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Created to Love and Live in Relationship with God

Fr. Chase's Third Talk

My name is Father Chase Hilgenbrinck, and today's retreat reflection will be based upon the readings the church has given us for the third Sunday in Lent. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Heavenly Father, we give You thanks and praise for this time away, this time of retreat, this time of recollection, this time in which we get to contemplate our relationship with You. We thank You for Your continued guidance, we ask Lord that You would enlighten us that, You would give us clarity and conviction, to continue to strive after that relationship. We ask Your blessing upon us in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

You know, during these days, it's always been good for me, during Lenten seasons, Advent seasons, to be able to reflect upon my relationship with the Lord, something that we should do continually, something we should do constantly, to remember all the good that He has done for us, the journey that we've been on, so we could see where we've been and, of course, where we're going. You know, and I look at my relationship now, and I recognize my life as a priest is in one in which it's been the culmination of a long relationship in which I discern God's will for my life, and trusted Him enough in order to be able to be guided by His commandments, by His will for my life, allowing Him to be the one who teaches me, and me the obedient learner. And as I look back on my relationship with Him, it's not always been that way. I haven't always loved Him above all things, or strived to do that. I recognize, especially in my youth, as I read today's first reading, I recognize that as we read the ten commandments, that I was in a place in my youth that I found Catholicism, my relationship with God, Christianity in general, just to be really burdensome.

I don't know where you're at in your relationship with the Lord right now. Maybe you consider that your faith is burdensome, and you consider following Christ burdensome. And that's okay, but we have to figure out why. We have to figure out how to unburden. Because Christ Himself said His yoke is easy, His burden is light. He wants us to take it upon Himself. And what is that yoke that He wants us to take? Well, quite simply, it's a relationship with Him. All His rules, His laws, and His commandments follow a relationship that already began with Him.

You know, as I reflect on my own relationship with the Lord, I reflect upon maybe those... what were those reasons that I thought my relationship with Him was burdensome? And I recognize that in my youth, plain and simple, one of the

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greatest reasons was just because I was immature. I was immature during life, and I didn't know where life was going. Oftentimes I'd be at school, and I'd be trying to please my friends, or trying to grow in relationship with them, and it was a much different relationship and a much different message than I received at home. And when I would get home, my parents were trying to form me in a relationship into the man that God created me to be. They always wanted me to strive after goodness, they wanted me to be a good moral man, they wanted me to be a Christian gentleman.

And so, they taught me a bunch of "Thou Shalt Nots," right, the commandments. They told me the things that I should not be doing, but they also lay down a track of the things that I should have been doing and wasn't. And that was the way to grow in mature manhood. And they did it because they were in relationship with me, they did it because they loved me. They did it because they wanted me to grow, they wanted me to excel. And in my immaturity, I saw that as burdensome, I saw that authority was trying to hold me down and keep me from really being happy, which is what I felt when I was at school and I was with my friends. I just wanted to be happy like they were happy, or to be happy with them.

Later I grew, of course, and thanks be to God I matured. But what really changed in my perspective? How did I go from being that person, who found Christianity so burdensome, to now, feeling that Christianity is the greatest gift, and that I'm unburdened? Well, it's because of that relationship, that personal relationship. The very reason that we may find Christianity burdensome is because maybe we haven't gone to the depths of our relationship with God. The depths that He wants us to strive for. The depths that He has made us for.

I recognize that there was a time in my life, and it was especially after college, a time in which I moved to South America, and I was living on my own. And it was that time that I began really a personal relationship with the Lord. And it was time because I was spending time with Him in silence, I was spending time in personal prayer. For the first time, I was going into churches, into Jesus' Eucharistic presence on my own, and just spilling out my heart, just allowing Him to hear what was on my heart. And a lot of it was burden. I wasn't living the most comfortable life that I thought I should be living. He wasn't granting all my prayers that I thought He should have been granted. And He was asking me to go deeper, and to live a more authentic Christianity.

But it was those times that just conversed back and forth, it was those times that I just spilled out my heart. And I thought "Maybe I'm not doing this right," because I thought that my Christian faith and my prayer life was supposed to be rote prayers, like what we often do in the Catholic church. Only the memorized prayers,

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that are so lofty and beautiful, things that I could never come up with on my own. But I realized that my relationship grew when I just spoke to Him. When I just saw Him as my loving Father. When I just saw Him as my loving brother. You know, I just wanted to... I just wanted to pour out my heart to Him, and I wanted Him to speak back. And that's exactly what happened. I started to grow in love for Him, and I started to understand more and more deeply His love for me.

