

**Homily for the Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year C
Saturday Vigil Mass - February 2, 2019**

**The Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, in just over a week we will celebrate Valentine's Day, or, more precisely, Saint Valentine's Day, a day which the world around us associates with romance. Naturally, people will once again purchase cards, or flowers, or gifts, or sit down for intimate dinners to celebrate a day dedicated to secular culture's overly sentimental view of love.

Love is not only an emotion, but it is so much more than just a sentiment. Emotions come and go, like the waxing and waning of the moon, and sometimes they even deceive us. For example, at times we perceive that we have been slighted by someone when no slight was actually done to us. Occasionally, we might even 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 simply being an emotion, love is a choice. It is a choice to seek the good of those around us before our own interests. Love, then, is not so much an emotion as it is an act of the will, it is a decision to act in a certain way, not simply a feeling over which we have no control.

In our second reading today, Saint Paul, in his letter to the Church at Corinth, reminds us that the driving force for our lives must be the theological virtues, namely, Faith, Hope and Love.

Our **Faith** in God sustains us so that we might live as Christ's disciples in the midst of the world today in spite of the obstacles that we encounter. Our **Hope** in the promise of eternal life motivates us to remain focused, and to believe that our efforts will not be in vain. However, **Love** gives us the framework as to how we should live so as to follow Christ as His disciples and in turn draw others to Him as well.

Saint Augustine of Hippo once said:

Love and do what you will. Whether you hold your peace, through love hold your peace. Whether you cry out, through love cry out. Whether your correct, through love correct. Whether you spare, through love must you spare. Let the root of love be within. For of this root can nothing come except that which is good.¹

These words of Saint Augustine point us to the reality that love is the greatest and most important of the theological virtues. For if love of God and love of our neighbor are not at the center of our lives, all of our efforts are in vain. Love must motivate us to choose to follow God's will for our lives and so live as His disciples each and every day.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, Saint Valentine certainly understood the reality of Love. We all know that the color red is associated with Saint Valentine's Day, but have we ever stopped to consider why? The reason the color red is associated with Valentine's Day is because red is the color of martyrs. Yes, Saint Valentine was a martyr. It is the color of martyrs because martyrs are people who shed their blood in witness to their faith in Jesus Christ. Saint Valentine was willing to die out of love for his Savior who died for all of our sins on the cross.

The Roman martyrology records the February 14th death of a Roman priest named Valentine who died in the year 269. According to a book called *Valentine's Day* by Fern G. Brown, February 14 was called "Valentine's Day" after Saint Valentine, a Christian priest who lived in Rome in the third century after Christ.

At that time, Christians in the Roman Empire were persecuted and forbidden to follow the “new religion” of Christianity. The priest Valentine was apprehended for preaching Christianity and sent by the emperor to the prefect of Rome, who, on finding all his efforts to make Valentine renounce his faith ineffective, commanded him to be beaten with clubs, and afterwards, to be beheaded. He was executed on February 14. He was buried on the Flaminian Way, a Roman highway extending north from Rome to Rimini built in 220 B.C., and a basilica was built in his honor less than a century after his death. He was later proclaimed a saint.

Another story tells of a priest named Valentine who loved children and gave them flowers from his garden. He was put in prison by the emperor because he refused to pray to the Roman gods. The children missed their friend and threw him bouquets of flowers with love notes attached through the prison bars. Valentine spent a year in prison with only the most basic necessities. The jailer’s blind daughter brought him messages and food and tried to make Valentine’s life easier. The emperor was impressed with the priest’s gentleness and dignity. The emperor offered to set Valentine free if he would give up Christianity and begin to worship Roman gods. Valentine refused. He was ordered to be put to death. During the priest’s last days, he

prayed that the jailer's daughter would regain her sight – and she did! Then Valentine was beheaded.

Perhaps you never heard these stories of Saint Valentine before, but if we are truly to live the life of a dedicated Catholic Christian, it is essential that we understand the life of martyrs like Saint Valentine and be willing to follow their example. In doing so we will certainly bring others to our Lord and so bring about a world that truly understands what it means to love one another.

This reality is underscored in the fact that during the Year of Faith, Pope Benedict XVI in his Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*, 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.²

I assure you, that 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.

So, as we prepare to approach our Eucharistic Lord in Holy Communion let us ask Him who loved us so much that He gave His life for

us on the altar of the cross to teach us how to love Him and those around us more perfectly and so live as His disciples in the midst of the world today.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Saint Augustine, Sermon on the First Epistle of John 4:4-12, no. 8.

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 6.