

**2011 Lenten Mission  
St. Stephen's Church  
New Orleans, LA  
Fr. Bryce Sibley**

**“Get Off the Couch and Follow Jesus!”**

**First Night: The Greatest Threat to Holiness Today**

- I. Lent as a season in the Church is centered on repentance from sin.
  - A. This idea of repentance is actually at the heart of the Gospel
    1. Christ never said “Believe the good news”, but “Repent and believe the good news (gospel).
    2. So without repentance from sin there can actually be no real belief in the good news
      - a. Why because the good news is about salvation from our sin – but one does not believe in sin, nor believe in its seriousness then the gospel loses its meaning
        - i. It risks becoming nothing more than inspirational gibberish
  - B. But as we know, in our contemporary society, even among Catholics, sin is not a topic we like to discuss
    1. It makes us uncomfortable, as it should
      - a. So we tend to ignore it or try to convince ourselves that it's not that big a deal
      - b. Well, if Christ came to die on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins, then you better believe it is a big deal!
  - C. So I want to talk about sin and repentance (and the good news of God's mercy) during this Lenten mission.
    1. But I'm going to challenge you to dig deep and look at sins that many of us might not be aware of in our lives, but in my years as a priest I can testify that they are killing the spiritual lives of many Christians today.
- II. Let's start with the biggest and most obvious question – what sin poses the largest and most dangerous threat to Christian holiness today?
  - A. Some possible answers
    1. Lust – because of the pervasive eroticism of our society
    2. Greed – Materialistic and consumeristic mentality
    3. Pride – the egocentricism and radical individualism
  - B. These are all on the list of “seven deadly sins” – but I would say another one of the seven big ones is the most dangerous one today
    1. The sin of sloth...
  - C. This comes as a surprise to many!

1. Most see sloth as laziness! How can lying on the couch all day eating potato chips and drinking Pabst Blue ribbon be the greatest threat to holiness today?!
  - D. Sure, laziness is a sin, but it is not what we are talking about when we talk about sloth.
- III. So what exactly is sloth then?
- A. The technical Latin word is “acedia” – literally means “without care”
    1. Translated as “sloth” although might be better seen as “spiritual apathy”
  - B. St. Thomas Aquinas defines as "an oppressive sorrow, which... so weighs upon man's mind, that he wants to do nothing." (ST II-II,q35,a1)
    1. But it is not something you can take a few Lexapro for and get rid of
    2. It is something much deeper
  - C. It's a lack of desire or passion for spiritual things
    1. Spiritual boredom or ennui
  - D. St. Bernard called it “sterility of the soul”
  - E. “Noonday devil” of monks – tempted to give up
- IV. Five Symptoms (Diagnosis) – Mostly from my experience
- A. Want a spirituality without demands, Christianity without the Cross
    1. Our society has a revulsion of suffering
    2. Don't want Faith to disturb our routine
    3. Irony, willing to put so much effort in to making sacrifices to excel in sports, work, school
      - a. But when it comes to our faith, we expect to glide right in
    4. Jesus said pick up your cross and follow me, not sit on your couch and follow me
      - a. It takes work and self-discipline
    5. Reading a book recently that called the Christianity many espouse today a parasite Christianity
      - a. It looks like the real thing, but drains the soul
      - b. Term that was used was “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”
        - i. Moralistic – Just be nice and tolerant
        - ii. Therapeutic – Focused on affirming yourself
        - iii. Deism – God is the clockmaker. He does not put demands on us, we he is there to meet our demands when we need him.
  - B. Loss of a sense for the sacred
    1. This is big for me, and one of the biggest problems in our society
    2. Sacred or holy means “set apart for God”
      - a. Opposite of secular
      - b. But we live in such a secular world, like being in a room filled with smoke – it tends to rub off
    3. No real desire for holiness, to be set apart from God
    4. Wanting sacred things to be more secular
      - a. See this esp. when it comes to modern attitudes towards Mass and the Eucharist

