

“The Presence” Retreat Closing Mass

Seventh Sunday of the Year

February 23, 2020 Miracle Camp/Retreat Center 11:00 a.m.

High School Students, from 14 Parishes + Chaperones: 310 Total

I'm so happy to be here with all of you in this beautiful setting of the Miracle Camp Retreat Center to celebrate the Closing Mass for this “Presence” Retreat. I look forward to this Mass every year, and this year, we are blessed with an absolutely gorgeous, Spring-like day to add to the blessings of this weekend. I am very grateful to Father Patrick Schultz from the Diocese of Cleveland who has been your Retreat Director, along with our own Fr. Chris Derda and the entire “Presence” Retreat Team for all that goes into making these 40 Hours with Jesus Present in the Holy Eucharist such a time of blessing for all of you.

I think it's safe to assume that all of us enjoy a good challenge—an opportunity to test our skills and expand our physical strength. Perhaps we enjoy doing that by playing video games; it might be by mastering a musical instrument, or competing in a variety of team sports. Of course, I'm sure for all of you, the best way to enjoy a good challenge is by going to school, and “enjoying” all the hard work that goes into excelling in your studies, correct? In each of those activities, I doubt that no one sets out with the goal: “I hope I lose!” or “I want to come in last”, nor to think: “my goal is failure!” NO! It's just the opposite: we want to succeed; we want to excel; we want to do our best!

You're all at the time in your lives when you're focusing on coming to know what your talents and gifts are, what you're good at doing, what you are most interested in. And by doing that, you can begin to have a better idea of what career path you might want to choose, or what you might want to “major” in when you go to College. In other words, this is the time in your life when you're becoming very aware of what you might want to “do” with your life.

But you're also at the critical time in your lives when you are deciding who you want to “be”---- what kind of person you want to “be”----what values you are choosing to make your own----what principles you hold, and what you believe; coming to be clear about whom you trust and in whom you find your hope.

I really hope this weekend retreat has helped you with those very questions, and that you've seen a bit more clearly, not so much what you want to do, but who you are, and who you are choosing to become.

The Scripture Readings we've just heard for this Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time couldn't be more perfect, because they are "challenging", and they set before each of us "life goals" that will help us to find true happiness here in this world, and more importantly, goals that will guide us in the ways that will lead us to eternal happiness in Heaven.

In today's First Reading, from one of the earliest Books in the Bible---Leviticus---we heard that God Himself spoke directly to Moses and told him to tell the people: "Be holy, for I the Lord, your God, am holy." Now, if we want to talk about a "challenge", there's a huge one.

I imagine ALL of us think that it's impossible to be holy. Of course, we know there have been "holy persons". We all know about the Saints---we've studied about them in Religion Classes. Maybe we think that those people were different than we are---but really, that's not true. The Saints were people just like us; they had to deal with the same kinds of life problems---some of them far worse problems than any of us will ever face---but they all had to do what each of us also has to do: they had to make choices. Every "Saint" chose to be holy or not to be holy.

"To be holy" doesn't mean sitting in church all day, nor spending every day the way you've spent these last 2 ½ days together in prayer before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Going back to that first Reading today, God helped Moses, and Moses in turn helped the people, to understand what it means to "be holy": "You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart.....Take no revenge.....Cherish no grudge against anyone.....You SHALL love your neighbor as yourself." That's some of the basic minimum standards of what "holiness" looks like---avoiding hurtful, mean-spirited, or angry choices, while also making sure to make choices which are loving and kind.

In the Gospel passage we just heard, which is taken from Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount", Jesus "raised the bar" a bit higher. Remember, Jesus taught: "You have heard that it was said.....But I say...." two different times in that brief passage. Jesus was saying that what Moses taught focused mostly on avoiding wrong-doing; what Jesus came to teach us is not just what not to do, but what we must choose to do, because that's the way to find true and lasting happiness. So even though the Old Law taught "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth", Jesus taught: "Offer no resistance to one who is evil.", and then He gave several examples of

what that means: turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give to those in need, don't refuse someone's request.

Jesus said a second time---You have heard it said, but I say....(and this is really challenging): You shall not only love your neighbor---but you shall also love your enemy! And not only "love" them, but pray for them, and be loving and kind to everyone, not just to those who are loving and kind to you. And then Jesus sums it up with this challenge: "Be perfect, just as your Heavenly Father is perfect!"

So, we hear today our two greatest "life challenges": "Be Holy" and "Be Perfect". Actually, they're one and the same. To "be perfect" doesn't mean flawless; it means to be "whole"----to be complete. When we allow sin and "bad choices" to guide our life choices, we are really being "less" than the person God intends for us to be. When we make the choices that Jesus teaches us to make, we are made whole---complete, in other words, "perfect" and united with Jesus.

Just as we all need "guides" and "coaches" and "good teachers" and "YouTube" instructions to help us in all our other life challenges, we need the same assistance in our spiritual lives: we need to stay close to Jesus, to practice our faith, to stay close to the Church, and to make sure that we are receiving the Sacraments regularly, especially the Sacraments of Penance and the Holy Eucharist, as you've experienced, I hope, in a new way this weekend.

In addition, we need to remember what St. Paul taught us in today's Second Reading: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, AND that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" Our Baptism, which is fortified and completed when we receive the Sacrament of Confirmation, gives us new life in Christ, and the Holy Spirit makes His dwelling within us. That is why we treat one another with great respect, and that's why we value this precious gift of Human Life. But that's also how we can accomplish these huge "life goals" of becoming holy and trying to be perfect ---allowing the Holy Spirit's Gifts to supplement our own human deficiencies. And the best help of all, of course is to receive the Holy Eucharist regularly.

As you know, in our Diocese throughout this whole "Year of the Eucharist", we are focusing on the importance of what an incredibly great and miraculous Gift the Eucharist is; Jesus gives us Himself in the Eucharist, to be our spiritual nourishment. And, strengthened by the Eucharist, that is how we are able to Love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

It's all up to us: what choices will we make, not just in what we want to do with our gifts and talents, but also, what person we want to be?

As Pope Francis said in his Homily earlier today, which I think captures well what I've been saying: "Let us Choose Love. Let us accept the challenge of Jesus, the challenge of Charity. Then we will be true Christians and our world will be more human."

Dear Young Church in the Diocese of Kalamazoo, may you always choose to follow Jesus, to stay close to Him in the Holy Eucharist, and to be joyful witnesses of His Loving Presence to all those you meet.

God bless you!