

Homily of Archbishop Bernard A. Hebda Archbishop of Saint Paul and Minneapolis

*On the occasion of the celebration of the 25th anniversary
of the institution of the Companions of Christ of Saint Paul and Minneapolis*

Our Lady of Grace Catholic Church | Edina, Minnesota | October 11, 2017

I'm so grateful for the invitation to be part of this celebration this evening, as we mark this twenty-fifth anniversary of an extraordinary group of men who have such profound love for our God, who want to be nothing more than companions of Christ.

How beautiful that they would be celebrating this anniversary on the feast of Saint John XXIII. I'm pretty sure I got invited because Saint John XXIII and I share a silhouette. But, I wish that I shared his great love of the church with that same intensity – for he was a pope, he was a bishop, he was a priest, who recognized that there was nothing more important than having a profound love of God. That's why we get these beautiful readings today, that are so fitting for the Companions – but, are really the readings for Saint John XXIII, such a great pastor.

Our gospel today is one of my very favorites. I love it in part because it has Jesus eating. He shares fish, he shares breakfast, with his disciples. It speaks of that deep bond. But after they had eaten, he calls Peter, Simon Peter, aside. He enters into this beautiful dialogue with him, that speaks to that love that's shared between a priest, a pastor, and Christ. How important it is! It's interesting, as you'll recall from the gospel, that there are three times that Jesus asks Peter if he loves him.

It's the first one that captures my attention all the time, because he asks Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" I'm sure that somewhere in this group of Companions is a Greek scholar. He's probably going to correct me after Mass. But, from what I know of that text, it's one of those places where Jesus, at least where Jesus is recorded as saying, "Is it absolute?", "Do you love me more than these?" It could be that Jesus is asking Peter, "Do you love me more than these other disciples?" I like it – how could Peter really respond to that? Who knows the love that's in the heart of another pastor? Granted, it could also mean, "Peter, do you love me more than you love these disciples?" That part wouldn't be very likely. There's nothing that we read in sacred scripture that would really speak to the love that Peter shared with the other apostles. Granted, he's the brother of Andrew. We don't have Peter as a great example of fraternal love.

There's a third possibility for that, "Do you love me more than these?", is that Jesus is referring *to these things*. Peter, the great fisherman, who in the midst of the great struggles in his life, as he has to face the crucifixion, as he had to face that pain, goes back to fishing. He goes back to his old ways, goes back to the nets and the boats. I think that's what the Lord is

asking Peter. “Do you love me more than your life as a fisherman? Do you love me more than you love these nets or these boats? Are you willing to walk with me?” Peter says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you”. There’s that beautiful exchange that Peter feels somewhat uncomfortable that the Lord would have to ask him three times. But, it’s that beautiful affirmation of a pastor’s love for Christ. In the case of Simon Peter, it’s a beautiful literary parallel with the three times that Peter would deny Christ. And for all of us who are called to love Christ, we know that we have to always go deeper and deeper into our hearts, to answer that question, which is the most fundamental question in the Christian life: “Do you love me?”

Peter was willing to give up everything for Jesus. He gave up those boats, he gave up those nets, he wanted to be nothing more than a companion of Christ in mission. He wanted to walk the way that Jesus walked. How beautiful in that whole exchange, we have an understanding, not only of Peter’s love for Jesus as a companion of Christ, but we have an exquisite description of how much Christ loves his Church. All that Jesus is concerned about is that his flock would be tended. All that Jesus is concerned about is that his flock would be fed.

We celebrate today, the fact that we have a God who continues to desire that the faithful of this archdiocese and beyond, are fed and tendered, and that they know the love of Christ, the good shepherd, through the wonderful work of priests, of Jesus’ companions, those who are willing to give up every aspect of their past lives to be Jesus’ companions in mission.

Saint John XXIII, in his beautiful *Journal of a Soul*, speaks about this passage, and of that wonderful love that was shared by Peter the pastor, Peter the first Pope, Peter, Saint John XXIII’s predecessor in office, that he shared with Jesus. As he considered that exchange by the seashore, he realized it had to have some impact on him and on his mystery. He writes this, “My life must be fueled with the love of Jesus, and also with the great outpouring of goodness and sacrifice for individual souls and for the Lord. For the gospel episode which proclaims the first pope’s love for Jesus, and through him for souls, it is but a short step to the law of sacrifice.” Jesus invites his companions into a life of sacrifice. All of us, my brothers and sisters, who aren’t Companions, benefit from that sacrifice. This local church is stronger because of the sacrifice of these Companions of Christ, who proclaim their love for Jesus in the very way in which they minister to us – who proclaim their love for Jesus in the way that they hold one another accountable within the Companions of Christ. The way in which they support one another in their faithful affirmation to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

On our own, there’s so many times that we can fall. Even those who have great love for Jesus know how sinfulness sometimes grabs our hearts. How beautiful to have a group of companions, who are able to sustain one another, to strengthen one another, to give hope to one another, so that they might be able to be faithful in their proclamation of Christ’s love. Not just on their lips, but in the way that they minister to all of us.

The presence of so many of you speaks to the effectiveness of their ideal. Your presence here speaks volumes about how it is that Christ, in desiring to tend his sheep, planted just the right seeds, in just the right minds, so that there would be a flourishing of the charism of the Companions Christ.

Bishop Cozzens is able to speak from personal experience of how what that was like in the very beginning. How that commitment, that shared commitment between brothers was something that was life-giving for them. How it was something that, indeed, has brought great fruit into this large place.

When we consider how these men live out their vocations, not only as priests, but as Companions, the rest of us have to be inspired to live out our vocations. To trust that when we say, “Yes Lord, you know that I love you,” that we can trust the Lord completely, even when he leads us into that life of sacrifice.

Certainly, this evening we offer congratulations to the Bishop, and to the Companions. We certainly have much reason for congratulation, but we also have to remember that this has to be an evening of gratitude. Gratitude not only for the sacrifices that these men have embraced, but gratitude to a God who loves us so much that he gives us just the shepherds that we need.

We give the Lord thanks this night. We ask him not only to continue to plant his seed in the hearts of young men who are already priests, or who believe that the Lord is calling them to be priests, but also to bless them, to give growth – increase to their numbers. To give them the perseverance that they need to continue to serve the Lord who calls us into a self-sacrificing love. Who calls us to trust him, who desires nothing more than that his flock, his sheep, will be fed and will be tended by priests whose hearts are like unto his own.