- i. Design of so many of our modern churches – like bowling alleys
    - ii. Loss of sense of reverence and decorum
    - iii. Wanting mass to be more entertaining
  - 5. A more “casual” attitude towards faith tends to prevail
- C. Love for God cools
  - 1. Vices are always opposed to some virtue
    - a. For Aquinas acedia is opposed to Charity (love)
      - i. Charity as friendship with God
    - b. Sadness over friendship with God
      - i. Specifically the demands this friendship entails
  - 2. True growth in holiness is about love of God (and neighbor)
    - a. Example I always used – serving someone you love vs. one you don’t
    - b. When you love, even the smallest task becomes a joy
  - 3. So then our Faith is then governed by rules and obligations – becomes oppressive
    - a. Von Balthasar “The more we remove ourselves from the innermost core of love, the more the commandment to love acquires for us a negative character and becomes a prohibition. In this way, the sweet inevitability of the lover’s free choice to love is transformed into the harsh compulsion of an obligation... What appears as cold duty to one who does not love is a joy for love...”
  - 4. We can especially tie this back to the Mass and Eucharist
    - a. St. Josemaria Escriva - “You say Mass is too long, I say your love is too short”
    - b. Sure sign – leaving Mass early
- D. Leads to a “Shooting for the minimum” in the Christian life – no real desire to become a saint
  - 1. Wanting to do just enough not to offend God seriously
    - a. But if charity is friendship with God, imagine doing that to a friend
    - b. But we do it to God all of the time
  - 2. See this in questions like – how much can I drink before it becomes a sin. How “far” can I go with my girlfriend?
    - a. These are the wrong questions to ask!
  - 3. Ratzinger: “The Christian in the person who does not calculate; rather he does something extra. He is in fact the lover, who does not ask, “How much further can I go and still remain in the realm of venial sin, stopping short of mortal sin?” Rather the Christian is the one who simply seeks what is good, without any calculation” (Credo, p. 14)
- E. Finally, loss of horror at mortal sin
  - 1. Mortal vs. Venial sin – from St. John
    - a. Mortal kills life of God in soul. Die with it on your soul, risk going to hell
    - b. Should want to avoid it and all sin
  - 2. But this is what I see a lot today

- a. In Confession, all these mortal sins and its been nine months since confession
      - i. What if the doc said you had cancer, would you wait 9 months for surgery?
    - b. Avail yourself of confession at this mission!
- V. Have a better understanding now, but why is it so harmful?
  - A. Cardinal sin – because other vices “hinge” onto it
    - 1. Aquinas lists quite a few, look to the Summa
  - B. Not obvious like lust or wrath – more subtle
    - 1. Like a deadly poisonous gas
    - 2. So many people suffer from it and they don’t even know it!
      - a. There are walking spiritual zombies!
  - C. Can end up in despair and abandoning the faith
    - 1. Seeing life of prayer and charity pointless
    - 2. Seeing ourselves beyond God’s mercy
- VI. What’s the good news? A few remedies
  - A. Frequent Confession
    - 1. Graces to help us rekindle flame of faith
  - B. Spiritual Discipline
    - 1. It’s Lent, we need to be more like Christ in the desert!
  - C. Meditation on spiritual goods
    - 1. Easy to get caught up in the world
    - 2. Aquinas - "because the more we think about spiritual goods, the more pleasing they become to us, and forthwith acedia dies away." (ST II-II,q35,a1,ad4)
    - 3. Spiritual reading is a great remedy
  - D. Generosity – living gift of self
    - 1. Giving till it hurts (will talk about that tomorrow)
    - 2. It tends to set things into motion
  - E. Thanksgiving - rejoicing over what God has done!
    - 1. Daily thanksgiving!
- VII. Tomorrow – look at some more controversial moral issues
  - A. But try to see they are all symptoms of a deeper spiritual malaise

### **Second Night: The Real Roots of Two Controversial Sins**

- I. Welcome back to the second night of the mission
  - A. Very practical and very essential theme for Lent – sin and repentance
    - 1. Digging deeper to examine our consciences in different areas
  - B. Last night we talked about the sin of acedia, or spiritual apathy
  - C. Tonight want to begin by looking at two of the more “controversial” moral issues in the Church today

1. Ones a lot of priests don't like to preach on, and ones that many Catholics don't like to hear about because they often hit a little too close to home
    - a. Acting a lot like Pharisees – this is their real problem, can admit their own sinfulness, so they lash out.
  2. We're going to deal with this head on tonight, no fear or self-righteousness and try to shed the light of Christ's truth on them
    - a. But I plan to go deeper than a surface evaluation, hope to show that these sins are symptoms of much more serious spiritual malaise
- D. These topics are controversial because they each focus on sex and money!
1. These are the issues of artificial contraception and generosity in providing for the needs of the Church
  2. I know these probably not problems for people attending mission, but good to be able to see roots and maybe help others
- II. Contraception
- A. Clear church teaching – each and every marital act must be open to the transmission of life and to deliberately separate the unitive and procreative aspects of the marital act is gravely sinful
1. Been a consistent teaching in the Church (actually up until 1930 all Christian denominations taught it)
- B. But since contraception has become more effective and easily accessible in the past 40 years – it has become harder for people to accept
1. Many say, "I don't want the church in my bedroom!"
    - a. Well, what you are really saying is that refuse to give your entire life over to the Lordship of Christ. There is one section where he teaching is not going to affect you. Pride and obstinacy!
- C. I would say a majority of Catholic couples use some form of contraception
1. I will admit, it is the fault of many priests over the years for not talking about it or teaching the wrong thing on it
    - a. Pope said last week priests must be willing to preach the full gospel, even on uncomfortable topics!
  2. If we are honest (and had more time to take a closer look) we'd see the damage that the widespread use of contraception has done to our society and culture
- III. Good stewardship and generosity (esp. with their money)
- A. Adage - In any parish, 20% of the people do 80% of the work and give 80% of the money
1. It's really true
  2. Lots of Catholics seemingly "along for the ride" and don't really want to get involved
  3. Esp. when it comes to parting with their money