And like any relationship in my life, whether it was a relationship with my parents, relationship with my own biological brother, my relationship with my friends and my teammates, and now with those whom I minister to, I want those relationships to grow. I want those relationships to go deeper. I want to learn how I can be able to love deeper, and how I'm better able to receive someone else's love. That's with every relationship that I have in my life. And so, the same thing started to happen to my relationship with God. I started to ask Him "Lord, how can I go deeper? How can I know You more? How can I love You more? How can I receive more of Your love?" And I recognized that there were many ways in the Catholic Church to do that, predominantly through sacraments.

But I also recognized that from the beginning of His revelation to human beings, that He set out a way for us, ways that we call commandments, that are to guide our relationship with Him and with our brothers and sisters. They are the ways that we are to grow in love. You know, that reminds me of one of my students who recently got back from visiting her family. And she is a college student here, studying engineering at the University of Illinois. And she goes home, and when she was home with her brothers and sisters, she was playing Legos with her young brother, who was probably around 8 or 10 years old, and he wanted her to build a Lego bridge. He wanted to take things across the bridge with the rest of his equipment, his cars, and he wanted that bridge to be as long as she could make it.

So, she said she made this bridge, and she said it was probably 3 feet long. It was made like it was never supposed to be made. But she said that she was testing out her ingenuity and her engineering skills, which is what made her strive to make it the best that she could make it. And she said she actually made it pretty strong. She actually surprised herself with all of the things that she's learned in engineering, to be able to convert it to Legos, and he was amazed. Her little brother, he was amazed. And he started to play with that Lego set, he started to bring things across the bridge, he thought his sister was so cool because of what she had made.

And then he started to push the limits, and he started to put things on there that were heavier, and heavier. And she was just watching him, and she was just enjoying his joy. She was sharing in his joy as she watched him. She started to see him do this, to push the limits, and she started to warn him. "If you put any more

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weight on that, it's going to break." And not only did he not want to listen, but he even started to get upset. "Why are you telling me this? Why are you keeping me from having fun?" And, of course, her reaction, you know, finally was she didn't want to restrain his fun, she didn't want to keep him from joy, she wanted quite the opposite. She wanted to see him enjoy that for a longer period of time. She wanted to continue to share in his joy. And she knew that if he didn't play by the rules, that if he didn't play by the rules of the creation that she had made, she knew its limits, she knew what it was made for and what it was not made for. And so she knew that as he pushed those limits, that he was going to break that bridge, and he would no longer be able to share in that joy. He would no longer be able to play with it.

And, of course, the inevitable happened. He put more and more weight on the bridge and it broke, and it was over, and it was done. But, nevertheless, I see that as an example of our relationship with the Lord. He is the one who has created us. He is the one who knows our limits. He is the one who knows the ways in which He has made our relationship to thrive, and the things that will break our relationship, and those commandments, those 10 commandments that He has given us, the foundational ways, the rules, commandments that He's given us to be able to insulate our relationship, to keep it at its optimum level, to be able to be the best relationships that we have in our life.

As we look at those relationships, we look at those rules, we see that those first 3 rules, those guidelines that guide our relationship are the ones that help us to love God to the best of our ability, to love Him above all things. To never take His name in vain, to never offend Him by using His name in an unworthy manner. And of course, to keep holy the Sabbath. He created the Sabbath not for Himself. He didn't need worship. He knew that we were created for worship. So often we say "Why do I have to go to church on Sundays? It's so burdensome." The reality is that God created that for us as a gift, so that we would be able to worship Him, so that we would be able to be fulfilled. He knew that was what we needed. He wanted to share in our joy. And so He built these things so that our relationship with Him would thrive.

Next, He gave us 7 other commandments that are to guide our relationship with our brothers and sisters. Remember, He's also commanded us not only to love God above all things, but to love our neighbor as ourselves. And so, these guidelines about loving our neighbor are what are going to make our relationship with our friends, our family, even our acquaintances, to be able to be able to thrive with them. We want to respect their goods. We want to love their human lives. We want to protect every single human life. We want to be able to love our family members, our mother and our father. We want to protect that institution of the family, which is the foundation of our society. We want to protect those things, right.

