

September 26, 2015 9:15 a.m. St. Catherine of Siena Parish

Diocesan Celebration of the World Meeting of Families:

Love is our Mission: the Family Fully Alive

(Mass Readings: 1 Peter 2:4-10; John 15: 1-8)

Welcome on this beautiful day as we celebrate together the beautiful gift of the family, and the wonder and joy of family life. In a special way, welcome to all the families who have gathered from various parts of our diocese, and we here in the Diocese of Kalamazoo are joined together with the estimated one million people---families from all over the world---who are at this very same time celebrating the gift of family life in Philadelphia at the World Meeting of Families where Pope Francis has now joined them.

The theme: “Love is our Mission: the Family Fully Alive” is taken from the great St. Irenaeus who said: “The glory of God is man fully alive”.

What a week this has been for our Holy Father.....On Tuesday, he arrived here in the United States where he was formally and publicly greeted by the President and Vice President of the United States, after which the Pope went right to the Nunciature.

On Wednesday/part of Thursday the Holy Father was in Washington: at the White House; then meeting with Bishops (at which I was one of the few bishops privileged to greet the Holy Father personally on behalf of the rest of the Bishops; followed by celebrating the canonization Mass for St. Junipero Serra; and on Thursday, the historic address to the joint session of Congress, followed by his visit to the homeless shelter----quite a contrast in itself.

Then he flew to New York City later in the day on Thursday, arrived there in time to celebrate evening prayer at St. Patrick Cathedral. On Friday he gave his historic address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, followed by the powerful prayer service at Ground Zero, and then he celebrated Mass that evening at Madison Square Gardens where more than 25,000 people were able to participate.

Today, he is making his way to Philadelphia for the World Meeting of Families today and tomorrow’s concluding Mass.

I simply don't know how he does it---I was with him for only one of those days on Wednesday---it was wonderful to pray with him for Midday Prayer at St. Matthew Cathedral on Wednesday and have the opportunity to greet him personally---at which I extended to him the prayers and best wishes of all of you and all the people of our Diocese-----, and then later on for the Canonization Mass. And at the end of the day, I was exhausted! So how does he do it? It has to be the supernatural grace of his office, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the intercession of our Blessed Mother!

But all the while---at every opportunity Pope Francis has had on this world stage---he is talking about the most basic and essential aspects of our Faith and of Society. He is talking about Love of God and neighbor; he is talking about compassionate care for the poor, those no one sees or pays attention to---the marginalized and powerless members of the human family; and he is talking about marriage and family life!

The Holy Father is pleading with the world---and with each of us---to see what is important---what is of lasting value---what is most basic to the betterment of the world and what makes the human person "fully alive"; and to turn away from and reject those temptations to pursue what seems to be pleasurable, good, and attractive.

We are truly blessed to have someone like Pope Francis who speaks with such integrity, such clarity, such humility, and with utter truth, and does so in a manner that is clear that he himself believes and lives those same values he preaches. It is so clear that he not only "talks the talk, but that he also walks the walk"---and that is what is so appealing to the millions of people, Catholics and non Catholics, believers and non-believers, to all people of good will---because he is speaking the Truth that touches at the core of the human heart.

It is at the core of the human heart---it is in the very essence of our humanity--where God has placed His own spirit, and as St. Augustine, our beloved diocesan patron, has said so eloquently: "there is something restless within the human heart that will only find rest when it rests in God".

What Pope Francis has been talking about is at that deepest level of human reality---and it touches the deepest longings of the human heart which goes beyond religious convictions and doctrinal teachings. It is rooted in those

religious convictions and doctrinal teachings, but it goes even beyond---more deeply---into our very human nature.

That's precisely where God's Word made Flesh ---our Lord and Savior----that's where Jesus too has spoken to the human heart, calling us to turn away from sin, and to live in the Love of God and Neighbor.

Our individual families are important to each of us, of course; but they are critically important to the very foundation and health of society. As Pope Francis said at World Youth Day last year in Rio de Janeiro: "The family is important and necessary for the survival of humanity. Without the family, the cultural survival of the human race would be at risk. The family...is the foundation." (July 27, 2014)

And yet, as we all know, there are lots of forces in the world today that are "attacking" the values and the supports for family life in our so-called modern society. We all know how those "attacks" come to us in a whole variety of "disguises" of good things or modern technologies or ways to make life easier---- but which are unknowingly, perhaps, undermining the Family in lots of ways.