- B. In my experience, I could talk about money ONE TIME A YEAR and someone is going to say, “All that priest does is talk about money!”
  - 1. I wonder what they said about Jesus, next to speaking about the Kingdom of Heaven, Christ spoke about money second most!
  - 2. Just like with sex – Christ has to have dominion over all of your life, your pocketbook included!
  - 3. Irony, they leave the Catholic Church and go to some non-denominational church and not only fork over 10% of their income but give the pastor their W2 forms!
    - a. Imagine if a Catholic priest tried to do that!
    - b. One of the great mysteries
- C. Generosity in almsgiving, charitable causes, and to the Church in general
  - 1. One of the six precepts of the Church (which you don’t hear about much)
  - 2. Provide for the needs of the Church (primarily material needs)
  - 3. Of course the church and these charitable organizations have a responsibility to use that money properly
    - a. But even if they may not, it is no excuse for not giving
  - 4. Specifically we are required to give according to our ability, but the Lord rewards generosity
    - a. Remember the example of the widow’s mite – she gave out of her want.
    - b. Notice too Jesus didn’t say, You’re poor honey, you don’t have to give...
- IV. Alright, if we look at these two issues, it seems obvious what the moral problems are
  - A. With contraception it is an unchaste attitude (wanting to have sex without responsibility) or possibly a refusal to be open to life
  - B. With generosity with money it seems to be greed or love of material possessions
  - C. While these are certainly part of the problem, I think if we look we’ll see the roots of these sins runs much deeper
    - 1. These sins are often a symptom of something bigger
  - D. So what is the deeper problem?
    - 1. It ties back to what we talked about yesterday – what man was created for: the gift of self!
- V. The Gift of Self
  - A. Vatican II “Man can only find himself through the sincere gift of self”
    - 1. This is part of being in the image of God – rooted in gift in the Trinity
    - 2. We are called to give of ourselves if we want to find true meaning in life, true happiness
    - 3. Gift of self to God and to neighbor
      - a. Not partial, but total
      - b. Christ on the cross becomes perfect expression of this
  - B. We can also see that this gift of self is tied to love

1. Gift lies at the heart of love
  - a. The lover desires to give gifts to the beloved, not out of duty – but for love alone!
2. The more we love, the more we are willing to give of ourselves
  - a. The example from last night of soup for the sick person
- C. Both of the items we are talking about deal with “gift”
  1. The marital act is the total reciprocal gift between man and wife
    - a. Gift in body at consummation
  2. Generosity with money – about giving back what has been given to you
  3. Sinning in either of these two areas means somehow rejecting or denying the gift (selfishness)
  4. Somehow I think they are connected – people who contracept give less
- D. But our deeds flow from our heart, from the core of our being
  1. If I am a generous person committed to gift, this is going to be reflected in all areas of my life
  2. If I am not, if I am selfish, then selfish deeds are going to flow from my heart
- E. Back to the person who contracepts and denies the gift of self, or the one who is not a good steward in giving generously
  1. These actions are a reflection of the fact that they are not really living up the call to give of oneself totally
- F. What we are talking about is a need of conversion in the heart!
  1. Person who repents from sin and knows and loves Christ will desire to give of themselves fully (although they may fail at times)
    - a. Certainly couldn't we say that someone suffering from *acedia* might have a hard time with contraception and generosity with their money because their love has cooled?
- G. I can see in the families that practice NFP and are serious with giving back of their time, talent and treasure (volunteers to the Church)...
  1. These are people who are serious about their Faith and giving themselves to God and to service of neighbor in all aspects of their lives
- VI. But I will argue, from my experience, the roots run deeper still
  - A. When talking to couples who contracept or individuals who clearly do not give as they ought, and ask them why they act in such a manner, I get the same exact answer...
    1. “Father, if we have another kid, we are worried that we won't have enough money to provide for them properly.”
    2. “Father, I don't give because I am worried I won't have enough to pay bills, or the mortgage or put food on the table.”
      - a. Irony here is they can spend 5 bucks a day on coffee and 100 buck a month for the cable bill
  - B. The same thing - Fear and anxiety

