

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – September 10, 2017 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,000 words

The last paragraph of the Code of Canon Law tells us that the highest law in the Church is the salvation of souls.¹ In today's second reading St. Paul says that "love is the fulfillment of law" and that in terms of our relations with one another, all the commandments can be summed up in the love of neighbor. Canon Law thus summarizes things in a more vertical way, in terms of salvation – our relationship with God; while St. Paul, at least here,² summarizes things in a more horizontal way, in terms of mutual love – our relationship with each other. The two are not incompatible or exclusive. For our Lord himself, in the gospels, tells us that we must love both God and neighbor.³

Considering these various interpretive keys for law: What, then, are we to do with today's gospel passage? Our Lord lays out a process for dealing with problems in his Church, which can ultimately lead to excommunication. First the erring person is to be warned privately; then publicly; then there is a more formal process that can lead to his being treated as an outcast – to his being removed from the community. Christ even invests the leaders of his Church with authority to bind and loose in these matters. It is all rather weighty, and indeed, the Church still has a penal process in her system of law today to deal with more serious offenses. But can any of this really be compatible with the idea that the greatest law is salvation and love?

One answer given is, in fact, "no". Over the last century or so this undercurrent slowly grew in the Church and picked up full steam with the cultural revolution of the 1960s. Many who held this theory asserted that in the early Church – which they saw as a pristine time in which everything was just as Christ intended it to be – there were no laws except that of love. Thus they pitted "law" and "love" against each other. What we can see in this is a re-definition of "love": love, for them, can only be positive, warm, friendly, and easy. Whereas "law" is seen as something negative, hostile, and so forth. And so, over the last century or so, but especially the last 50 years, there has been a strong current within the Church that disdains law and sees it as at best, unhelpful, and at worst, harmful.

But this approach has not served anyone well. A glance back over the recent great scandals in the Church shows us quite clearly that disdain for law is in no way loving or conducive to salvation: the great harm that was done by not following Church laws and so punishing such grave offenses and preventing further ones; the loss of souls and the scandal given; the undermining of the credibility of the Gospel and of the Church's witness. Any who hold to a view that pits law against love or salvation are challenged – rather urgently – to rethink such a position. It really comes down to what the true definition of love is: "willing the good of the other".⁴ That "good" is an objective reality, not merely what the other perceives as good subjectively.

Consider, for example, your own children. If one of them has a sweet tooth and doesn't easily moderate his consumption of junk food, you don't turn a blind eye to that. You don't tell him, "Oh, honey, that's OK, go ahead and eat the entire package of Oreos". And neither do you reason to yourself that although you had previously held that it was bad to eat so much sugar, it must now be good, because your child thinks it so. No – you recognize that regardless of what he thinks, this is objectively not good for him. You tell him that. You then start to lay down the law,

¹ *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1752.

² St. Paul has much to say on the subjects of law and love, and it would be erroneous to speak of this one passage as a complete summary of his entire thought on these topics.

³ Cf. Matthew 22:36-40.

⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1766; cf. also St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica I-II*, q. 26, art. 4.

limiting his access to the junk food and helping him form better habits. This is not easy: perhaps there are tantrums and setbacks. But you recognize that it is the loving thing to do, really what is good for him; moreover, you have the authority (and duty!) to do it, so you do. And eventually things do change for the better.

And so we come back to today's gospel. Jesus wants us to be united in the truth: which is to say, united in him. He tells us, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life";⁵ he also says, "the truth will make you free".⁶ Truth is an objective reality that makes a claim on us. In other words, we are held to its standard, and not the reverse. When someone departs from that, therefore, we must try to bring them back: that is the loving thing to do. That is the path of salvation! But we never sacrifice the truth: in the end, if our efforts fail, we do not say, "Oh, that's OK. You see things differently. Go ahead and keep doing what you are doing." No – our Lord lays out even a rather stiff penalty for someone who is so intransigent and resistant to what is true and good. And everything that he did was loving.

So Christ gives us a lesson in tough love. It's a lesson that you parents already know about; it's also likely one that we've all experienced in our own upbringing. But, here's the kick: How have we experienced tough love in our relationship with God? How has he disciplined us when we dug in our heels? Has he brought us to our knees at different points in our lives? And, are we striving to live in the truth now – not our own private truths, but the truth to which all will be held by God? He wants us to be united with him and in him. We are in this together. So let us respect the order that he has established and help each other in love, along the path of salvation.

⁵ John 14:6.

⁶ John 8:32.