

“Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law... You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law.” These were the words we just heard in the Second Reading from St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Now the next logical question may be: “What does it mean to love?”

The modern secular world has distorted and redefined the notion of love so much so that there is real ignorance and popular confusion when it comes to the true meaning of authentic love, which every human being naturally yearns for. Indeed, love is the essence of human existence and so we were freely created out of love, to be loved, and to love. So what does it mean “to love?”

Let me first say what “love” is *not*: love is *not* condoning, excusing, justifying, or approving evil and sin. Love is *not* supporting *everything* that someone thinks, says, and does, even if it’s objectively wrong, sinful, and evil. Tragically, for many in our modern secular world, love has been equated to moral relativism and this false notion that in order to “love someone, you must accept, embrace, and support”

everything they think, say, and do, even if it's objectively and morally wrong, sinful, and evil. ***This is not love.***

Rather in the ***Catholic*** understanding, to love means to selflessly seek the ***authentic good*** of another purely the sake of the other. To love means to freely share in the being of another. And the “authentic good” for ourselves and others is one’s holiness and salvation—one’s repentance and ongoing conversion—one’s happiness and freedom in accordance with truth, goodness, and beauty.

Our Lord Jesus Christ expands upon all of this for us in today’s Gospel from Matthew when He teaches His Apostles about “Admonishing the Sinner,” which is the one of the 7 Spiritual Works of Mercy. To admonish the sinner, means to lovingly correct the sinner for the sake of the sinner’s soul. Like all of the spiritual works of mercy, admonishing the sinner is an act of love. To admonish the sinner is to ***love the sinner*** and ***hate the sin.***

So while our Lord commands us ***not*** to judge the hearts and souls of others, he ***does*** command us to judge the words and actions of others ***out of love for them.*** The divine command “not to judge” is ***not*** a

proclamation of moral relativism, where we live in a world where nobody's words or actions are judged to be right and wrong, good and evil. Such a world where human behavior is not judged by an objective moral standard would lead to absolute anarchy, lawlessness, confusion, and chaos—if that were the case, we wouldn't have judges and a criminal justice system. So while we are not called to judge *souls* for eternity, we *are* called to judge *deeds* out of love for the person and this is what our merciful Savior teaches us in the Gospel today.

Another word for love is charity and so to make it sound catchy, one could say that the Lord calls us as His disciples to *charity through accountability*. If we wanted to summarize today's Gospel using three words, you could say the Lord is demanding *charity, humility, and accountability*. Brothers and sisters, we are all sinners in need of Christ our Savior and the grace and salvation He gives us through His Church. As imperfect sinners we all need be held accountable for our words and actions. And the accountability we extend to each other *must spring from authentic, genuine love*—from one's desire for the authentic good of another purely for the sake of the other. We must be *humble* enough

as sinners to be *held accountable* by Christ and others and we must be *courageous* enough to *hold others accountable for their actions*.

Again, “admonishing the sinner” can *only come from true love*, which is the fulfillment of the Law—it *cannot* come from hate, sinful anger, arrogant self-righteousness, pride, or revenge. To determine the morality of human action, motive is a key component. If I’m condemning the sins of others out of hatred for them or a sense of arrogant self-righteousness, then my evil motive corrupts my condemnation. But if one condemns the sins of another out of love for God *and* the sinner and urges the sinner to change for the sake of their salvation, then one’s motive is pure and the act is morally good.

Notice how Christ spells out the four-step process of spiritual accountability and fraternal correction. First, He says, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him *alone*. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. *If he does not listen*, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to *listen to them, tell the church*. If he refuses to listen even to the church,

then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector” or in other words have nothing to do with them until they change! This sounds harsh but all of this is designed to lovingly get the person to change – to encourage and challenge the person to turn away from their sins and embrace the good.

Now this last course of action that our Lord Jesus enumerates is truly the last resort! In fact, it is the Biblical basis for the Church’s discipline known as “excommunication”—wow what a politically correct term! Excommunication is not some evil, dark thing that the institutional Roman Catholic Church invented in the Middle Ages! No excommunication comes straight from the mouth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Who in today’s Gospel, bestows His own divine authority upon the 12 Apostles, authority which He first gave to St. Peter and now extends to all of the Apostles in a unique way saying: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” The primary exercise of this divine power is in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and in the laws and disciplines of the Church, including excommunication.

Remember, everything that our Lord Jesus just said, including his teaching on excommunication, is rooted in His love for sinners and His desire to save us and transform our lives. Excommunication, while a prescribed last resort for helping a hardened and unrepentant sinner, is meant to be a remedy for the sinner purely for their sake! Like all good discipline, this is an extraordinary act that is born out of love and is designed to renew one's love for God and others.

Brothers and sisters, we can call it whatever we want: fraternal correction, spiritual accountability, or charitable feedback. We all need charitable feedback in our lives and we should always be humbly open to it in order to grow in holiness. Charity, humility, and accountability. Our Lord commands us to be humble in *accepting* charitable feedback and He commands us to be courageous in *offering* charitable feedback to others for the sake of their holiness and salvation.

As we prepare to worship and receive our eternal and merciful Judge, our Lord Jesus, in the Most Holy Eucharist, let's open our hearts and minds to the grace of our Savior, Who desires our salvation more

than we do. Lord Jesus, help us to grow in charity, humility, and accountability.