

Synopsis Easter V (April 24) Homily on John 13:31-33a, 34-35 L/16

Introduction: Today's readings are about renewal and new things: *The New Jerusalem, a new Heaven and a new earth, and a new commandment.* The first reading, taken from the Acts of the Apostles, describes how the small Christian communities helped the work of renewal in their members by their *agápe* love, imitating the *agápe* love of Paul and Barnabas. The second reading, from the Book of Revelation, explains how God renews His Church, *the New Jerusalem* by being present in her members and in their parish communities and liturgical celebrations. "See, I am making all things new." Today's Gospel passage gives us the secret of Christian renewal as the faithful practice of Jesus' new commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13: 35). Jesus has added a new element to the Old Testament command of love by teaching us that the true test of discipleship is to love other people in the same way that he has loved us, with sacrificial, unconditional, *agápe* love. Hence, the renewal of Christian life means a radical change of vision and a reordering of our priorities in life. Such a renewal brings us to embrace new attitudes, new values and new standards of relating to God, to other people and, indeed, to our whole environment.

Life messages: 1) Let us learn to love ourselves so that we may learn to love each other. The old commandment (*Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18*) says: "Love your neighbor as yourself." We cannot learn to cherish others and care for them if we have never learned to do the same for ourselves. We live in a world that denies our basic human worth. How do we reclaim our basic worth? We can become whole and holy only when we learn to love ourselves properly, acknowledging the fact that we are children of God and that the Triune God resides in our souls, making our bodies the "temple of the Holy Spirit."

2) Let us love others in our daily lives: We are asked to love as Jesus loved, in the ordinary course of our lives. We love others by responding to their everyday needs with love and compassion. We love others by comforting and protecting those who have experienced loss. We love others by serving others in every possible way no matter how small, seeing the face of Jesus in them. We love others by forgiving rather than condemning, by challenging rather than condoning. Finally, we love others by sacrificially sharing our time, talents and blessings with them.

3) Let us demonstrate our love for others in our gatherings and parish assemblies: When we are assembled as a religious or social community, we have an opportunity to demonstrate our love for one another. People must see

Christians as people who interact with a love and concern for one another that reveals their strong love and appreciation for each other. They should see in us a quickness to appreciate and readiness to forgive, even as Christ has forgiven us.

Easter V [C] (April 24): Acts 14: 21-27; Rv 21: 1-5a; Jn 13:31-33a, 34-35

Anecdote # 1: Catherine Lawes who transformed a notorious prison with love: In 1921, Lewis Lawes became the warden at Sing Sing Prison in New York state. No prison was tougher than Sing Sing during that time. But when Warden Lawes retired some 20 years later, that prison had become a humanitarian institution. Those who studied the system said credit for the change belonged to Lawes. But when he was asked about the transformation, here's what he said: "I owe it all to my wonderful wife, Catherine, who is buried outside the prison walls." Catherine Lawes was a young mother with three small children when her husband became the warden. Everybody warned her from the beginning that she should never set foot inside the prison walls, but that didn't stop Catherine! When the first prison basketball game was held, she went ... walking into the gym with her three beautiful kids, and she sat in the stands with the inmates. Her attitude was: "My husband and I are going to take care of these men and I believe they will take care of me! I don't have to worry." She insisted on getting acquainted with them and their records. She discovered one convicted murderer was blind so she paid him a visit. Holding his hand in hers she said, "Do you read Braille?" "What's Braille?" he asked. Then she taught him how to read. Years later he would weep in love for her. Later, Catherine found a deaf-mute in prison. She went to school to learn how to use sign language. Many said that Catherine Lawes was the body of Jesus that came alive again in Sing Sing from 1921 to 1937. Then, she was killed in a car accident. The next morning Lewis Lawes didn't come to work, so the acting warden took his place. It seemed almost instantly that the prison knew something was wrong. The following day, her body was resting in a casket in her home, three-quarters of a mile from the prison. As the acting warden took his early morning walk he was shocked to see a large crowd of the toughest, hardest-looking criminals gathered like a herd of animals at the main gate. He came closer and noted tears of grief and sadness. He knew how much they loved Catherine. He turned and faced the men, "All right, men, you can go. Just be sure and check in tonight!" Then he opened the gate and a parade of criminals walked, without a guard, the three-quarters of a mile to stand in line to pay their final respects to Catherine Lawes. And every one of them checked back in. Every one! They

