

**Homily for the Courage Conference Mass
Mundelein Seminary Main Chapel
Mundelein, Illinois**

**Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary Time - Cycle A
July 30, 2017**

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, Consecrated Religious, members of Courage, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is truly good to be with you here, to celebrate this Eucharist in conjunction with the Courage conference. It is always very good for me personally to come back to Mundelein Seminary, where I studied for the priesthood, and to celebrate Mass here in this sanctuary where I was ordained both a deacon and a priest. So it is good to come back to the roots and the very beginnings of my priesthood and to be renewed in that way.

We all need to go back to our roots from time to time, reflecting on the way things were at the beginning, and recapture those treasures which may have been lost or corrupted over the years. Going back to the roots is a very radical thing to do, since the root of the word 'radical' is the Latin word *radix*, which means 'root.'

For us individually, going back to our roots as Christians means revisiting what it means to have been baptized. It means trying to recapture the meaning of what it means to be a Christian, or discovering that meaning for the first time in case we have never truly appreciated the true significance of being adopted sons and daughters of God. It means delving deeper into the implications of having been confirmed in the faith and being fully initiated as adult Christians filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit. It means truly comprehending the consequences of our bodies and our blood being transformed by the Body and Blood of Christ when we receive His Real Presence in the Eucharist. It means acknowledging the need to repent and confess our sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation with a firm purpose of amendment when we have strayed from His path, so that we can be restored to a right relationship with our heavenly Father through His bountiful and merciful grace.

For us as a Catholic community, going back to our roots as Christians means living as a people whose collective memory of the faith goes back two thousand years to the time of Jesus Christ and the early post-resurrection Christian community, and even beyond to our Old Testament roots of the twelve tribes of Israel as the Chosen People of God.

For the purpose of understanding better why the Courage Apostolate here in the twenty-first century is so focused on the virtue of chastity, we need to go back to the roots of the Church's sexual ethic as lived in the pagan culture of the Roman Empire.

One of the conceits of the baby-boomer generation, which reached its peak sixty years ago in terms of the number of births, is that the rebellious youth coming of age in the 1960's invented the "sexual revolution" and liberated people from the constricting sexual standards of the previously stifling codes of conduct that had reigned from time immemorial. The truth is that the so-called "sexual revolution" did not really discover anything new, but simply asserted a return to the libertine practices of sexual behavior found in the pagan worlds of ancient Greek and Roman culture. In fact, it was the early Christian community that brought about a sexual revolution, rejecting the hedonism of the Greco-Roman culture and replacing it with an ethic that valued purity for the sake of the Kingdom of God and viewed marriage between a man and a woman as an icon of the covenantal relationship between Christ and His beloved Spouse, the Church. In this sense, the virtue of chastity is the pearl of great price that we heard about in the Gospel, because it leads us to the Kingdom of God.

One of the reasons why this historical Christian understanding of sexual morality is incomprehensible to so many people in our times is that so many of them, including those who call themselves Christians, actually adhere to a form of religion that is essentially not Christian. This was the finding of sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in their 2005 study of the religious and spiritual lives of a broad cross-section of American teenagers. These researchers coined a phrase to describe the religion of these young people; they called it “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” and identified these basic characteristics of their spirituality:

1. “Moralistic” refers to an ethical code that expects people to be good, nice and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most religions of the world.
2. “Therapeutic” says that the central goal of religion is to help people to lead a happy life and feel good about themselves.
3. “Deistic” describes a God who created and ordered the universe at its inception, but now simply watches from afar and does not need to be particularly involved in people’s lives except when He is needed to solve a problem.

