

TO LOVE AND TO SERVE THE LORD

By

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As we move with eager anticipation towards the Lenten season we will do well to reflect on the words often used as part of the dismissal at the end of Mass, “go in peace to love and serve the Lord”. Let’s take this word ‘love’ first. Of course this has been the focus of Pope Benedict’s first encyclical and you might want to look at that as you reflect on what ‘loving the Lord’ means for you. I would like to suggest that we might especially explore two essential qualities of love.

Firstly love is unitive. Divisions and separation break down when love is present. There is an experience of oneness. We can know that from our experience of human love. To love another person, whether it be a parent, spouse or friend, is to experience a total unity with that person. This can now be translated into our love of Christ. To love Christ is to know that we are one with Christ. To love then in this way is an entry into a profound intimacy. If we haven’t quite reached that level in our love of the Lord yet then we need to engage in practices that we use to develop any human relationship. We need to spend time together, time that is spent in listening and openness to the other. At the risk of being thought sacrilegious might I suggest that every day during Lent you have a “date” with the Lord? Listen during this time to his words to you. The Song of Songs or much of the Johannine corpus from Holy Scripture would be a good source for this listening. You will naturally find that as your unitive and loving relationship with the Lord ripens so will your experience of oneness with all creation. It is out of this experience that compassion arises. Compassion is not an emotional “feeling sorry for” but a realization that we are one with the other and we feel their pain as our own.

This moves us quite normally to the second essential quality of love. Love is of its very nature life-giving. Of course this is very obvious in a spousal relationship but it is also true that a test of our love is whether all our relationships are life-giving and enriching for everyone. This means that there should be no self-seeking, exploitation or manipulation. Such love provides the foundation for our service. As I write this I have been preparing for the upcoming Sunday Liturgy where the gospel gives the account of Jesus healing Peter’s mother-in-law. In that account we hear how Jesus sets the woman free from whatever imprisons her. She is liberated from her ‘fever’ and thus able to respond with loving service. Reflecting on this story we might want to consider where we are stuck and need to be set free. So part of developing a loving relationship with the Lord may be asking to be set free from whatever prevents us from loving and serving in a life-giving way. As this begins to happen then we need to have the courage to seek the help of the Holy Spirit to discover the ways in which we are called by Christ to serve. We can divide our service into three areas, Time, Talent and Treasure. How do we use our time? What are the God-given talents that we have to offer, small or large they can all be used in the sphere of our life? Finally how generous are we in our giving, sharing our world’s goods with others? Throughout Lent it would be good to evaluate how we serve the Lord in each of these areas. Some of our service may be explicitly in our parish church but we should not limit it to that. To be life giving in our love and faithful in our service we need to look realistically at our lives and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us in our decisions. This way the dismissal at Mass moves from being just a liturgical formula to becoming a lived reality.