



ONE-DAY RETREAT SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2020

GIFTS OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH

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Good afternoon, once again, my name is Kelly Meraw and I'm the Director of Pastoral Care for the Collaborative of St. John- St. Paul. First, let me start by saying it is an absolute privilege to walk with you through this retreat today. I want to acknowledge first that it is beyond my comprehension what you all must have gone through, and continue to face on a daily basis. I am a parent, and from the day my daughter was born I became acutely aware of what would be the most catastrophic thing that could ever happen to a human, and you each have faced that unspeakable loss. It is both a fundamental teaching of the Catholic Church, and a universally acknowledged truth that we live in a very broken world. Nothing depicts that brokenness, that disorder, like the death of a child.

I imagine, as well, you are each at a completely unique place in your spiritual life. You may cling closely to God during your grief, or perhaps you may be feeling abandonment, resentment and outrage toward Him. Perhaps in one day you are feeling absolutely every spiritual and emotional proximity to God. The death of a child must push you to the edge of faith life. Regardless of where you are at; I want to share with you that you are a beloved Child of God, who see's you, and will meet you exactly where you are. He knows your heart, and the hearts of your children better than anyone else because He created them both and placed them lovingly together.

It is my hope today that I can share with you the gifts of the Catholic faith, that saved my life. They are the moments of the most profound stillness, the epicenter

of gratitude, and source of the deepest peace. They are the sacraments. See, I am a convert to Catholicism. I was raised in a Protestant denomination, and even on a path to ministry when the Holy Spirit unveiled for me the truth of the Catholic Faith, by way of Her sacraments. I saw in the Sacraments the indelible marks of God's truth. I was a follower of Jesus Christ, and particularly His word; but had not yet experienced His grace. His grace was present to me in abundance in the sacraments. Catholicism brought me from head knowledge to heart knowledge. The Church offers us over 2000 years of Tradition; scripture, the catechism, the lives and writings of the Saints and Mystics, The Communion of Saints, but for me- Her heart is the sacraments because, in the sacraments - human to human - we are connected and enlivened by sacramental grace. There is no greater intimacy than the sacraments.

To start I'd like to start with the sacrament of reconciliation. I believe the sacrament of reconciliation is a worship experience like no other. In John's Gospel Jesus tells us, 'Peace I leave you. My peace I give to you; a peace the world cannot give, this is my gift to you. Let not your hearts be troubled or afraid.' Jesus knows us so well. Peace. Our greatest struggle is for peace, at every level and stage of humanity. Anxiety, Fear, Haste, Doubt, Insecurity- all thieves of our peace.

Romans 11 tells us 'God's gifts and His calling are irrevocable'. We as children of God have been given the Gift of the Holy Spirit in our baptism; and they are cultivated, bloomed and brought to fruition in our Confirmation. Those sacraments are the primary narrative of our life. God gifts are irrevocable, so we have Christ's peace available to us always. But now? After a loss like this? Maybe only for a time. But one path to the glimpse of peace is reconciliation.

Father Jacques Philippe writes this poignant depiction of our need for peace. He writes: 'Consider the surface of a lake, above which the sun is shining. If the surface of the lake is peaceful and tranquil, the sun will be reflected in the lake. The more peaceful the lake, the more perfectly it will be reflected. If, on the contrary, the surface of the lake is agitated, undulating, then the image of the sun can not be reflected in it.'

According to the Church, the purpose of our earthly journey is to glorify God in this life in order to be with Him in eternity. There can be nothing more important therefore, than achieving moments of peace, where you can glorify God and your child's life with your own peace. And you will be with them in the next.

This is a spiritual battle. But it is a battle you do not fight alone. God has given us the power of the Holy Spirit to accompany us. Prayer, Surrender and Reconciliation are the three weapons in this battle.

- Prayer is noticing God's constant gaze on you. It is allowing God to accompany you through the mundane, ordinary, the extraordinary and yes, the unspeakable in our lives. It is acknowledging His presence in it all, and abiding in His gaze. That abiding brings you closer to Him.
- Surrender is the paradox of spiritual maturity. It is in letting go that we allow God to prove Himself trustworthy. It is falling out of the airplane (and in this case being pushed) and allowing the stable cables of God's parachute of love and mercy save you. But surrender is not passive. It is a moment-to-moment battle which isn't possible without the supernatural help of the Holy Spirit. John's Gospel says there is nothing we can do apart from Him.
- And finally, Reconciliation. I don't know a single person who isn't clouded by regret, doubt or shame. It is a heavy load and one not meant to be carried long. This is the greatest gift of the Church. We are given the opportunity to set aside the heaviness. In the presence of Christ himself in the sacrament of Reconciliation, we are flooded with grace, the unmerited favor of God, and in the words of His Priest, "Your sins are forgiven". Your burden is lifted.