This belief system was found to be especially prominent among Catholic and mainline Protestant teenagers.¹ Certainly there are some worthwhile elements of this Moralistic Therapeutic Deism that can be found in Christianity, such as belief in the existence of God, loving our neighbor and seeking happiness. What is missing from this approach, however, are some elements of Christianity: the Word of God as revealed in Sacred Scripture and Tradition; the Trinitarian understanding of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; the incarnation of God as man in the person of Jesus Christ, His redemptive suffering and death, and His resurrection and ascension into heaven; the Lord's call to repentance, conversion of heart, taking up one's cross, self-sacrificial love, purity of heart, and – most of all – putting God above everyone and everything else so as to enjoy eternal happiness with Him forever in heaven.

In terms of putting God above everyone and everything else, I would like to tell you about a couple that I met recently at a conference in Portland, Oregon. This past May 2, I gave the Keynote Address for the Northwest Regional Canon Law Convention in Portland, Oregon, entitled, “Doctrine, Law and Practice in Light of *Mitis Iudex* and *Amoris Laetitia*,” two documents issued by Pope Francis. With regard to the question of

pastoral care for the divorced and remarried, Pope Francis had suggested in a footnote, “In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments.” The qualifier, “in certain cases,” means that there is no indiscriminate, universal or blanket permission for the divorced and civilly remarried to receive Holy Communion. One example I gave of these certain types of cases would be what is known in the Church as the brother-sister solution, in which the couple lives together publicly as husband and wife, but abstains from all sexual intercourse. In such cases, the couple who agree to live as brother and sister may receive Holy Communion with the approval of the bishop, provided there is no danger of scandal.

As part of the canon law conference in Portland, a married couple gave a presentation the day after my talk, describing their experience of living as brother and sister. Listening to couple’s experience provided a deeper dimension to our understanding of the brother-sister solution as a lived reality and not just a theoretical notion.

The husband spoke first, describing how he had been baptized Catholic as a child, but left the Church when he was a teenager and lived as an atheist for thirty years! Realizing that atheism left him feeling empty

and without any purpose in life, he began searching and eventually found his way back to Catholicism.

The wife then described how she had been brought up in a Protestant church, but after years of her own searching, she came to the conclusion that the true faith is found in the Catholic Church. She and her husband both spoke with a Catholic priest about returning to the Catholic Church in his case, and entering into full communion with the Catholic Church in her case.

One obstacle for both of them, however, was that each had been married and divorced previously. The priest helped them complete their paperwork petitioning the diocesan tribunal for a declaration of invalidity, commonly called an annulment, of their previous marriages. He then explained to them that they had to make a choice until their annulments would be granted: since they would be considered by the Church as still married to their previous spouses until their prior marriages had been declared invalid, they would either have to refrain from Holy Communion if they engaged in conjugal relations as husband and wife, or they could go to Holy Communion if they abstained from sexual relations and lived as brother and sister. Both of them quickly chose the latter, agreeing to live as

brother and sister because they wanted to receive Holy Communion. They lived this way as a family with their two sons for nineteen months, at which time both of their previous marriages were declared to have been invalid and their current civil marriage was convalidated in the Church.

When asked how they came to this decision to live as brother and sister, the wife responded by saying, “It was simple: we decided that God was more important than sex!” As simple as that answer may sound, it is also deeply profound. This couple quickly came to a great insight that they plainly saw as obvious in their view, but which seems to escape most people in our culture today. When you stop to think about it, the fact that so many people regard sex as more important than God is at the root of so many of our society’s ills, including abortion, contraception, adultery, fornication and homosexual relations.

After their talk, I thanked this couple for giving such a powerful example that obeying God’s commandments is not impossible, if indeed we are convinced that God is more important than our own selfish desires. The witness of this couple willing to practice sexual abstinence because they realized that “God is more important than sex” should be a source of encouragement for everyone involved in the Courage Apostolate. Jesus

said, “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). There is no greater happiness than to see God. It is indeed possible to live a life of purity and chastity if we truly love God more than our own selfish desires. Coming to that conclusion and living according to that conviction of faith requires God’s grace, so we should pray for this grace in this Eucharistic sacrifice, because “with God, all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26).

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).