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Bill Cosby once said that “it’s a common misconception among children that parents are interested in justice. Parents don’t want justice, they want QUIET.” And yet, my brothers and sisters, God has done this most audacious thing, has taken this most improbable step of creating us not only to be his creatures, or servants, or slaves, or pets...but to be his adopted children, in his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. And so, becoming as a parent to us, his adopted children, what does God want from us? If today’s readings are any indication, He wants more than simply quiet, although that might be a good start. Looking at today’s readings, I was struck by the fact that they are couched almost totally in negative terms: in the Gospel especially, our Lord takes up the moral life of the Israelites as it existed since Moses, and seems to deepen the prohibitions and restrictions on their behavior. We not only can’t kill, we can’t nurture anger and hatred towards others, we not only can’t swear by Heaven, we can’t swear by anything, we not only can’t commit adultery, we can’t even think about it. Jesus focuses today on the “Thou shalt not” section of the 10 commandments. And so really the message of today’s Gospel speaks clearly enough for itself. We can either hear Jesus’ words as a summons to refresh and fine-tune our consciences once again, or we can go about our business as if we hadn’t heard or understood what Jesus enjoins on us today. There’s little more that I can add to such a long and specific set of teachings as we find today in Matthew’s Gospel.

And yet, seeking to balance the negative commandments of the moral law that Jesus gives us today with a reminder of his positive commandments, I thought first of the Greatest Commandment: positively speaking, we are to love God with all our souls, all our minds, and all

our strength, and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. In another place in the Gospels Jesus says “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” In another place in the scriptures we hear God say “be holy, for I am holy.” And even in today’s readings, I found, hidden in Saint Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, a glimpse of what God wants FOR us, as opposed to what he wants us NOT to do. Saint Paul says: “*we speak God’s wisdom, mysterious, hidden, which God predetermined before the ages for our glory.*”

Our GLORY! God wants our glory. In other words, he wants us to share in what he has, in what he is. He wants us to live forever, as he does, and, eventually, to live without pain, without fear or ignorance of any kind. He wants us to fully blossom, to be fully beautiful, and to exist forever in a fully open, perfect, healed, and holy relationship with him and with all the rest of Creation! And because our destiny of glory is so intimately connected with our being created in God’s image and likeness, our glory has much to do with the fact that we, like God, are free. We have free will. We are, in a sense, in our ability to choose freely the good and the bad, the better and the worse, creative, though not in quite the same way as God is Creator.

Then why so many NEGATIVE statements in today’s readings? Why so many commandments of “Thou shalt not?” Why indeed does the Catholic Church have the reputation of being the most morally uptight, prudish, and uncompassionate in her teachings, especially on matters dealing with marriage, and procreation, and abortion? Are we not free? Doesn’t our glory lie in our choosing? Why does Saint Paul make such a point about distinguishing between the wisdom given by God in Christ and the wisdom of this world, of the rulers of this age? Why does our Lord Jesus himself seem to take the moral life—as it was given by God, through Moses, to the Israelites—and make its restrictions and prohibitions all the more severe? Again, the answer is so that we might come into our glory, the glory for which we were made and

predestined by God. But here's the rub: it is not a glory that we create for ourselves, as so many who are carried away by the spirit of world believe. We are not destined to reach our ULTIMATE perfection, our ULTIMATE perfection, by means of ever-improving cures for cancer, or by inventing a cheaper better solar panel, or by spreading democratic forms of government all over the Middle East. Should we do these things? Yes of course, but we are destined to a glory that far surpasses them. And that glory is a free gift of our Creator, who freely chose to adopt us as his children and friends in Christ.

More importantly still, we are not even destined to reach our perfection and glory, both as a race and as individuals, by *creating our own system of values* and then living sincerely in accord with them. We are free, and we can figure out many things, but the one thing we do not have dominion over on this earth is the Knowledge of Good and Bad. That was the tree whose fruit was, and still is, off-limits, in the Garden of Eden. When it comes to truth, especially moral truth, God made us to be stewards, not creators...discoverers, not inventors. Pope John Paul II very courageously affirmed this by many teachings of his pontificate, as well as by his own heroic example of a moral life lived in accordance with Divine truth.

Now among the many achievements of Pope John Paul II papacy was the production of MANY documents, of a body of Church teaching that numbers in the thousands of pages. Foremost among these teachings were his Encyclical Letters, of which he wrote 14, each one seemingly longer than the one before it. So, he wrote a lot, and I can't blame anyone for not having read the majority of his teachings, but if you ever decide to pick up just *one* of his encyclical letters and really struggle through its long sentences and big ideas, and perhaps discuss it with your friends or family or students, then the one I recommend most is *Veritatis Splendor* (THE SPLENDOR OF TRUTH). Now there's not time to explain all of its main points

in this homily. But I'll say a little bit about it. It was the first time a full-length papal encyclical was dedicated to the Church's moral teaching and to moral theology. Pope John Paul felt it was urgently necessary to address a crisis in the moral life, and in the moral teaching, of the Church, a crisis whose effects can still be felt today. It was published in 1993, on August 6th, the Feast of the Transfiguration. That was no coincidence. In reaffirming the fact that in our lives as Christians we are called to discover and then align our freedom with OBJECTIVE MORAL TRUTH, knowable by reason, but confirmed and illuminated fully by Revelation, John Paul II was reminding us that it is on the path of truly formed consciences that we will follow Christ to our destiny of glory, our destiny of Transfiguration in the life that is to come.

