

We've rightfully heard a million times that "Jesus loves us" and we see the proof of this through our Lord's Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Yet how do *we* love Jesus in return? In today's Liturgy of the Word, the topic of "loving Jesus" is put into prime focus.

In today's Gospel we hear of a mysterious encounter between the risen Christ and some of His Apostles at the Sea of Tiberias, which is just another name for the Sea of Galilee. And if you've ever wondered whether or not Jesus could cook, here's your answer! We're told that once the Apostles on the boat recognize the dude on the shore as being Jesus Himself, they hurry to join Him on the shore and once they do, they find "a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread." Jesus is cooking and preparing a meal for them. And so our Lord invites His friends saying, "Come, have breakfast." So for the rest of history, one could argue that "eating breakfast" is one of the solemn teachings of Jesus.

We're told that once they're all done having breakfast, our Lord Jesus asks Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" After St. Peter answers "yes," Christ proceeds to ask him two more times whether or not he loves Him—to which Peter repeatedly answers

“yes,” but with some frustration that he has to keep answering this same question. After each of St. Peter’s answers, our Lord gives the following commands to the fisherman from Galilee: “Feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep.”

This mysterious episode is significant for two main reasons. First, it confirms the unique primacy of St. Peter as the hand-picked leader of the Church, the hand-picked Shepherd of Christ’s flock, who is clearly given a special teaching authority that is to sanctify and govern the Church. If St. Peter was not important, then Christ would *not* be giving him these specific commands—notice that Jesus does *not give these commands to any other apostle or disciple*. Rather He *only* gives these specific commands to *St. Peter* because this fisherman from Galilee *is* the hand-picked leader of Christ’s Church.

The second main reason this episode is significant is because Jesus’ threefold questioning of St. Peter on whether or not he truly loves our Lord is a merciful *reversal* of St. Peter’s three-fold denial of Jesus. If you remember, St. Peter denied Jesus *three times in front of a charcoal fire* and *now he reaffirms* his love for Jesus *three times in*

front of charcoal fire. And the questions that our Savior asks St. Peter are indicative of the fact that Christ explicitly seeks Peter's love.

With regard to the first question that Jesus asks St. Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" Who are the "these"? I would argue that one can interpret the meaning of this question in two ways. First, the "these" that Jesus is referring to are certainly the other Apostles gathered there with them and so the phrase "more than these" could mean: do you love me, Peter, more than *they* love me? Or that same phrase could also mean: "Do you love me, Peter, *more than you love these other Apostles?* Do you love me more than you love them?"

Brothers and sisters, just as He sought St. Peter's love, our Lord Jesus seeks *our love*—He seeks our hearts. And so given that our Savior is so desirous for all of our love, Jesus gently but clearly asks us, *by name*, on a daily basis, "*Do you love Me?*" And with regards to that first question the Son of God asks St. Peter, we can substitute *anything* really in place of the word "these." For example, I have no doubt that our Lord Jesus asks us: "Do you love Me more than your own family and friends? Do you love Me more than your job? Do you love Me

more than money? Do you love Me more than your cell phone? Do you love Me more than Netflix and your TV? Do you love Me more than politicians and your own political party? Do you love Me more than popularity and power? Do you love Me more than yourself?"

Brothers and sisters, our Lord and Savior asks us the same questions He asks St. Peter: "Do you love me?" We claim to love Jesus, but do our thoughts, words, and actions tell a different story? Such a question is part of any honest and humble examination of conscience. It's only reasonable that Christ, Who lovingly sacrificed everything for us on the cross in order to save us and give us eternal life, demands that we be *equally* willing to sacrifice everything for Him and *make Him first in our life*. And if we do that, if we love Jesus above everyone and everything in our life, then that love will naturally overflow into all of our other relationships. Then we will love our family and friends as we should! *Then we will love others as we should*—treating others with the dignity, respect, and compassion that they deserve!

Our Lord Jesus ends his conversation with St. Peter with the simple, yet challenging command: "Follow Me." *This is how we love*

Jesus: by following Him and loving Him in and through His Catholic Church. Notice that Jesus says “Follow ***Me.***” As disciples of Christ, ***we are supposed to follow Jesus and not the other way around!*** Jesus is ***not supposed to follow us!***

Loving Jesus means following Jesus. And following Christ means humbly listening to Christ, ***obeying Him,*** and faithfully conforming our entire life to His—conforming our entire life to the teachings of Christ and His Catholic Church, which He gave us in order to make us holy and keep us close to Him! Loving Jesus means adopting the declaration of the Apostles from the First Reading: “We must obey ***God rather than men.***” Loving Jesus means seeking fidelity to Christ and His Church over personal popularity. Am I more concerned about being popular with others than about being faithful to Christ and His Church?

Brothers and sisters, ***following Jesus demands love and love demands courage.*** Loving Jesus ***in and through*** His Catholic Church demands courage: courage that we be willing change our sinful ways in order to love Christ and others; courage to speak up and defend our Lord and the teachings of His Church when they are under attack from family,

friends, co-workers, etc.; courage to learn more about our Catholic faith so that we can lovingly defend and explain our faith to others; courage to stand up to those hostile forces within our culture that push selfishness over selflessness and are trying desperately to banish Christ and His Church from the public sphere.

Brothers and sisters, as Catholic disciples of our Lord Jesus, we need courage—the courage to love Him and follow Him with every fiber of our being, *most especially when it's hard*. So as we prepare to worship and receive our Savior in the Most Holy Eucharist, let us pray: Lord Jesus, give me the grace, the strength, the love, and the courage to follow You always, especially into places where I do not want to go.

Amen.