That's why Pope Francis called for the Extraordinary Synod on the Family last year, and why there will be the Ordinary Synod on the Family for most of the month of October in Rome, and why he's here in our country to attend the World Meeting of Families. Pope Francis is one of the leading voices, but joined with all of ours as well, in defending and protecting the family.

While it is true that there are many "attacks" from without that are undermining the importance of the Family, there can also be "attacks" if you will from within----and sometimes that happens when perhaps we ourselves take the importance of our families for granted.

Do you remember just a few months ago (May 13, 2015, Feast of Our Lady of Fatima), Pope Francis gave a talk that resonated with lots of people everywhere. He talked about how important it is that we----members of families, husbands and wives, parents and children----consciously remember to say 3 phrases to one another every day: "May I?", "Thank you", and "I'm sorry". And to those 3 phrases, I would just add one more: "I love you!"

Don't we all find it to be true that we sometimes take those with whom we live and who are closest to us for granted, and that can begin by forgetting to express common courtesy by asking "May I do this?", or "Thank you for preparing

such a delicious meal”, or “I’m so sorry for upsetting you or hurting your feelings.” And we should never let a day go by without saying to those closest to us: “I love you!”.

God Himself is a Family of Persons: the Father’s eternal Love for the Son, which brings forth in that Love their Holy Spirit---Three Divine Persons, one God--- a basic and essential mystery of our Faith.

But in some other ways, so is our Family---a kind of divine mystery of Love: Husbands and wives loving one another, and through their love, bringing forth children to carry on the human race and to continue to serve the needs of society and the world, and destined for eternal life with God in Heaven.

And that is the way our God---Creator and Father---has made us as human beings, made in His image and likeness---He has made us to live as one big family, in the midst of our own individual families. We are sons and daughters of God--- we are brothers and sisters of one another. We are a people of faith focused on family: God our Father, Jesus our Brother and Savior, Mary our Mother and our Mother the Church, with all of us as sisters and brothers in Christ in the family of humankind, with the saints as our family in Heaven, pulling for us and interceding for us.

Today’s readings are so beautiful and so very appropriate. In today’s First Reading from St. Peter, we hear him remind us that we are “*Living Stones*” united with the Living Stone, Jesus our Lord. It is He Who makes us into a strong “*spiritual house*”, and calls us to be “*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own.*” And in today’s Gospel Reading from St. John, Jesus gives us the beautiful image ----“*I am the Vine, you are the Branches*”. But then Jesus goes on to tell us that just like Branches on the Vine, it is our job---our vocation---our calling to “*remain*” in Him. Jesus doesn’t just say that one time---- He tells us 8 different times in those very few verses to “*remain*” in Him!----“*Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in Me.*”

My dear sisters and brothers in Christ---members of the family of faith here in our diocese and God’s family throughout the world, today----joined in solidarity with families from all over the world in Philadelphia----we must reinforce our determination to “*remain*” in the Lord---renew our own commitment to value,

appreciate, protect and strengthen our own individual families---what we also know as “the Domestic Church”.

It’s in our families where we first come to know God; it is in our families where we are taught to value God’s ways and live according to God’s Word; it is in our families where we first live out the mandate of the Gospel---to love God and neighbor as we love ourselves----and it is in our family where we learn to live according to the Golden Rule which Pope Francis spoke so eloquently about to the Joint session of Congress on Thursday. It is through our families that we learn how to live in the larger family of humanity as Jesus has called us, and shown us how, to live. And it is in our families where we find the strength, the grace, and the love to stay connected---to remain---with Jesus, as the Branches to the Vine, so that we can say “May I?”, “Thank you”, “I’m sorry”, and “I love you” to one another, and then to our brothers and sisters in Christ throughout the world.

May God bless you and your families, all the families in our Diocese and throughout the whole Church. May we continue to be the “living stones” being built up into a strong spiritual structure because *“once we were no people, but now we are God’s holy people”!*