learned the commandment of love as practiced by Catherine. [*Stories for the Heart* compiled by Alice Gray (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1996), pp. 54-55.]

2: "Wow! I would like to be that kind of brother." In the lovely book, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, there's a story about a man who came out of his office one Christmas morning and found a little boy from a nearby project looking with great admiration at the man's new vehicle. The little boy asked, "Does this car belong to you?" And the man said, "Yes. In fact my brother gave it to me for Christmas. I've just gotten it." With that, the little boy's eyes widened. He said, "You mean to say that somebody gave it to you? And you didn't have to pay anything for it?" And the man said, "That's right. My brother gave it to me as a gift." With that the little boy let out a long sigh and said, "Boy, I would really like..." And the man fully expected the boy to say, "I would like to have a brother like that, who would give me such a beautiful car," but instead the man was amazed when the little boy said, "Wow! I would like to be that kind of brother. I wish I could give that kind of car to my little brother." Somehow that child understood the secret of the "new commandment" of love, which Jesus gave to his apostles during his last discourse, as described in today's Gospel: "*Love one another as I have loved you.*" True love consists, not in "getting" something from the lover, but in "giving" something to the loved one. The most familiar example of this type of love is a mother's love for her child.

Introduction: Today's readings are about new things: *the New Jerusalem, a new Heaven and a new earth, and a new commandment.* In the reading taken from the Book of Revelation, God tells us that His saving and healing work in the world is ongoing: "*See, I am making all things new*" (Revelation 21:5a). The first reading, taken from the Acts of the Apostles, describes how the small Christian communities helped the work of renewal in their members by their *agápe* love, imitating the *agápe* love of Paul and Barnabas. The second reading, taken from the Book of Revelation, explains how God renews His Church by being present in her members and in their parish communities and liturgical celebrations. Today's Gospel passage gives us the secret of Christian renewal as the faithful practice of Jesus' new commandment: "*Love one another as I have loved you*" (John 13: 35). Jesus has added a new element to the Old Testament command of love by telling us that the true test of discipleship is to love other people in the same way that he has loved us. Hence, the renewal of Christian life means a radical change of vision and a reordering of our priorities in life. Such a renewal brings us to embrace new attitudes, new values and new standards of relating to God, to other people and, indeed, to our whole environment. For most of us, "renewal" is something that

comes at different stages in our lives, each time bringing us to a deeper understanding, insight and commitment.

First reading: Acts 14: 21-27: Each Jewish synagogue served the Faith community year round as a) a House of Prayer (b) a House of Study and (c) a House of Assembly or Socialization. When Jesus came upon the scene, he also fostered the idea of small communities. He gathered a small group of twelve men to travel with him, to share prayer, ministry, Faith and values. He promised his followers that wherever two or three would gather in his name, he would be present among them. After his death and Resurrection, Jesus' disciples tried to establish small Christian communities wherever they found a welcome. Paul and Barnabas knew that evangelization and Baptism were but the first steps in a lifelong process of turning to, and being transformed by, Christ. Hence, in their subsequent visits to Christian communities, they continued to instruct their converts. Already in the first Christian century, believers understood that catechesis is a cradle-to-grave endeavor. Paul and Barnabas also considered their mission an extension of the small community's outreach to the world. Because of this they were *accountable* to the Christian community that had sent them. Therefore, they returned to relate all that they had done, careful to credit their success and the increasingly universal character of the Church to God, who "*had opened the door of the Faith to the Gentiles*" (v. 27). It is a welcome sight to see modern Christian communities, which are criticized for too much structural set-up, returning to their first century roots by establishing congregations that are a network of individual Christians, bound together in prayer, faith, mutual support, service, missionary outreach and accountability. We may not be called to the same kind of missionary activity as were Paul and Barnabas, but we must be as unselfish in our service of others as were these early Christians.

