The season of Lent in general, and a day of recollection in particular, are opportunities for us to focus on some of the biggest questions, questions that in the hustle and bustle of each day we can punt. Why am I here? Where I am going in life? How am I to get from where I am to where I hope to be, to where God wants me to be? In the readings for today’s Mass, God, our Teacher, gives us great clarity.
- He first tells us that the reason why we’re here, the reason why he created us, the reason why we’re born and in existence is to become more and more his holy image and likeness. “Be holy,” he tells us through Moses in the first reading, “for I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” The measure of our life will be determined by the measure with which we allow God’s life to enter into ours. Jesus himself would reiterate this point in the Gospel when he tells us “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful,” and “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Holiness is to become like God who is holy, holy, holy. We can’t do that, obviously, by our own power. We know all too well our weaknesses. But nothing is impossible for God.
- Holiness is ultimately the perfection of love, when God who is love dwells within us so that we can love God with all our mind, heart, soul and strength and love our neighbor with all our mind, heart, soul and strength. That’s why in today’s readings, God shows us the path to holiness precisely in the perfection of charity.
- In Leviticus in today’s first reading, Moses continues the Old Testament emphasis on “negative commandments,” or “thou shalt not’s.” St. Paul called the Old Testament a “pedagogue,” a “disciplinarian,” something that God had given us precisely to prepare for the New. Just like a parent begins to instruct a child morally through describing what they shouldn’t do — “don’t stick the key into the electric outlet,” “don’t put your hand on the fire,” “don’t hit your little sister,” “don’t cross the road without looking both ways first” — because these are much clearer for children to understand than larger positive commands that require some interpretation and application, God does the same thing with training us toward holiness. He gives us first what we shouldn’t do.
- Through Moses in the Book of Leviticus, he tells us not to steal, not to lie or speak falsely, not to defraud or rob, not to withhold wages, not to curse the deaf, not to trip up the blind, not to make dishonest judgments, not to play favorites, not to spread slander, not to stand idly by when our neighbor’s life is threatened, not to bear hatred, not to take revenge and not to cherish grudges. All of this is summarized at the end in the positively phrased “Golden Rule,” “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” but in practice in Old Testament morality, this was understood as the “Silver Rule,” as “Do not do to your neighbor what you would not want him to do to you.” This was the way God was training them in the perfection of holiness, by first clearly indicating to them behaviors that were contrary to charity.
- Throughout the Gospels, Jesus would himself teach us and show us positively what the perfection of charity was in his own care for the poor, hungry, grieving, abandoned, and all others in need. He called us to love others as he has loved us first to the point of washing their feet, crossing the road to care for their wounds, forgiving them and praying for them even when they were making themselves our enemies. But not even that was enough for Jesus. In today’s Gospel he gives us in a sense the pinnacle of his teaching on charity by identifying so much with others that he says that he takes personally whatever we do or fail to do to them. St. John wrote in his first epistle that we cannot love the God we have not seen if we don’t love the brother or sister we do see. And Jesus wants to help us to grow in the capacity for love by making it “easier” for us, calling us to treat others the way we would treat him, since he presumes that if we knew we were caring for him directly most of us would give it our best.
- And so the questions come for us:
 - When we see someone who’s hungry or thirsty, do we try to help get him food or do we tell him to go get a job? And if we know that Jesus identifies with the hungry, is it enough for us to wait for

someone who is hungry to approach us for food — a somewhat frequent occurrence for someone in big cities, especially outside of Churches — or do we go out in search of Jesus in the disguise of the man or woman or child with hunger pains? Jesus calls us not just not to treat the hungry and thirsty the way the Rich Man treated Lazarus (Lk 16) but positively to love them by feeding them.