1. But Christ tells us in Matthew 6: “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on.”
  2. Look at the birds of the air
  3. Look at the lilies of the field
  4. Seek first the Kingdom of God and all of these will be provided for you...
- C. What is needed is trust in Christ that our needs will be provided for!
1. This is the real root – lack of trust in God!
- D. So instead of clinging to Christ we cling to our money to give us security, a sense of control
1. Thus we make mammon our God – trusting in money rather than him
- E. Being in control is a big part of this fear and lack of trust
1. Especially true in our technological age, when we gain a sense of control from our technology
  2. But all of us do it – part of our fallen human nature
    - a. Like to feel we are in control, esp. in time of chaos
  3. But we must learn to let go of that wanting to control and put it in God’s hands and trust in divine providence, that he will take care of things
- F. But who is easier to trust – someone you love or someone you don’t?
1. Of course, someone we love – we trust them with our lives
  2. So if our love is dead, again if acedia has crept in – we are going to have a hard time loving an then trusting
- VII. Conclusion – talk tonight so much bigger than sex and money
- A. About generosity with our gift of self, about trusting in the Lord
1. Really it is about loving Christ
    - a. If we love him we want to give ourselves and we trust him
- B. But we can apply this in all areas of our lives
1. Where is it that we struggle with the gift of self and trusting in God, and why?
  2. This is a great examination of conscience
- C. Good news – in recent years I have seen a shift
1. People more generous in both of these areas
- D. Will bring it all together tomorrow with our last talk
1. Will really draw from yesterday and today’s talk

### **Third Night: Following the Law or Following a Person?**

- I. Welcome back for the third night of our mission
  - A. We’ve been talking about sin and repentance

1. Really though trying to make a diagnosis and offer a solution to the spiritual problems facing so many Catholics today
  - B. Looked at spiritual apathy the first night and then explored the issue of a lack of love and gift and trust in Christ
    1. Notice, these sins (or sinful dispositions) are rarely consciously willed
      - a. If I murder I make a conscious choice, if I commit adultery I make a conscious choice
      - b. The deep sins we addressed – most people are not even aware they lie at the root of much of their other sins
  - C. So we are going to attempt to bring it all together tonight
    1. Will draw heavily from what we've talked about on the previous nights
- II. I have a set of three questions
- A. What do you think the response of most Catholics today would be?
    1. Why do you go to Mass on Sundays?
    2. Why do you act morally?
    3. Why do you follow the Church's teaching? (presuming that they do follow the Church's teaching)
  - B. I would imagine most answers would be: because we're supposed to!
    1. To rephrase, "Because we are obliged to do so..."
  - C. Obligation and duty seems to drive their religious faith and moral life
    1. Not that they are bad people or Catholics – they are following the rules and obeying the laws
  - D. But does this make them "good Catholics"?
    1. Think of the citizen who always follows the speed limit, and pays his taxes, and keeps his yard clean
      - a. Law-abiding citizen, but is not going to win any civic award for expending extra effort making his community a better place
    2. Law-abiding Catholics: going to Sunday mass, not killing anyone, saying grace – nothing extraordinary, no real striving for holiness
      - a. Tepid, lukewarm, slothful (spiritually apathetic)
      - b. No real love for Christ or the gospel
    3. Just going through the motions
      - a. Sort of mindless routine, not heart in it.
      - b. This is the sin, or at least the root of other sin
      - c. Not sure what to call it – I guess it is another form of apathy
      - d. Especially prevalent where it is easy to take the faith for granted (like in Southern LA)
      - e. Also, where there is no persecution to separate the wheat from the chaff
- III. So what happens when faith is seen as set of rules and obligations to follow
- A. It is a three-step process (go back to revisit quotes from the first night)
    1. Begins to calculate, to strive for the minimum, to see how far they can go without falling into mortal sin
      - a. Ratzinger: "The Christian in the person who does not calculate; rather he does something extra. He is in fact the lover, who does

not ask, “How much further can I go and still remain in the realm of venial sin, stopping short of mortal sin?” Rather the Christian is the one who simply seeks what is good, without any calculation” (Credo, p. 14)

