

Third Sunday of Easter – April 17-18, 2010
St. Mary's Church, Richmond
Fr. Michael Renninger

I was crying into my chicken salad. There I was, having my last supper at the Ukrop's at Three Chopt and Patterson. The sad fact was clear – on Saturday evening, my favorite Ukrop's store would close for good, and a week later, it would re-open under a new name. What is it? "Satan's?" "Martins?"

So, there I sat, enjoying my chicken salad, my white house rolls, my fresh brewed iced tea. I couldn't wait to have my rice pudding.

Sitting next to me were two women, both in their 30's. They were discussing the recent news stories about the Vatican, the pope, and priests who abuse children. From their conversation, two things became clear to me: one, they were not Catholic, and two, they were not aware that the man sitting next to them, dressed in black and wearing a white collar, was in fact a Catholic priest.

The two women actually expressed some of the feelings I've had in recent weeks – frustration at the Vatican over some of its official comments, great sadness over the criminal behavior of some priests and bishops, profound regret that you, the members of the church, have to face constant questions about all of this at work and in your neighborhood.

But then they started to talk about celibacy. They were convinced that celibacy is the root of all evils; that it is a sick lifestyle; that it guarantees bad behavior.

In the middle of one sentence, one of the women finally noticed me sitting next to them. She had a look on her face that was half embarrassment, and half anger. So she said to me, "You are one of them, aren't you? You're a priest!"

And I said, "Yes I am."

She got flustered, and asked, "Why in the world are you celibate?"

And I quietly responded, "Because I fell in love with Jesus."

She got even more flustered, paused, then said, "Well that's just sick."

They got up and left. I enjoyed my rice pudding. And I pondered her question some more.

Why am I celibate?

The answer really is: Because I fell in love with Jesus. After years of discernment when I

was younger, I realized that Jesus was calling me to this way of life. It's is who I am. I fell in love with a person, named Jesus Christ. I did not fall in love with an institution; not a figure locked in an ancient creed; not an historical personage from 'way back then.'

I fell in love with Jesus Christ, and he called me into a living, breathing, intimate, passionate, personal relationship with him as Lord and savior.

He called me to dedicate my life to him. He called me to this way of life because he wanted to be my spouse, my beloved, the center of my life.

He called, and he makes it possible. It is all a gift. It is all his call. It is all Christ. Jesus loves me enough to call me, and he calls me to love him with my heart.

He calls. We respond.

That should always be the order of things. Not just for celibates, but in everyone's life.

The risen lord calls, and we respond. The Lord calls, and we do. The Lord gives, and we receive. The Lord invites, and we are able to say 'yes.' The Lord leads, and we follow. Christ is first. Christ is central. Christ is the lover. Christ is the caller. Christ calls us to love and to do.

That is true in my life. It is true in your life. It is true in Saint Peter's life. We see Peter in tonight's Gospel. It is just a few days after Jesus died on Calvary. It is just a few days after Peter denied Jesus three times. It is after the resurrection. Peter and the others have gone on an unsuccessful fishing trip. It is unsuccessful until Jesus shows up. Notice what happens – Jesus instructs, then they obey. And great things happen when we obey the instructions of Jesus.

After they come ashore, Jesus then invites them: "Sit down!" and they do.

Jesus asks questions, and Peter answers.

Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Notice, that is the first thing Jesus asks. He does NOT ask, "Peter, why did you deny me?" He asks the fundamental question: DO YOU LOVE ME? Do you love me more than anything? Do you love ME, not just some idea of me?

Then Jesus instructs Peter – if you love me, show me. Show me your love. Show me your love by taking care of the people that God places in your life. If you love Jesus, show him that by loving the least of his brothers and sisters.

Loving Jesus ALWAYS leads to serving Jesus' people. Christian love always overflows into Christian service.

The lady in Ukrop's asked me, "Why are you celibate?" And I told her – I am celibate because I fell in love with a person, named Jesus, and he called me to this specific life of

service.

So what about YOU? *Why are you a Christian?* If the lady in Ukrops asked you that question, how would you answer?

Eventually, I think the answer becomes the same for all of us, no matter who we are, no matter what our specific vocation. We become Christians because, after all, we are falling in love with Christ. And, if we love Christ, he will ask us to show our love in concrete ways. He will ask us to demonstrate our love by tending his flock; by reaching out to those who seem lost, by comforting the abandoned, by caring for those who struggle in poverty, to give hope to hopeless children.

Do you love Christ? Then show him, by spending some time with someone living with HIV, or breast cancer, or depression. Do you love Christ? Then love his children, love them no matter what language they speak, no matter what cross they carry, no matter what has caused them pain. Tend the flock. Love them.

This Sunday of Easter, our readings provide an invitation for us to pause, and to be asked the most basic question – *why are you a Christian?* It really is (in slightly different words) the question that Jesus posed to Peter: “Do you love me? If you do, then show me.”

But recall that the ORDER is always important. First, fall in love with Christ, then, you will know how to serve Christ. Love without service becomes selfish. Service without love becomes empty work. The risen Lord prepared a meal for his disciples on the shore. The risen Lord has prepared a meal for you today at this table. He is calling to you, because he loves you. Fall in love with him. It will change your life, and the life of the world.