Second Reading, Revelation 21:1-5a: The Book of Revelation was written to bolster the faith of persecuted early Christians. Today's passage begins the [final section](#) of the book. The scene is really a vision of the new age of eschatological fulfillment inaugurated by the death and Resurrection of Jesus. The ancient city of Jerusalem had long been for the Jews a token of God's presence with them. God had aided them in capturing and holding it, in making it their capital, in building His Temple there, and in returning to it after their exile in Babylon. Within the holiest chamber of the Jerusalem Temple, they kept the stone tablets of the Law given to Moses and placed in a chest known as the *Ark of the Covenant*. God dwelt in a particular way above this chamber. These details give richness to the image of the "*New Jerusalem*" spoken of in Revelation. The image is also a metaphor for the Church, which is always called to reveal God's presence among us. Today's

passage from the Book of Revelation (21:3) gives us the assurance that “*God’s dwelling is with the human race.*” It affirms the fact that God is present at every moment of human history, even those most desperate and threatening. Jesus’ death and Resurrection have created a state in which a once-distant God is now present to every person and in every situation. Moreover, Jesus has given us the insight and power to transform everything in our lives by practicing *agápe* love in our interactions with people. It is through this constant love-centered interaction among us that the “new earth, the new Heaven and the new Jerusalem” can begin to come into existence - not at some unknown future time and in some other place but here and now.

Exegesis: Today’s Gospel reading comes from Chapters 13:1--17:26 of St. John’s Gospel, known as “The Last Discourse,” which took place at the Last Supper, on the night before Jesus went to the Cross. In these chapters, Jesus has left urgent messages for his Apostles and for us – things that he wanted to tell us before he went away. This farewell discourse is a powerful and intimate part of Jesus’ teaching on the Christian concepts of glory and love.

The Christian concept of glory: The glorification mentioned in today’s passage refers, above all, “to the glory which Christ will receive once he is raised up on the cross (John 3:14; 12:32). St. John stresses that Christ’s death is the beginning of his victory: his very crucifixion can be considered the first step in his Ascension to his Father. At the same time it is glorification of the Father, because Christ, by voluntarily accepting death out of love, as a supreme act of obedience to the Will of God, performs the greatest sacrifice man can offer for the glorification of God. The Father will respond to this glorification which Christ offers Him by glorifying Christ as Son of Man, that is, in his holy human nature, through his Resurrection and Ascension to God’s right hand. Thus the glory which the Son gives the Father is at the same time glory for the Son.” (*The Navarre Bible: Text and Commentaries*). As Christ’s disciples, we also will find our highest motivation and glory by identifying ourselves with Christ’s obedience in our daily lives, especially by keeping his new commandment of sacrificial, unconditional and forgiving *agápe* love.

The new commandment: In the second part of Jesus’ farewell discourse, he gives his followers a new commandment: they must love one another as he has loved them. They would be known, not by the sign of the fish or even of the cross, but by their mutual love, the fruit of their conversion. Just as Solomon, in the story of the disputed child, was able to discern the identity of the true mother by her love, so will the world be able to identify the true disciples of Jesus by their love for one

another. The command of Jesus is both new and old. It repeats the precept of Lev. 19:18 *to love one's neighbor as one's self*. What is new is that this love characterizes the new life inaugurated by Jesus and is proof of one's love for God (1 Jn. 4:7). Jesus' new commandment calls for love without limits, conditions, or prerequisites. This love opens our eyes to facts that we might otherwise overlook: that the poor in the world belong to our family; that those who live in despair may be saved by our care of them; that peace can come to the world through our efforts

