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The Fifth Sunday of Easter (C)

Today, Christ the Lord "make[s] all things new" (Revelation 21:5) as he gives us the new commandment: "As I have loved you, so you should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35).

When we behold the face of Jesus we see that God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. The LORD is good to all and compassionate toward all his works" (Psalm 145:8-9). He is indeed "compassionate," in the true sense of the word, for "while we were still sinners Christ [suffered and] died for us" (Romans 5:8).

In fact, God himself has loved us in the very way that we should love him. The only Son of God gave himself up for our salvation; holding nothing back, he died for us and showed us the true and authentic meaning of love. God himself does what we too often refuse to do: he loves us first and he loves us to the end, seeking only our good (cf. I John 4:10, John 13:1).

Jesus gives us this command because, in him, "love of God and love of neighbor are now truly united."<sup>1</sup> But in giving this command, he "does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves

are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has "loved us first", love can also blossom as a response within us." <sup>2</sup>

Now we must ask the question, What is love? "It is clearly revealed that love is not merely a sentiment. Sentiments come and go. A sentiment can be a marvelous first spark, but it is not the fullness of love."<sup>3</sup> Love desires not what is good for me because love "does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth" (I Corinthians 13:4-7). Love has as its aim nothing less than the good of the one who is loved, and what greater good can there be than eternal life and happiness with God?

This command that Jesus gives today is closely connected to how he summed up the Ten Commandments. With this in mind, Saint John says, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (I John 4:20).

As he hung dying upon the Cross, Jesus called out, "I thirst;" he thirsted for the love of each of the sheep he died to redeem (John 19:28).<sup>4</sup> Even now, victorious over the grave, Christ still thirsts for our love! He commands us to love our

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

neighbor so that we might love him, because, as he himself says, "whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). Who, then, is my neighbor, you ask? "Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbor."<sup>5</sup>

We can offer no greater gift, we can offer no greater help, than the love of Jesus Christ.

Everybody feels the longing to love and to be loved. Yet, how difficult it is to love, and how many mistakes and failures have to be reckoned with in love! There are those who even come to doubt that love is possible. But if emotional delusions or lack of affection can cause us to think that love is utopian, an impossible dream, should we then become resigned? No! Love is possible.<sup>6</sup>

Love has been given to us and the Lord Jesus will not give us an impossible command or an impossible task. He calls us to follow in his path, to walk where he has trod: to love God and neighbor.

How, then, are we to love in this way, to love like Christ? It consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with

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<sup>4</sup> cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 22<sup>nd</sup> World Youth Day.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 15.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 22<sup>nd</sup> World Youth Day.

God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person, not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend. Going beyond exterior appearances, I perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern. This I can offer them... Seeing with the eyes of Christ...I can give them the look of love which they crave... If I have no contact whatsoever with God in my life, then I cannot see in the other anything more than the other, and I am incapable of seeing in him the image of God. But if in my life I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be "devout" and to perform my "religious duties", then my relationship with God will also grow arid. It becomes merely "proper", but loveless. Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me... Love of God and love of neighbor are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment. But both live from the love of God who has loved us first. No longer is it a question of a "commandment" imposed from without and calling for the impossible, but rather of a freely-bestowed experience of love from within, a love which by its very

nature must be shared with others. Love grows through love.<sup>7</sup>

Those who love will take their places in "the holy city, a new Jerusalem" (Revelation 21:1). Those who love will live in the presence of God and gaze upon his face.

He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain (Revelation 21:3-4).

The Roman poet Virgil said this of love: *Omnia vincit amor; et nos cedamus amori* (Love conquers all; let us, too, yield to love).<sup>8</sup> If we allow ourselves to be conquered by the love of Christ we, too, can truthfully sing: "I will praise your name forever, my king and my God."<sup>9</sup> Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Antiphon, Responsorial Psalm of the day.