

**Homily for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Cycle C
February 3, 2013**

**St. Paul Church
Highland**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My brother Priests and Deacons, consecrated religious, brother Knights of Columbus, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I am happy to be with you today on this Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, the liturgical season named not because it is common or mundane, but because it is time ordered around the life of Christ. Just as the liturgical calendar takes its shape from the life of the Savior, so, too, should each part of our daily lives. Our lives should be ordered around Him who loves us and gave His life for us.

Unfortunately, not everyone's life is so ordered. We have witnessed in recent years a troubling distortion of the reality of love that has taken a deep hold in Western society, not only in the general culture of the day but also in the thoughts of many individual people. This distortion of the truth - and even the purpose - of love has been raised to new heights in recent months with the legal attempts to redefine marriage to include the so-called unions of two men or of two women.

Indeed, here in Illinois such an attempt to redefine marriage was made last month, and will be attempted again in less than two weeks – by one great irony – on February 14th, the memorial of Saint Valentine, if matters progress according to the wishes of the Illinois Senate President. You know already of the efforts of the Bishops of Illinois to oppose this attempt to redefine marriage and I urge you join us.

Those who insist on this redefinition of marriage claim to do so out of love. Should anyone be denied the right to love another person, they ask. The answer, of course, is no, provided that we have a true definition of love, such as is given us today by Saint Paul.

This passage is frequently proclaimed at wedding ceremonies, when a man is joined to his wife and the two become one flesh, because at the heart of marriage, as at the heart of every Christian life, is love (cf. Genesis 2:24). At the beginning of this passage, the Apostle tells us to “strive eagerly for the greatest spiritual gifts” (I Corinthians 12:31). At the conclusion of this passage, he tells us what the greatest spiritual gift is: “the greatest of these is love” (I Corinthians 13:13). Let us, then, consider this key and fundamental question: What is love?

Certainly, love is a feeling that we experience, an emotion, but it is also much more than a sentiment. Emotions come and go, like the waxing and waning of the moon, and sometimes they deceive us. It sometimes happens that we perceive to have been slighted by someone when no slight was actually done to us. We sometimes become angry with friends or family members, and while we feel anger towards them and not necessarily affection, it does not mean that our love for them has ceased.

Rather than being an emotion, love is a choice. Love is a choice for the good of another person. Love is also the desire to act so as to obtain the good for another person. Love, then, is not so much an emotion as it is an act of the will; love is a choice; it is a decision to act in a certain way, not simply a feeling over which we have no control.

We know that what is good is not sinful and what is sinful is not good. Authentic love, then, never encourages sin or leads a person further into sin, but seeks instead to help another live a holy life. Love seeks to lead a person further away from sin and closer to the truth. We also know that the truth is not a thing, but a person. Christ Jesus tells us, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6). One who loves seeks to lead the beloved always closer to Jesus Christ, to him who is not only the Good

Shepherd but is, as Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches us, Goodness itself (cf. John 10:11).

Parents know that when they raise their children and teach them the ways of love, that “love both elicits virtue and expels vice, not permitting it to spring up at all.”¹ If vice is not expelled but instead encouraged and fostered, then a person lives more in sin than in love, and their salvation is at risk. This is why Saint John Chrysostom declared, “In other words, says Paul, if I have no love I am not just useless but a positive nuisance.”²

Love, then, does not tolerate sinful desires and activities but seeks to root them out because “it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth” (I Corinthians 13:6). The Venerable Fulton J. Sheen put it this way:

Christian love bears evil, but it does not tolerate it.

It does penance for the sins of others, but it is not broadminded about sin.

The cry for tolerance never induces it to quench its hatred of the evil philosophies that have entered into contest with the Truth.

It forgives the sinner, and it hates the sin; it is unmerciful to the error in his mind.

The sinner it will always take back into the bosom of the Mystical Body; but his lie will never be taken into the treasury of His Wisdom.

Real love involves real hatred: whoever has lost the power of moral indignation and the urge to drive the buyers and sellers from the temples has also lost a living, fervent love of Truth.

Charity, then, is not a mild philosophy of "live and let live"; it is not a species of sloppy sentiment.

Charity is the infusion of the Spirit of God, which makes us love the beautiful and hate the morally ugly.

When the Church teaches and proclaims what is moral and what is immoral, what is holy and what is sinful, what is right and what is wrong, what is just and what is unjust, she is met with opposition; evil never likes to be called out for what is. Yet in the face of such opposition, the Church continues to speak the truth because "love endures all things" because she does not teach her mere opinion, but the truth she has received from Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 13:7).

There will be some - as there have always been - who will seek to hurl those who speak the truth over a cliff, as they attempted with the

Lord, but the truth must still be spoken because the message of salvation in Christ must always be proclaimed (cf. Luke 4:29). As we seek to love in truth we must remember the word of the Lord: “They will fight against you but will not prevail over you, for I am with you to deliver you” (Jeremiah 1:19).

In his Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*, by which he began this Year of Faith, Pope Benedict XVI pointed out that “the renewal of the Church is also achieved through the witness offered by lives of believers: by their very existence in the world, Christians are called to radiate the word of truth that the Lord Jesus has left us.”³ If you and I strive for the greatest spiritual gift, the gift of love, and seek to share that love in everything we do by acting for the good of others, not only will the Church be renewed, but the world as well.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, 33.3. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Vol. VII: 1-2 Corinthians*. Thomas C. Oden, et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1999), 130.

² Saint John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, 32.6. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Vol. VII: 1-2 Corinthians*. Thomas C. Oden, et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1999), 128.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 6.