2. Then after awhile, resentment comes and their faith as seen as hard and limiting freedom (even the commandment to love)
    - a. Von Balthasar “The more we remove ourselves from the innermost core of love, the more the commandment to love acquires for us a negative character and becomes a prohibition. In this way, the sweet inevitability of the lover’s free choice to love is transformed into the harsh compulsion of an obligation... What appears as cold duty to one who does not love is a joy for love...”
  3. Too much to bear and either become bitter and resentful or go an join “The Church of Niceness and Marshmallows”
    - a. Think there are too many rules and regulations – shouldn’t be!
    - b. Great irony, we know every society and company needs rules to run efficiently
    - c. Here we have 1 billion Catholics and they think the Church is the one exception! Get real!
- B. We don’t need law-abiding Catholics, we need ones striving to be saints
1. People who are striving for excellence
- IV. Now I am not saying that rules and regulations are bad – they are necessary, but they cannot be the whole reason we practice our faith
- A. Playing football, lots of rules.
1. No one plays just to follow the rules – they play to win, they play to have fun
  2. Without firm rules it becomes chaos
  3. But if all you do if play to follow the rules, you are going to think it is no fun and quit!
- B. Same with the faith – we need rules and obligations
1. But they are not the sole purpose of the faith
  2. They are there to help us grow and keep us on the narrow path to heaven
  3. If we follow them just because we have to, the journey loses its excitement and we get frustrated and quit
- V. So what is the solution? Von Balthasar and Ratzinger gave it to us – love over law!
- A. This is the message of Christ – particularly in the Sermon on the Mount
1. Must go to the interior, to the heart – that is where true morality and Christianity lies
    - a. Not just “don’t kill”, but love others and don’t hate
  2. Read it as an examination of conscience
    - a. He says, he has not come to abolish the law (the Old Law) but to fulfill it
    - b. Go beyond it, to go deeper – let actions flow from love

- B. Clarify – not talking about love as we know it in culture
  - 1. Not talking about a warm fuzzy feeling
    - a. Talking about a choice – willing the good for the other person
  - 2. Head vs. Heart: not intellect vs. emotions
    - a. Heart is center of the person, where we will, where we choose
  - 3. Don't act on feelings alone – must be guided by reason!
- C. Love as charity is a gift! Theological virtue
  - 1. Given to us at baptism, with so many other graces
  - 2. But like Hershey's chocolate milk – very few people stir up the gift, and stir up love in their lives
- D. But again here we have to revisit what we talked about earlier
  - 1. Can love rules and laws and abstract things
    - a. You love a person
    - b. Love Christ who leads us to the Father in the Spirit
  - 2. But if you don't know him you cannot love Him!
  - 3. But how do we know him?
    - a. Remember we believe in the Resurrection! He is alive and we can encounter him
    - b. In Eucharist, in Scripture, in others, in prayer!
      - i. But it is an encounter in mystery!
- E. Christianity is about following a person!
  - 1. It is an adventure, you never know where he will lead you!
  - 2. I can tell you, it is rough sometimes – but never boring.
- VI. Objection – sounds fine, but it would be easier if he was walking among us, Christ is up in heaven
  - A. He made promises
    - 1. Promised he would be with us,
    - 2. Promised he would not abandon us
    - 3. He also promised to send Spirit to lead us to truth
    - 4. Promised to send us shepherds!
  - B. But where do we find all of this today?
    - 1. In the Church and in her shepherds – Pope, bishops, priests
    - 2. We follow Christ in His body the Church
  - C. This is another one of the big issues today – ecclesiology
    - 1. Ratzinger: “Jesus yes, Church no”
      - a. Want personal relationship with Jesus but reject organizational Church
      - b. See the Church as paternalistic or as big bureaucratic institution
    - 2. Church is necessary
      - a. Can't separate Christ (the head) from his body – that would be a monster
      - b. The main shepherd has good to the eternal pasture, he has left the shepherd in charge on earth (what you bind/lose on earth)

- c. To use the other scriptural analogy – Christ is the husband who has gone away, he has left his bride, Our Mother the Church in Charge
- 3. Important point we forget – church is not an it, but a she
  - a. Look at feminine words
  - b. She is our mother, there to teach us and feed us
- 4. Don't see church (or authority in church) as threat to freedom or identity, but a gift!

VII. In conclusion

- A. Started with a basic outline and tried to let the Spirit guide me.
  - 1. Not sure where he led me
  - 2. Not sure either what to really call this mission
    - a. Maybe "Get off your butt and follow Jesus!"
- B. But hopefully have touched on enough to help you make a good examination of conscience and make a good and thorough confession this Lent
  - 1. That has been the real purpose – repentance from sin
- C. Chance to go to Confession now
- D. Want to thank Msgr. Nalty for giving me the chance to speak to you, thank all of you for coming
  - 1. Keep each other in prayer