Before my conversion I kept short accounts with God about my short-comings. It was a regular practice of my prayer-life to bring my sins to God. But for anyone who has ever experienced therapy, you can certainly attest to the power of speaking our pain to another human. You really do feel better just having said it to another person. The sacrament of reconciliation is that, and so much more, because you are sharing vulnerably with another human, but you are also sharing your whole self with God- who sees and hears everything, spoken and unspoken in that sacrament. That sacramental grace is more than feeling better. It is experiencing peace. Peace is not an emotion. Emotions are movable. God's peace surpasses all understanding; and it is available to us on the other side of reconciliation.

I'll be speaking about another of the 'healing sacraments' later this evening; but right now I'd like to touch on The Eucharist. First I'd like to read a scene from you following the death of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. Two of Jesus' bereft friends are walking together.

A reading from the Holy Gospel According to Luke 24:13-35

Now that very day two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred.

And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them,

but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.

He asked them, "What are you discussing as you walk along?" They stopped, looking downcast.

One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?”

And he replied to them, “What sort of things?” They said to him, “The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him.

But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place.

Some women from our group, however, have astounded us: they were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive.

Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see.”

And he said to them, “Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke!

Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures.

As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther.

But they urged him, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over.” So he went in to stay with them.

And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them.

With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight.

Then they said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?”

So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, “The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!”

Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The Gospel of the Lord

Jesus makes himself fully present, particularly to those who mourn, in the breaking of the bread.

Catholics believe the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ is found in a small host. It is a concept that, for most, without the eyes of faith, would be incomprehensible. I would like to share the most recently recorded Eucharistic miracle, which I don't share as a method of convincing you of Christ's presence, but more as the profound measure of God's love for you and your child. The miracle occurred in Buenos Aires in 1996, under Cardinal Bergoglio (otherwise known as our current Pope Francis). A woman notices a host, in a parish after mass, placed carefully on an unlit candlestick at the back of the church. She brings the host to the priest, not knowing if it had yet been consecrated. He takes the host, puts it in a pyx, fills the pyx with water and places it in the tabernacle. 8 days later, he opens the pyx to find a bloodied substance. The priest calls Cardinal Bergoglio who asks him to take a picture of it; and to keep it. Eight years later, when the specimen shows no visible signs of decomposition both the priest and cardinal send the specimen to a scientist in New York. They offer no information about the specimen. Dr. Frederick Subiga concludes;

"The substance is true human flesh and blood. The analyzed material is a fragment of the heart muscle, found in the wall of the left ventricle close to the valves. This muscle is responsible for the contraction of the heart. The left cardiac ventricle pumps blood to all part of the body. The heart muscle is in an inflammatory condition and contains a large number of white blood cells This indicates that the heart was alive at the time that the sample was taken. It is my contention that the heart was alive as white blood cells die outside of a living organism. Thus their presence indicates that the heart was alive at the time the sample was taken. Further, the white blood cells have penetrated the tissues, which indicates that the heart has been under severe stress, as if it had been beaten about the chest."

My Sisters and Brothers, the Divine Heart of Jesus is still alive in the Eucharist. God's love is so vast for us. His Son's heart is still beating for us. His heart beats for you, and for your child. He makes himself available to you in the Eucharist, the food that satisfies. We literally take in the vastness of God's love when we receive the Eucharist.

Someone else is there at the table of the Eucharist as well. The Communion of Saints is a confusing teaching of the Church, but I'll do my best to simplify it. The Communion of Saints, spans time and space. All who believe make up the communion of saints: those among the living, and those among the dead. The communion on earth gather around God's altar week after week and in praise cry out "Glory to God in the Highest. We worship You. We give You thanks.". That heavenly communion gathers too, at the throne of God, in the heavenly liturgy, bowing down and worshiping God day and night.

The same Christ who reigns on the throne in heaven with his saints above is made present in the Eucharist with his saints below. And when the faithful receive the Eucharist, there is Holy Communion between all of God's saints. Holy Communion. You are together again in that moment. There can be no moment of greater hope than that, for now.

The Catholic Church places the crucifix literally at the center of its worship. This is an image that again, as a convert, makes me highly uncomfortable. Jesus is resurrected! He is alive and is very much with us today! Must we look at His body everyday? But in working with Diane and Charley and Laurie through the continuation of the Emmaus Retreat, it strikes me as appropriate that everyday we are faced with the tragedy of the death of God's Son. There is no greater horror than the death of a someone's child. It makes those of us who couldn't possible fathom it indeed, uncomfortable. But discomfort is NOT agony. And a dead child is agony. God our Father understands that agony. Our Blessed Mother understands that agony. They can understand your unique pain, in a way that no human can.

I'd like to conclude with a reading from the book of the Prophet Isaiah:
(Isaiah 65:17-23)

See, I am creating a new heaven and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered nor come to mind. Instead, shout for joy and be glad forever in what I am creating. Indeed, I am creating Jerusalem to be a joy and its people to be a delight; I will rejoice in Jerusalem and exult my people. No longer shall the sound of weeping be heard there, or the sound of crying; No longer shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, nor anyone who does not live a full lifetime; One who dies at a hundred years shall be considered a youth. They shall not toil in vain, nor beget children for sudden destruction; For they shall be a people blessed by the Lord and their descendants with them.

The Word of the Lord.