

A homily for September 7, 2008, St. Ignatius Church, 23rd Sunday (A).
Father Joseph T. Nolan

You may recognize that the end of this gospel is repeating, in a new context, what we heard two Sundays ago—the grant to Peter and his successors of the power to bind and loose, what is called the power of the keys. For many this is the very foundation of the church, and the whole text is carved high over head in the great rotunda of St. Peter’s in Rome. Some of you have probably craned your necks to read it! So have I—and let me “show off” by repeating the Latin: TU ES PETRUS ET SUPER HANC PETRAM AEDIFICABO ECCLESIAM MEAM ET PORTA INFERAE NON PRAEVALEBUNT ADVERSUS EAM. ET TIBI DABO CLAVES REGNA CAELORUM.

It surprises some to learn that a great Jesuit scholar who taught for many years in Rome, Gerald O’Collins, says that he would have chosen another text for that place of honor—he prefers the great shout of exultation that Luke’s gospel records on Easter day—DOMINUS RESURREXIT VERE ET APPARUIT PETRO! “The Lord has risen indeed and has appeared to Peter!” So Peter is still important—but the resurrection is the very foundation of our faith. There is no good news like the astonishing news that death is no longer destruction but transition, in Christ, to the new creation. We often miss the second part, that when Jesus becomes the risen Christ he is able to be present everywhere, motivating us to new life—*his* life now, as members of his body.

The power to bind and loose, and the doctrine of the keys is important for the structure of the church and the understanding of the papacy. For many Catholics this means that the way to holiness and salvation is simply to obey the church, which has been granted this power from on high. And the church has encouraged this view. It was Pope Pius X about 1910 who said (this is difficult to believe) the role of the laity—people like you—is to pray and obey the hierarchy. Some have modified this to say, “They think our role is to *pay*, pray and obey.” Why is this unacceptable, even offensive, today? Because the laity in the meantime got educated—able to think, ask questions, do more than obey. The theology department at Boston College is full of people pursuing graduate degrees in theology.

In a simpler time the church ruled very much by obedience and fear, by promise of reward or threat of punishment. **There is a better way—it is the way of love, and loving.** The pope we fondly remember as John XXIII knew that very well. When some in the Curia complained that he had not issued any critical judgments on theologians or the state of the world, he said, “I did not become pope to deal in condemnations.” That doesn’t mean we should never speak out to criticize or condemn things which are terribly wrong. But over and above all this, the church should speak in a loving and affectionate voice. The present pope has taken that approach, to the surprise of many. To say that the way of love and loving is the primary way to holiness and salvation should not surprise us; it was the Teacher himself who summed up all the rules in one great commandment—the love of God and neighbor. And the apostle Paul declares, in the epistle today, “Love is the fulfillment of the law.”

The way of reward and punishment has its place, but there is a classic story that illustrates what we have been saying. It's about a man who encounters an angel carrying in one hand a bucket of water, and in the other, a flaming torch. "What does all this mean," he asked the angel. The angel replies, "With the bucket of water I am going to extinguish the fires of hell. And with the torch I'm going to burn down the castles of heaven. And then we shall see who loves God."

If you have been blessed with marriage and children as your vocation—and I envy you that—you know well the priority of love over reward and punishment. The love you show is the highest kind; it is called agape, sacrificial, self giving. It goes on all the time, doesn't it—I see it only in glimpses. In Chicago last week my friends who were house moving asked me to take Alex, who is nine, to the park. At nine you just don't walk in the park—you play ball! And Tuesday, I took my friends' two sons, who are eight and ten, to the Boston College pool to celebrate their last day of freedom from school. All this for me is a learning process—learning how much energy is packed into a small boy! And how much loving and anxious care is demanded of parents all the time.

Much of my adult life has been as a teacher, and that too is a way of sacrificial love, not just handing out assignments. I see now at this university the sons and daughters whose parents I married, indeed, had some of them in class. And you think: who prepared them, with so much self-giving love for this great moment? The parents did. The grandparents did. The relatives and elder siblings did. And blessed art thou.

And now these final words are about something terribly different; It is the awful anniversary which comes this week on Thursday. Yes, it is 9/11. We should never forget it, for many reasons. One reason is to learn to cope with the uncertainties of life. We look for a word, not to explain the evil but one that gives some sense to living in the midst of death. We find it in the apostle Paul, who said, "**None of us lives as his own master. And none of us dies as his own master.**" So far that could mean little more than a reminder of cruel fate. So many people began that day as just another day—of work, play, love, food, travel. There was no thought that it would be their last day. Indeed we know that this is possible any day, all the time, for any of us. But we live and conduct our lives with what is probable, not what is possible. What is probable for most of us is that we live, and death is a put-off, see-you-later stranger. But *how* do we live. Again for believers, Paul speaks: "**While we live we are responsible to the Lord. And when we die, we die as his servants.**"