

Sermon for the Feast of the Sacred Heart (Extraordinary Form)

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From today's epistle: "May Christ find a dwelling place...in your hearts...may your lives be rooted in love, founded on love." (Eph 3:17)

In the Name...

Sodom and Gomorrah are synonymous with fire and brimstone because that was the fate of the two cities, according to the Book of Genesis (19:24): a severe punishment for behavior gravely at variance with God's will and with human nature. As Abraham surveyed the scene, "the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace," in the words of the sacred writer. (Gen 19:28) We find references to this episode later in Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Jeremiah...plain reminders and warnings, for those who have eyes that can see.

In three places in the New Testament, Our Blessed Lord compares the punishment that Sodom and Gomorrah received to the day of judgment, which He indicates will be worse:

1. About those who refuse the preaching of the Apostles (and by extension, their successors), He said, "Truly, I say to you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town." (Mt 10:15)

2. About Capernaum, a city that refused to repent, Jesus said: "But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you." (Mt 11:24)

3. And finally, the Lord said, "But on the day Lot went out from Sodom fire and sulphur rained from heaven and destroyed them all, so will it be when the Son of man is revealed." (Lk 17:29, 30)

These words fall heavily, painfully, upon us, and that, of course, is the intention. Every parent knows there come times when only a sharp reminder of punishment will rouse the child...and parents also know such messages do not always achieve their purpose. Such is the proof of our willfulness.

At the opening of his *Confessions*, St Augustine writes, "What am I to Thee that Thou demand my love, and unless I give it Thee art angry, and threaten me with great sorrows?" (1,1.5) Augustine seeks on our behalf to understand the cause of Divine anger, the reason behind the Divine threats..."What am I to you, Lord? Why do you threaten?" Perhaps, dear people, we find the answer in today's Gospel for this Feast of the Sacred Heart: "But one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water." (Jn 19:34) The humble Heart of Christ has opened itself to us in generosity and love, in sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, and now, it has been opened by a lance, and nothing—nothing—is withheld. At Calvary do we best see—if we are there, if we are sincere—the quality of Divine love...and this helps us to better understand the character of Divine justice. From a familiar Lenten hymn: "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

In raising the names of Sodom and Gomorrah, and in particular Our Lord's references to them, I want to make very clear that I am not drawing a direct line to events of the NY state government a week ago, nor to people who have same-sex attraction, and so somehow predicting any consequences in either case. But I am using the change in NY law to make a couple of points that I hope will be of benefit to you, to the people who are attending this Mass. Our fallen nature is such that we may first apply the warnings of Sacred Scripture to "them," to others, and not first to ourselves. This, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is not the way of the Gospel. What happened in NY is but one tragic, albeit very perverse expression of a wider and deeper malady to which we are all vulnerable. I will return to this in a moment.

First, I do agree completely with the Holy Father, when he said, "Very soon it will not be possible to state that homosexuality, as the Catholic Church teaches, is an objective disorder in the structuring of human existence." Paradoxically, those who seek tolerance will inevitably become less and less tolerant themselves, and more severe in disallowing any dissent.

Second, and more importantly for all of us, especially given today's feast, I want to offer some fruits of my priestly experience and an idea of the source of the underlying problem that afflicts all us in some measure because of concupiscence and our own personal sins...and the blindness that can follow.

I have been teaching sexual ethics to our men in formation for Holy Orders and for the permanent diaconate, and to Mother Teresa's nuns, for almost all 14 years of my priesthood. This was the purpose for the professional degree, the license in moral theology, that Bishop Egan sent me to Rome to obtain many years ago: to understand better the nature of human intimacy and to share that understanding with others. Many of you are familiar with my current assignment. My other experience includes hearing hundreds of confessions of Catholic high school students during a two year assignment at Notre Dame in Fairfield and six years of daily—seven days a week—confessional practice at St. John's in Stamford. I would say (and I mean this without boasting) that in my first eight years of service to the diocese, I had as much confessional experience as any priest in Bridgeport...and please remember that what I share with you comes in part from what I have learned by people who are *earnestly seeking* to live the teachings of Christ and His Holy Church, as established by their presence in Confession.

Here are some of my conclusions that I will not attempt to prove this morning; you may do with them what you will. I offer them without any spirit of condemnation, and only out of priestly and fraternal charity.

The steady erosion of our sense of purity is something we probably don't recognize as clearly as we might, because we are living in the midst of it all the time. One can tell a lot about a culture, for instance, by what it considers "funny," from its humor...much of ours is what used to be called, "off-color." TV shows—and I realize that that these are mild by comparison—like *Friends* and *Seinfeld* are not entertainment for the friends of Christ.

Fashion, and even that embraced by some Catholic women who regularly attend Mass, often presents a grave danger to the purity of men who see them, because objective standards of modesty (and they do exist...) are routinely violated. My opinion is that much of this is traceable to thoughtlessness or vanity, not from an intention to seduce.

There are many men who will go to Church today and who regularly, perhaps habitually, view pornography, and worse, who may not consider what they are doing to be contrary to their marriage vows.

If parents use contraception in their marriage, then they have every reason to expect that their children will use it outside of marriage. If we deliberately dissociate procreation from marriage, we will soon disassociate sexual relations from marriage.

It is a naive mistake to think that modern music, especially the video that often accompanies it, does not affect our relationships and how we view others.

Parents who allow their children—especially their boys—to have the internet in their own room (and even worse with the door closed) are putting a stumbling block in the path of those they should be protecting.

Now please let me be clear again: this is not a call to become the "Catholic Amish," which is a tendency to which I think some who attend this Mass in particular are sometimes inclined, as a solution to the problems I have just numbered. The evangelical imperative of the Gospel, to be salt and light in a fallen world, remains, and parents and priests must prepare children to live in the world, while not falling prey to the world...a most demanding challenge today, I grant you.

The other day, the Holy Father said this, "The real question is this: Is what we believe true or not?" And he suggested that "custom" (again I refer to the examples I have given) is something very different than a "love of the truth"...and in saying this, he connected the two great faculties or powers of the human person: the capacity to love and the capacity to know the truth. Pope Benedict went on to say: "Love wants to know better the one it loves. Love, true love, does not make one blind but seeing. Part of it is a thirst for knowledge, true knowledge of the other."

And so to conclude, dear people, I come back to the malady to which we can all succumb: that our search for love can easily become *misdirected*, and we can settle for a counterfeit instead: *self-satisfaction*...the very opposite of what we see at Calvary, where the Sacred Heart, self-forgetful and self-giving, pours out blood and water, grace and mercy, from the Cross.

As the Pope suggests, we will only be interested in truth if we are striving to love after the example of the Heart of Jesus. Said another way, a lack of love precedes a loss of desire for the truth about our human condition and the gracious and free initiative of the Good God to rescue us from sin and selfishness. The only solution to the tangle of the human heart is the Sacred Heart of Christ, who loved us boldly to the end, and who invites us, begs us, even with strong words, to love Him boldly in return.