

Homily for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time - Cycle B
St. John Vianney Church, Sherman, Illinois
November 2, 2024

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Souvenir stores and gift shops are a featured stop whenever we travel on a vacation or pilgrimage. We like to have something to remind us of a wonderful time at the seaside or some place of beauty or historical interest, or a shrine of religious significance. As Catholics, we have any number of visible symbols that help us to connect with the realities of our faith, like the crucifix, a statue, a holy picture and so on. These little signs and symbols remind us of our memories and the deeper meanings that they represent.

If you were to visit the home of any observant Jew, even today, you would see, attached to the doorpost, a small cylinder or box called a *mezuzah*. Inside this is a small parchment scroll on which are written words from today's first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, "Listen, Israel: The Lord our God is the one Lord..." Today's reading instructs us to let these words be written on our hearts. A few verses later, however, the instruction is to write them on the doorposts of our homes. These few verses are often

referred to as “the Credo of Israel,” the heart of Israel’s faith. They are to be recited many times a day: on rising and on retiring; on coming into the house and going out; as part of morning and evening prayers; and they are to be diligently taught to children.

It is highly likely, then, that this short scriptural prayer was part of the daily prayer of Jesus, a faithful Jew, and so it immediately comes to His lips when He is asked which is the first of all the commandments of the Law. The genius of Jesus is to link it straight away with the command from the Book of Leviticus, “You must love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus understood that to love God with all our heart and soul, mind and strength, it is not sufficient merely to be able to recite the formula from the scriptures, even less to touch or even to wear the box containing the words. Love for God has to be expressed in action towards those among whom we live. As Jesus himself is the living sign of God’s love for us, so we are called to be living signs revealing love for God in the mercy and compassion we have towards our neighbors.

Up to this point in Mark’s Gospel, the scribes and Pharisees have been presented as adversaries of Jesus, but something in Jesus’ response touches one scribe. He agrees with Jesus and goes further: love of God and neighbor

is far more important than sacrifice or ritual offering. It is love which connects or binds us with God, love which connects us with our neighbor and love which connects us with our truest self. The very word “religion” means “that which binds together.” Love is the deepest meaning of religion, and the followers of Jesus are a people who seek to love the Lord our God and love our neighbor as ourselves.

What does this mean in practice? Jesus says, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). The two great commandments to love God and neighbor are specified in more detail in the Ten Commandments. The first three commandments specify how we are to love God:

1. *“I am the LORD your God. You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.”* We fulfill this commandment by living the virtues of faith, hope, love; worshipping God alone; praying and having reverence for holy things. It forbids idolatry, superstition, spiritism, tempting God, sacrilege, and attendance at false worship.
2. *“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.”* It commands reverence in speaking about God and holy things; the keeping of oaths and vows. It forbids blasphemy, the irreverent use of God’s name,

speaking disrespectfully of holy things, perjury, false oaths, and the breaking of vows.

3. *"Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day."* It commands Catholics to go to Mass and pray on Sundays and holy days of obligation. It forbids missing Mass through one's own fault and unnecessary servile work on Sunday and holy days of obligation.

The next seven commandments specify how we are to love our neighbor:

4. *"Honor your father and your mother."* It commands love, respect, and obedience on the part of children for their parents; care on the part of parents for the spiritual and temporal welfare of their children; and obedience to civil and religious superiors. It forbids hatred of parents and superiors, disrespect, and disobedience.
5. *"You shall not kill."* It commands respect for all human life from conception to natural death, and safeguarding of one's own life and bodily welfare and that of others. It forbids unjust killing, suicide, abortion, euthanasia, and endangering the life and limb of oneself or others.

6. *"You shall not commit adultery."* This requires modesty, purity, and chastity in word and deed. It forbids obscene speech; pornography, sexual activity outside of marriage, and impure actions alone or with others.
7. *"You shall not steal."* It commands respect for the property of rights and others, the paying of just debts, paying just wages to employees, and integrity in public office. It forbids theft, damage to the property of others, not paying just debts, not returning found or borrowed articles, giving unjust measure or weight in selling, not paying just wages, bribery, graft, cheating, fraud, accepting stolen property, not giving an honest day's work for wages received, and breach of contract.
8. *"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor."* This requires truthfulness, respect for the right of privacy and the good name of others, and the observance of confidentiality when required. It forbids lying, injury to the good name of others, slander; gossip, rash judgment, contemptuous speech, and the violation of confidentiality.
9. *"You shall not covet your neighbor's wife."* This commands purity in thought and forbids willfully entertaining impure thought and desires.

10. *"You shall not covet your neighbor's goods."* This requires respect for the rights of others and their property. It forbids envy, avarice or greed, and the desire to take, to keep, or damage the property of others.¹

The scribe who questioned Jesus comments that this understanding of the Law as love of God and neighbor is far more important than any holocaust or sacrifice. This links nicely with today's second reading from the letter to the Hebrews, where we are told that the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus does what all the sacrifices of the old Law could not do; that is, save us from our sins. The sacrifice of Jesus is the perfect act of love for God and neighbor. In His life, suffering and death, Jesus offers to God the Father that love which alone can reconcile humanity with God.

The sacrifice of Jesus is made effective for us through our sharing in the life of the Church and through our participation in the sacraments. They are the signs that not only remind us of the most important truths of our faith, they actually bring them about. When we are baptized, we enter into the grave with Jesus where our sins are washed away; then we rise to new life with Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can live with Jesus and like Jesus in our lives of love and service of the people among whom we

live. In the Eucharist we participate with Jesus in that eternal offering of humanity's love and worship of the Father; and we receive from the Father the outpouring of His love and mercy as we receive Jesus in Holy Communion. The best way for us to fulfil the command to love God and neighbor is to share in the life of the Church, especially in the Eucharist, as Our Lord comes to us at this and at every Mass in Holy Communion.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Cf. Michael Hains, "The Ten Commandments," *EWTN.com*; accessed online November 2, 2024, at <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/ten-commandments-10336>.