The nature of Christian love: Jesus speaks of *agápe*, a love that requires total commitment and trust. It is the kind of love with which God loves us, a love that should be the model of the love we have for others. This love should be more than just a warm feeling toward others; it should be a compassionate gift of ourselves to meet the spiritual and bodily needs of our brothers and sisters. *Agápe* implies a reaching out to others in a caring attitude for their wellbeing without expecting any favor in return. It is strong, positive, difficult, determined action. Jesus repeats the command to love one another three times, first explaining what it is ("*a new commandment*"), how it is to be applied ("*as I have loved you*"), and finally noting that this love would stand *as the trademark* of his disciples. Not only is this a new commandment, but also, Jesus teaches, it is the greatest. To love, in fact, is to know God—"*Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love*" (1 John 4:7-8). The early Christians practiced this love literally. That is why Tertullian stated that the heathens held the Christian congregations in high regard: "*See, how these Christians love one another.*" The fact is that Jesus' death and Resurrection served, not just as an example of how to love, but as the agent that actually freed us from our selfish love through His indwelling presence. It was this new kind of love which was manifested by the first disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem (Acts 2:44-45), and in the Churches in Macedonia (2 Cor 8:1-5). It was a love that was attentive to the poor and the needy. During his life on earth, Jesus Himself was lovingly present to those who were not at all lovable. He allowed himself to be moved with pity and compassion when he encountered those in need, and he was moved to tears in the midst of sadness. He openly shed tears at the tomb of Lazarus. He shed tears also over the city of Jerusalem. Even the anger that Jesus displayed in the Temple was rooted in love -- the love for His Father and for His Father's house. Jesus loved by serving others, by helping them and by healing others. His was a love that healed and built up, that challenged and inspired people. It was a deeply forgiving and sacrificial love. "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends*" (15: 13).

Life messages:1) Let us learn to love ourselves so that we may learn to love each other. The old commandment (*Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18*), says: "*Love your neighbor*

as yourself.” How do we learn to cherish others and care for them if we have never learned to do the same for ourselves? We live in a culture that devalues life and worships death—a culture in which people drug themselves into oblivion. Women and girls are willing to starve themselves to fit some unrealistic media image of beauty and worth. People and relationships are sacrificed on the altar of “workaholism.” How are we to love ourselves when we are told over and over again that we are unlovable? How do we reclaim our basic worth? We can become whole and holy only when we learn to love ourselves properly, acknowledging the presence of the Triune God in our souls, making our bodies the “*temple of the Holy Spirit.*” Only those persons who are fully convinced that they are themselves lovable because God has loved them and so brought them into being can reach out comfortably and unconditionally to love those who themselves cannot love but can only hurt and hate and destroy. It is through constant love-centered interaction with God and each other that the “*new earth, the new Heaven and the new Jerusalem*” can begin to come into existence.

2) Let us love others in our daily lives: We are asked to love as Jesus loved, in the ordinary course of our lives. This means that we should love others by allowing ourselves to be moved with pity for them. We love others by responding to their everyday needs. We can show love by materially sharing with those who have less. We love others by comforting and protecting those who have experienced loss. We love others by serving others in every possible way no matter how small. We love others by forgiving rather than condemning, by challenging rather than condoning. We love others by responding to the call of God in our lives and by walking in the footsteps of Jesus. We love others by making sacrifices for them. This is how the world will know that we are the Disciples of Christ.

3) Let us demonstrate our love for others: When we are assembled and have guests, we have an opportunity to demonstrate our love for another. They must see Christians as people who are glad to see one another, who are willing to take the time to visit with each other and who know each other's names. Our assemblies may be the only time some guests have the opportunity to see Christians interact with love and concern for one another, an interaction that reveals the strong love and appreciation for one another which the members have. Christians will often sin against one another and offend one another. But others should see in us a quickness to forgive, even as Christ has forgiven us.

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