- Do we welcome strangers or do we resent their presence? There is a terrible xenophobia (a fear of the stranger) present in some parts of our country, including among Catholics, with regard to immigrants. Many of us don't see them as brothers and sisters and we certainly don't see them as Jesus Christ. If we did, would we ever ask to see Jesus' green card? Would we ever fight to have Jesus deported? Yet this is what many Christians clamor for with regard to immigrants who entered or stayed in our country illegally. Jesus tells us that the way we treat them is the way we treat him. If we know Christ identifies with the stranger, do we go out in search of people to provide a welcome? Jesus here calls us not only not to abuse strangers in our midst but to welcome them into our homes, into our lives, and allow them to inconvenience us, because that's what loving them means.
 - Do we clothe the naked or do we take advantage of their nudity? Today we're living in an age of rampant pornography where so many are trained not to clothe the naked but strip them with their eyes and minds. So many fuel and fund the porn industry despite the fact that Jesus identifies with every person violated and objectified in this way. Similarly when we see someone without proper clothing, do we seek to help or do we leave the person on his own? If we know Christ identifies with the naked, do we go out in search of people, for example, who do not have winter clothing? Jesus here instructs us not only not to scourge them but to care for them, because that's what's consistent with loving them.
 - Do we a preferential care for those who are sick or do we ignore them lest we catch what they have? If we know Christ identifies with those who are ill, do we lovingly go out of our way to visit those who are in hospitals and nursing homes, rehab centers or homebound? Sickness is one of the most vulnerable times of life, a time not only of pain but also of occasional desperation when one has to suffer alone. Jesus had a special care for the sick and he wants all of us to do so remembering that when we see anyone ill, we should recognize that Jesus is saying to us, "I am ill and I need you to care for me." Jesus here calls us not just not to neglect them or "put them out of their misery" but to love them by treating them with sacrifice and tenderness.
 - Do we care for prisoners at all or just think of them as a bunch of thugs of whom our only reaction should be fear? Not everyone is called to prison ministry to strangers, but when we know someone in prison, do we seek to write that person and visit? Do we pray for those who are incarcerated? Do we seek to send Bibles or prayer books to help the time of imprisonment be a time of conversion rather than of hardening of hearts? When someone is released from prison and we meet the person in Church, do we continue to treat him mainly as an ex-con or do we try to help him get back on his feet? Jesus calls us here not just not to call for the death penalty for prisoners, but actually to go out of our way to minister to them in one way or the other, because that's what's consistent with loving them.
- Jesus makes clear that while we are not saved by our works — we've saved by grace through faith — we will be judged by our works. We will be judged by our love. It's not those who cry out "Lord, Lord" who will be saved, Jesus says, but the one who does the will of his Father in heaven. Jesus makes quite plain in the Gospel that those who don't care for the poor and the needy, who don't open their hearts to the stranger and to the prisoner, go to Hell. He notes that many, if they knew it were he in disguise, would readily care for him in their need, and he wants us to treat everyone the way we would treat him.
 - Jesus identified with the needy because he himself on the Cross experienced all of the attributes he describes in today's Gospel. He was hungry on the Cross and cried out in his fifth words, "I thirst!" He was stripped totally naked (the loin cloth with which he's vested on the Crucifix is merely for our sense of decorum). He was a stranger even in the world he created, kicked out of his own city of Jerusalem to die as a malefactor at the place of the skull. He was sick and wounded, having had his flesh ripped open by a brutal Roman scourging, having been beaten and crowned with thorns. He was imprisoned not only in the high priest's dungeon but pinned to the cross not by chains but by nails. He continues to live out his crucifixion when people don't care for him, don't love him, in others.

- Today as we come to this Mass, we ask the Lord Jesus, who we behold under the appearances of simple bread and wine here, to help us to recognize him in the disguise of the poor we'll meet later in the day. We ask him to help us to hunger and thirst for the charity toward others for which he hungers and thirsts. We ask him to recognize that we, too, are strangers on pilgrimage together with him and that just as he has provided for us, we're called to share that generosity with other strangers on the way; to grasp that when we've been ill because of our sins and needed a doctor, he's always been there; to see that we're naked and transparent before him but that he wants to clothe us in his virtues; to realize that we're imprisoned in our own worldly logic that rationalizes the lack of charity but that he wants to help us to use our freedom to do as much good as we can, to love as much as we can, to grow to do for others what he has first done for us.
- Today he calls us once more to be holy as he is holy, to be merciful like he is merciful, to love others as he has loved us and as we want to love him. And as he prepares to feed us, we ask him to strengthen us to live up to this call of loving mercy!