So, to speak only of the concluding point of the letter, the pope, after addressing many current issues, areas of confusion, and public disagreements on morality, dedicated the last few chapters not to any difficult-to-follow arguments of Thomistic or phenomenological moral reasoning, but rather to commenting on the personal—and ultimately most convincing—witness to unchanging moral truth made by Jesus, the martyrs, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. He said: *“Jesus reveals by his whole life, and not only by his words, that freedom [again, the freedom whose meaning is so much distorted by today’s society yet that is so bound up with our destiny of glory as adopted children of God], freedom is acquired in love, that is, in the gift of self. Contemplation of Jesus Crucified is thus the highroad which the Church must tread every day if she wishes to understand the full meaning of freedom: the gift of self in service to God and one’s brethren.*

Jesus, then, is the living, personal summation of perfect freedom in total obedience to the will of God. His crucified flesh fully reveals the unbreakable bond between freedom and truth, just as his Resurrection from the dead is the supreme exaltation of the fruitfulness and saving power of

a freedom lived out in truth.” About the martyrs, he adds that the fact that we are called to live according to certain fixed moral truths “*is confirmed in a particularly eloquent way by Christian martyrdom.*” In other words, when we are faced with a choice between on the one hand re-defining our moral life because of difficulties or complexities that we encounter...or on the other hand suffering terribly, even to the point of death, for what traditionally have been held to be unchangeable moral truths, then we must follow the martyrs, and Mary, and Christ, to the Cross. And the Pope makes no attempt to hide the difficulty of this moral life, noting that in today’s society, it becomes almost a daily, bloodless martyrdom to resist the strong pressures from society that seek to re-define dramatically the demands of moral life, even of specifically Catholic Christian moral life, especially when it comes to matters pertaining to the 5th and 6th Commandments. Pope John Paul’s point? If people who came before us have been willing and able, with God’s grace, to suffer or die rather than violate certain moral truths, then we, who share the same human nature as the martyrs had, must likewise simply resolve to accept our own share of sufferings in order to reach our destiny of glory.

Let us resolve then, today, in the prayers we make during this Eucharist, to admit to God the difficulties and fears that we face in trying to live in a total, uncompromising way, the moral truths of the human person. Truths, again, that are knowable with difficulty by Reason, but that have been fully revealed in all their depth and confirmed in their unchanging solidity by Christ. Let us pray for the virtues that will help us in our ongoing struggle: for prudence, and temperance, and fortitude, and above all charity. Let us resolve to continue learning about and teaching to others the true moral life traditionally taught and lived by the Catholic Church. And let us ask in this Holy Communion for true fellowship with the crucified Christ, with his Mother who sorrowed at the foot of his Cross, and with all the martyrs who have joyfully followed them into true glory.

Please stand now, and let us profess our faith.

INTERCESSIONS

Our Lord Jesus has challenged us to prove our love by keeping his commandments. Our God will give power to answer his call to holiness to all those who cry to Him day and night in faith. Trusting in his wise and loving Providence, let us bring to Him our intercessions.

1. For our Pope, Benedict XVI, that through his words, deeds, and prayers—assisted by God’s grace—the Church may grow in unity and in faith, *let us pray to the Lord.*
2. For all bishops and priests, especially our bishop Kevin and his assistant bishops Mark and Douglas, and for all who are teachers of the Catholic faith and especially of Christian moral life: that they may proclaim to all the world Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life, *let us pray to the Lord.*
3. For all the baptized, that they may realize the great joy, dignity, and moral responsibility of their lives redeemed in Christ, *let us pray to the Lord.*
4. For all young people, that they may build the habits of fervent daily prayer, careful discernment, and humble seeking of advice from others that will lead them to respond more perfectly to Jesus’ call to holiness, *let us pray to the Lord.*
5. For all who are hindered in their daily response to Christ by the bad example of other Christians, or by the slavery of addictions and sinful habits, *let us pray to the Lord.*
6. For all government officials at every level of society, that they might always strive to uphold and defend the dignity of every human person, *let us pray to the Lord.*
7. For the conversion of sinners, especially for the deeper conversion of ourselves, and for the souls in Purgatory, let us pray to the Lord.

Almighty God, Creator, Lawgiver, Savior, and Judge for all the living and the dead, accept the prayers we bring before you with the merciful compassion that you revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of your Son, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. AMEN.