

The Essence of Christian Life
By Bill Gross

When Carol Paelish asked me to do a rollo at the second touch weekend, I readily agreed, but then it occurred to me to ask what the topic would be. She told me I'd be speaking about what is essential to living the Christian life.

After I picked myself up off the floor, I politely asked if I'd be expected to speak for one year or two. It is a fairly large topic, you understand. "No," she assured me, "you can cover the subject in about 20 minutes." I felt as if I'd been asked to cram the Pacific Ocean into a peanut butter jar.

But then I thought about a few sentences from one of my favorite authors, Father James Martin, S.J. In his book *Jesus, A Pilgrimage*, Father Martin writes that people may assume that Jesus' central message is loving your enemies, or offering forgiveness, or helping the poor. But though all of these are central to his message, they are not the central message. Jesus' central message was the reign of God.

It looks like Father Martin has saved me a great deal of trouble, and saved your ears from an equally great deal of needless verbiage, but sadly I've agreed to fill up 20 otherwise unscheduled minutes. So bear with me.

I guess the first thing anyone needs to know about a Christian life is that no matter what, God loves you. He loves you with the passionate love that a parent has for his child. And like any child who is loved, we love him in return. We love him with all our heart, all our mind, and all our strength. That is the greatest commandment.

But there is another commandment concerning love. We are required to love our neighbor as ourselves. That means we do not follow the lead of Charlie Brown in the Peanuts cartoon. When Schroeder asks Charlie Brown, "Do you hate mankind", Charlie Brown replies, No, I love mankind. It's people I can't stand."

We have a better guide: Jesus Christ. It is not possible to love Jesus without loving others, and it is impossible to love others without moving closer to Christ.

So, we are to love the fellow in the next pew, of course; but we are also enjoined to love our Protestant neighbor, our Jewish neighbor, our Hindu neighbor, our Moslem neighbor, and our agnostic neighbor. We may not use race or gender or ethnicity or sexual orientation to excuse a failure to love. We are to love the immigrant, as the native. But we are also directed to love the most loathsome among us: the criminal, the murderer, the kidnapper, the molester. No one ever said Christianity was easy. It isn't and it shouldn't be. If it was easy, anyone could do it.

Speaking of difficult, let's take a look at the most famous verse in the New Testament: For God so loved the world... OK. Let's stop right there. I know you all

know how it ends, but let's look at just the beginning: God... loved... the world. That means the world is lovable. God looked at his creation and said it was good. The world is good. The world is lovable. The world is a gift from God, and if He loves it, so must we. And when we are given a gift that is both good and lovable, do we throw it into the trash? Of course not.

Then why are we trashing our world? As Catholics, we have a responsibility to protect our world. Listen to the words of a beloved pope: "The church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert that responsibility in the public sphere. She must defend earth, air and water as gifts of creation." I'll bet you thought those words came from Pope Francis. Well, you'd be wrong. That was Pope Benedict, the sixteenth of that name. Here's what Saint John Paul II said, Christians must "realize that their responsibility within creation and their responsibility toward nature and the Creator are an essential part of their faith."

So how are we doing? At the current rate, there will soon be more plastic in the ocean than fish. Remember, even more so than diamonds, plastic is forever. The air, the ocean, the climate-- they are our problem, our responsibility. Again, No one ever said being a Catholic was easy.

Getting back to Father James Martin, the central message of our faith is the reign of God, and the central messenger is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We worship this man/God messenger, and so we should. It is always proper to worship and adore him because he, and he alone, opened up the doors to heaven to us. It is his holy sacrifice that we celebrate whenever we receive the Eucharist. But just as important as worshipping him, we must also listen to him.

We recall that he said, "Whoever does God's will..." There's that verb: to do. Our obedience is to turn the other cheek, to forgive seven times seventy offences, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked. That is why we as Catholics build for the downtrodden, counsel the refugee, heal the convicts, comfort the sick. We leave our comfort zones and go out into the broken world to make a difference, and we do it with love. Sometimes I think the word Christian instead of being a noun, something we are, should be a verb, something we do.

As Catholics and Cursillistas, we both live in and create community. After all, the words communion and community have the same root. Jesus has a lot to tell us about our communities, especially about the rich and the poor among us. He tells us that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.

So who are these rich people? Where are they? You may be thinking of the Walton family or the Koch brothers, but you'd be only partly right. If you want to see the rich of this world, reach for a mirror. If you keep your food in a refrigerator, your clothes in a closet, have a roof over your head and sleep in a bed, you are richer than 75% of the people in this world. If you have a bank account, you are richer than

90% of the world's population, and if you could right now write a check for \$400 to cover an emergency without going into debt, you are wealthy beyond the dreams of the overwhelming majority of mankind.

The catechism tells us "There exist sinful inequalities that affect millions of men and women. These are in open contradiction of the Gospel." In the documents of the second Vatican council, we read, "Equal dignity as persons demands that we strive for fairer and more humane conditions. Excessive social and economic disparity between individuals and societies of the one human race is a source of scandal."

Are we scandalized that 6,000,000 children under the age of 5 die from treatable diseases and malnutrition every year? If we as Catholics are not utterly horrified by those numbers, then we are not truly a pro-life community.

Are we, you and I, too rich to pass through the eye of a needle? Not necessarily, but it won't be easy. St. Paul reminds us that we must work out our salvation in fear and trembling. Once again, the emphasis is on the verb: to work.

By far the greatest Biblical exemplar of this love is the parable of the Good Samaritan. You all know the story of what the Samaritan did, so I won't repeat it. But let's think about what he didn't do: He didn't ask the victim's name, or where he came from. He didn't ask what his business was or why he was going to Jericho. He didn't ask if he was a native or an immigrant. He didn't ask if the fallen man was a Jew, A Samaritan, a Greek or a Roman. And most assuredly, he did not just go home, write a check, and after carefully recording the exact amount for a tax deduction, plop it into the mail.

No. He got his hands dirty— the very thing the priest and Levite had feared to do. What makes Catholics special is that we are never afraid to get our hands dirty. That is why we feed more hungry people, heal more sick people, shelter more homeless people, and comfort more lost and lonely people than any other organization on earth.

At his point, I would not be surprised if you were to throw up your hands and mutter, "Isn't he ever going to get around to the sacraments?" I appreciate your patience. The sacraments matter. Where do we get the strength, the imagination, the determination to do all these things? Very simply, our spirits are We receive nourishment that only the real presence of Christ can give. by the sacraments. As vitamin pills are to the body, the sacraments are to the will.

The sacraments transform us; they affirm our relationship with Jesus Christ. Jesus impacts us, shocks us, renews us because of his intimate relation to God. He fills us with the Holy Spirit and we are moved to create His reign. He is our model, our inspiration, our king, and we encounter him most passionately in the sacraments. It is through the sacraments that we are able to do his will without tiring.

And finally... finally (isn't that a lovely word? Whenever we are listening to someone else talk, it's the one word we long to hear) finally there is prayer. Prayer has been called many things: an obligation, a request hotline, a wireless connection to God, a means of challenging and changing ourselves; but to me prayer is the most effective means of transferring faith from the head into the heart, and that is both the shortest and the longest leg of a journey to salvation.

As Catholics we look for and encounter God everywhere. Prayer, in the words of the great Catholic philosopher Simone Weil, "enables us to hear the universe as the vibration of the word of God."

For me, prayer is a clean window, through which the light of God can shine. It is the one window that never requires Windex. We open ourselves to the light of God, and the whole of our faith is revealed and energized.

I leave you with this last thought. Our faith is not a decoration, not a window dressing. It is a mission.

Ultrea