

St. Maximilian Kolbe Memorial
August 14, 2010
Fr. Joe Bambenek
St. Joseph's Church, Clayton

1 John 3:14-18 Psalm 116 John 15:12-16

Sing: It's more than a feeling, more than a feeling

It is very special for me to be back here in Clayton, at St. Joseph's Church, to celebrate my recent ordination to the priesthood. This morning I am experiencing many feelings, including gratitude for my friends in the St. Louis area... especially for the several dozen of you who got up early on Saturday morning to be here, from as far away as Troy and South County. And I don't think I have celebrated Mass with as many priests since ordination day. Thank you, my brothers, for being here today. I also feel much gratitude for the experience I had during the summer of 2007 when I lived in the St. Joseph Rectory. In particular, for the generosity of Msgr. Shamleffer in your willingness to provide a home for an unknown seminarian from another diocese. And to the parish community for having warmly welcomed me, most especially Jane our lector this morning. The couple months I spent here were undoubtedly the most fruitful of the four years that I was in the seminary. Through the hospital ministry internship program called CPE that I took at St. Louis University Hospital, and by living here in Clayton, I gained deeper insight in a number of areas. And no area was more valuable than the insights I gained related to the nature of love, and of my own ability and inability to love as Christ loves.

Today's readings have much to say about the nature of love, and what they have to say is not sappy or sentimental. To use the line from the Boston song with which I began this homily, we hear clearly that love is more than a feeling... While love has an emotional content to it, the essence of love is not feeling excited about another, but rather, how we selflessly give ourselves to another, to the very point of laying down our life for another. By dying to our selfishness, we give life to others, and ultimately receive eternal life ourselves.

Perhaps no one in our time has better intellectually grasped the nature of love described in today's readings than Pope John Paul. The late Pope experienced the opposite of love at a crucial time in his intellectual development, the hatred unto death of the Nazi occupation of Poland, followed immediately by Soviet domination. John Paul, in his writings now known as the Theology of the Body, goes through the Bible and describes how it is through giving to the other, rather than taking from the other, that we express love, the love that leads to life. His writings are consistent with Vatican II, which explained in words that resonate with modern people the gospel passages, "he who loses his life, gains it, and who seeks to keep his life loses it." Vatican II states that man only finds himself through a sincere gift of himself. Furthermore, John Paul observes that the imperative to give ourselves is written into God's design for our very bodies, in which men and women were formed with a physical complementarity that matches mutual giving of love for which they are created. The intended apex of this self giving, of true love, takes its expression in the marital act, through which God cooperates with humans to create new life.

John Paul is also significant for today's Mass as he was the Pope who canonized today's saint. Maximilian Kolbe was a man who heroically lived out today's readings of literally laying down one's life for another in the most awful of circumstances. Kolbe was a Polish priest, one

of many taken prisoner by the Nazis during World War II and sent to the awful Auschwitz concentration camp. When a group of 10 prisoners were randomly condemned to die in retribution for the successful escape of one of their colleagues, Kolbe stepped forward to take the place of one of them, a man with a family who had cried out when he was selected to die, "My poor wife! My poor children! What will they do?" In the four days that followed, as Kolbe and the 9 other men starved to death in an awful basement death bunker, Kolbe led them in song so as to keep their spirits as high as possible. Kolbe died, that another might live. And in the process of dying, he continued to live out faith, hope and love. Miraculously itself, the man whose life Kolbe saved was ultimately released from Auschwitz alive, and went on to live nearly 55 years after Kolbe's death.

Making today all the more special for me is that Kolbe is one of my favorite saints. When I was 12 years old we learned about him in religion class at the time he was canonized. In fact, he is the first saint who I remember being canonized. As I have come to have an adult appreciation for his life, what has become so compelling is that Maximilian was an extraordinary man who accomplished great things in his life before dying a martyr's death. Kolbe built up a Franciscan religious community especially dedicated to the Blessed Mother that is still active. He was an effective missionary in the Far East. When I was in Poland a little over a year ago, we visited Auschwitz and I went down into the starvation bunker where Kolbe died. While there I prayed that as a priest I might be able to live fruitfully and courageously like Kolbe. Also while I was in Poland, in fact on the day we visited the Franciscan Community that Kolbe built, I was given the stole I am wearing at Mass this morning. I have intentionally waited to wear it for the first time as a priest until this morning's Mass.

In Maximilian Kolbe we see a man who, through his life of daily faithful, loving service to God, was slowly transformed into a man who could speak heroic and impactful words of love at the end of his life. And even more importantly, he walked the talk: he could lay down his life for another.

On a day like today we can be inspired by a saint's life, yet we can also be tempted to discouragement, recognizing how far short we fall of the saint's example. I suspect that there are at least some among us, starting with the homilist, who might be thinking "I could not, at this very moment, die for someone else, especially for someone I barely knew." Yet we hear in today's readings that we, as Christians, are supposed to love to that degree. After all, that is what Jesus did for us.

Then how is it that we get to the point? I propose that it is like running a marathon. Aside from a few exceptional people, one does not just get up one day and run 26.2 miles. It involves training. It involves a series of decisions, about diet, about persevering in a training schedule, taking the time to do it and continuing to run in spite of fatigue and pain. So it is in the spiritual life as well. The first step in living love as today's readings challenge us to live is to say yes to our vocation. To say yes to the purpose for which God created each one of us. Once we have said yes, we must feed that decision to follow God's voice with the truth that comes through prayer and reading the Bible; as well as the grace that we receive through the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist to strengthen us and Penance to purge us of our sins and selfishness. And then we must practice it in our lives, every day deciding to say yes to lovingly serve those who God places in our lives as part of our vocation. For most people here, this means lovingly serving our spouse and his or her needs. It means saying yes to our children, especially when doing so requires sacrifice. For the priests here, we have a close analog: our spouse is the Church and the children are our parishioners. For the members of SLU's Pastoral

Care department who are here this morning, it means selflessly being God's loving and compassionate presence as patients and their families walk in the dark valleys of serious sickness and death. And for those who are not married or otherwise committed, it means using the extra freedom that one has in singleness to serve those who God places in one's life.

Regardless of what we might have done in the past, by walking steps of holiness each day, by receiving the strength of God's grace through Word and Sacrament, when we get to the end of our time on Earth, we will be prepared to love as God wants us to love, even if that love means giving up our lives. As we consider the life of St. Maximilian Kolbe today, let us ask ourselves: are we following the training program of life-giving love that he followed, are we seeking to love as Jesus loved?

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