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We want our neighbor to thrive. We don't want to covet his things, we don't want to steal his things, we don't want to take away anything that rightfully belongs to him. Why? Because if we love our neighbor as ourselves, we want him to be at his best. We want her to find fulfillment in her life. We want to guard and protect everything that is good about our neighbor. And therein, we see what the commandments truly are. The commandments do not limit our fun, they do not limit our freedom. In fact, the commandments are there to protect what is truly good, the best things in our life. Those commandments protect our relationship with God. If we go outside of those commandments, we will break our relationship with God. If we go outside of those commandments, we will break our relationships with our brothers and sisters who were commanded to love.

We have been called to be one, to be united as one. Jesus prayed for this before He died. And He wanted us to be one so much that He has given us guidelines and the ways that our human lives, our human hearts, will thrive. To be in love with Him, to receive more of His love, and to be able to live that relationship with love with our brothers and sisters. You know, today's gospel brings about something interesting. Just as we may think that God's laws in the Old Testament are burdensome, "Well here we have an incarnation of an angry God," right, this Jesus that comes into the temple and He clears it out. And we see maybe His wrath.

Actually, we don't see His wrath. We see His zeal. Notice how He says, after He has cleared His father's temple, He says "The zeal for your house has consumed Me." Zeal. What is Zeal? Saint Thomas Aquinas says that zeal arises from the intensity of one's love. What we see in Jesus is that He's trying to protect something that's good, just like the commandments. He wants to protect His Father's house. He wants to protect those who come there to truly worship. He will not stand for corruption, He will not stand for those who oppress others, He will not stand for any evil, and He will turn over tables of anybody who is trying to keep other people from their relationship with the Father. Jesus is protecting the good, and He's zealous for it. His heart burns intensely with love, and that is the result. His righteous anger is the sign of His love for all that is good and His protection for those good things.

So, what if you think that Christianity is burdensome today? What's the answer? What should you do? Maybe it is time for you to spend time in silence, to pour out your heart to God. You know, you can say anything to the Lord. He's a big boy, He can take it. Spill out your heart. Be able to talk with Him personally. Be able to spill out everything that's on your heart. Tell Him what's on your mind. Tell Him the ways that you're feeling unfulfilled. Ask Him to fulfill that in ways that He knows how. He's the one who created your human heart. Ask Him to fulfill it in

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the way that He knows best. Put your love and your trust in Him. Promise to love Him more.

Also, remember the encounters that you've had with Christ throughout your life. Have you had an encounter with Christ? Can you recall those times? Is there anything profound about your relationship with Christ in the past, where you said "Gosh, my heart burns with love for Him. I know that He is real, I know that He is true, I know that He wants more from me." What are those times, as we look back? Can we recall those encounters with Christ? To rekindle that fire? To go back to those places, and to realize that God, the reason that He puts everything in our life is to rekindle that fire within us. Maybe we just haven't spent enough time with the Lord to fall in love with Him. Maybe our perspective needs to change. I know that mine needed to change. I know that mine needed to mature. I know that I needed to give of myself to Him more and more. I knew that by following the commandments, that I would be able to love Him more in the way that He wants to be loved. In the way that my human heart was made to love Him back.

Today, we submit ourselves to the Lord, we submit ourselves to all of the commandments. They're not burdensome, they're not here to oppress us, they're not here to ruin our fun. In fact, as a priest, a brother priest told me recently, he said "You know what? My life in the past has been all about trying to follow the commandments." And he says, "Now that I'm love with the Lord, and I'm love with my relationship with Him," he says "I don't even have to think about the commandments anymore." Not because he doesn't follow them, but because he doesn't have to think. They're just the way that he lives, it's just a way of life. Following the commandments is just our relationship with God.

And so today, we don't see them as burdens. Please don't see them as burdens. See them as the ways in which God has called you personally to love Him. The way that He's called you personally to love your neighbor. And in that, we will find more happiness, more peace, more joy than we have ever known. Our hearts were made for Him, and He knows the ways that we will be able to be loved best, and to love Him best. Amen.