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 "I will ask the Father, and he will give you
 . . . the Spirit of truth."— *John 14:16-17*

6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER 2008

APRIL 27, 2008

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ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 8:5-8, 14-16

1 PETER 3:15-18

JOHN 14:15-21

The crowning moment of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius is what is called the *Contemplatio Ad Amorem* or the *Contemplation To Attain Love*. Before the meditation begins, St. Ignatius offers two preliminary observations. The first of which is that love ought to be manifest more in deeds than in words, and the second that love consists in a mutual communication between two persons. In other words, the one who loves gives and communicates to the beloved whatever he has, and the beloved in return does the same to the lover. Therefore, if one has knowledge one shares it with the other, and it is the same way with other gifts or material possessions. There is nothing earth shaking in Ignatius's observations, since they are just that, observations. If we simply observe two people who truly love each other we see this kind of mutual sharing which really confirms their mutual love.

Today in our Gospel from John we return to the "Farewell Discourse" of last Sunday's Gospel. Today's reading is outlined by two parallel statements at the beginning and end of the reading, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments," and, "Whoever has My commandments and observes them is the one who loves Me." Our faithfulness to the Lord's commands becomes the only decisive and reliable criterion that makes it clear who truly loves Him. To make an impression on His disciples, Jesus repeats this statement six times almost like the refrain of a song in His *Farewell Discourse* hoping to insure that they will not forget its importance.

In the course of His teaching throughout the four Gospels we find Jesus encouraging His disciples to do certain things and to avoid doing others. Yet, I think that it is not His intention that we put together His "thou shalt" and "shalt not" to form a list to be done or avoided that will clearly mark us as people who love Him. Instead, we need to return to our Gospel reading from last week which immediately precedes today's Reading when He tells us that "He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life," and where in effect He presents Himself as our rule of life. Here, clearly, Jesus' words and actions conform to both of Ignatius' preliminary observations as Jesus is about to enter into His Passion and Death, allowing His actions to show His love, and here He also gives to us what He has, nothing short of His very self.

In addition to that, however, He also is true to His word and does not leave us “orphans”, but instead shares with us a part of His divine life with us by sending the Holy Spirit as another Advocate to support us, and lead us, and to plead our cause. This Advocate gives us the eyes of faith so that we may believe without seeing.

In our Reading from the *Acts of the Apostles* we see Philip immediately after the martyrdom of Stephen leaving Jerusalem for safety’s sake and going to Samaria where, as you remember, Jesus had already made some inroads with the community near Jacob’s well. But, here for the first time the disciples begin to proclaim the Word of God to a non-Jewish audience and to cure those who were sick or in the grip of the devil. As the Samaritans began to accept the faith, Peter and John come to them and laying hands on them give them the gift which the two of them already possess, the Holy Spirit. This evangelization and laying on of hands prove to be the very act of love which Ignatius speaks of and which Christ has given to His Apostles and disciples so that they too might share it with others.

The *First Letter of Peter* this morning confirms the obligation of Christians to share in love the Good News of Christ with anyone who asks, but Peter also warns that the Word, the Love of Christ which Christians are so eager to share, is not always accepted with the readiness and gratefulness of the Samaritans. Sometimes the Word is rejected, and more than simply rejected it is returned with violence and suffering for the sharer. Even in rejection and suffering, however, Peter reminds us that there should be joy since we are doing what we must do, sharing what we must share. We can be sure that in doing the Will of God even if others reject it, we will be rewarded by the Holy Spirit.

Peter is speaking in this *First Letter* to a community somewhere in Asia Minor that was living in the midst of a people who did not share their faith or hope in Christ. They were believers among unbelievers, and that often led to persecution. Our position seems to have little in common with theirs, but as Catholics living in what has traditionally been the Bible Belt of the South, a place where Evangelical Christianity has thrived we are often enough even today, outside of the more urban areas, perceived not as fellow Christians whose belief and hope in Christ we share but as the “Whore of Babylon.” We are seen as the “Anti-Christ” whose mission it is to draw others from their true belief. Certainly this attitude has changed greatly in the recent past, but it is by no means entirely gone. What is more is that the internet has given those who hate us as Catholics an open forum to present their rage. Side by side with this sort of perception we live in another society, the overarching society of materialistic America, which does not take Christianity very seriously. A society in which that very thought of self-sacrifice is looked on at

the very least as foolish and totally misguided. Sandwiched as we are between these two attitudes we may find it very difficult to lead a life that is fully Christian, and not unlike the community that received Peter's letter.

If we return again to Jesus' words in today's Gospel, "Whoever has My commandments and observes them is the one who loves Me," we might ask "how difficult is it for us to honor the great commandment of love when those we are called to love either look on us "evil" or look on us as 'foolish and deluded'"?

It is only through the new Advocate, the Holy Spirit that we have the courage to act in such situations. The New American Bible translates the Greek word "*Paraclete*" as advocate which means one that is called to defend or to speak for another. But "*Paraclete*" has other meanings. *Paraclete* is a healer one who searches for a cure or a simply a physician. It can, however, also mean a helper or an assistant as well as a counselor as one who gives advice in times of confusion. Finally, the *Paraclete* is a comforter one called to give strength or courage. In reality the Holy Spirit, as the *Paraclete*, sent by Jesus is all of these. After Christ's return to the Father it is the Holy Spirit who then enables each succeeding generation of Jesus followers to live out our Christian lives no matter what our circumstances may be. And so, no matter where we find our self, whether we experience acceptance or rejection, whether others love us or hate us, whether we face difficult obstacles or find the going smooth, we are still able to carry out the Commandment of the Lord to love if we trust in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ knew well that once He physically departed from the company of His Apostles and disciples that they would face difficulties that were both external and internal. He knew that there would be opposition to the Good News He missioned His followers to preach. He knew that their faith would sometimes be weak, and He did not expect them to face the future by themselves, and so He sent the Advocate. But, the Holy Spirit is amorphous, it blows where it will, and like the wind we can't see it. We can only see its effects. The history of the Faith teaches us that the Holy Spirit has been a continual source of courage and strength both for the Church and for individual Christians for two thousand years. Is there any reason to believe that the Spirit will fail us now?

In a few minutes as we prepare for the Consecration of the Bread and Wine, I will ask in the name of all of us gathered here together, that the Father send His Holy Spirit upon the gifts of bread and wine, to make them holy so that they may become the Body and Blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is through the Spirit that we receive this Eucharist, and in receiving it we

are nourished and strengthened so that we might continue to fulfill the mission Christ has handed on to us. We can state that mission in many ways: we can say it is to proclaim the Good News, or to continue the Lord's work of reconciliation, or to make the Crucified and Risen Christ known, but as John's Gospel clearly states this morning *our mission is to return in kind what we have been given. And, that is simply whether it be easy or difficult, to love as we have been loved.*