

Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said, “There are not one hundred people in the United States who hate The Catholic Church, but there are millions who hate what they wrongly perceive the Catholic Church to be.”

Things haven’t changed much and the Catholic Church still is largely misunderstood.

Two thousand years ago the followers of Christ were out of step with mainstream society. That was a society that abandoned unwanted infants in the wilderness. That was a society in which abortion had become so commonplace that the Church explicitly condemned the practice from the very beginning.

Two hundred years ago, when the Catholic faith first came to America in numbers, we were called Papists and were not welcome in Protestant communities. We were mistrusted and looked upon with suspicion. And so we practiced our faith discreetly, and quietly, in rooms with closed doors and curtained windows. For all intents and purposes we were an underground Church, barely lifting our voices above a whisper.

Sixty years ago, it was not an uncommon belief that Catholics were stockpiling guns in the basements of our churches, waiting for the pope to signal us to start a revolution.

And today, it seems we have come full circle. Catholics are still out of step with mainstream society. It is a society in which abortion has become so commonplace that Catholics in our highest elected offices claim that their pro-abortion beliefs are in line with Catholic teaching.

But of course those politicians are wrong. Despite what they say, the Catholic Church has condemned abortion from its earliest days. Anyone who claims otherwise is either woefully ignorant of what the Church truly teaches, or else, that person loves the practice of abortion more than they love Our Lord.

Perhaps the best way to understand the Catholic faith is that it is a faith based on the concept of sacrificial love.

We are not called to love our neighbor simply as we would love ourselves. Jesus has given us a new commandment, to love one another as He has loved us. And we only need to look up to be reminded how He loves us.

Protestants will often chide us for displaying a cross with the crucified Christ on it. They typically display a plain cross. "Don't you know he has risen?" they will ask, "He is no longer on the cross."

Well, of course He has risen. Our entire Christian faith is based on the fact that Jesus rose from the dead. Our identity as Christians bears witness to that belief. But before He rose, He died. He suffered death on a cross because of His great love for us. And that is something we must never forget.

That is why it is so important that we wear crucifixes around our necks, have them in every room in our homes, and display them in our schools and our churches. It is a reminder that we are called to love one another, as Christ has loved us.

As Christians we are called to a higher path than the rest of the world. This is the mark of the Christian; this is what separates us from the rest of the world. And unfortunately we do not always live up to this calling.

So what does this mean to love each other as Christ loved us? What does it mean to be another Christ in the world? Each of us is called to live the pattern that Christ set for us in our own lives. And what that means will be unique for each person as each of us have unique lives. But we are all called to dedicate our lives to discovering and fulfilling God's will, and striving to help as many people as possible to know, love, and follow Christ.

It means to take those gifts Gods has given us, all of our blessings, talents, and abilities, and use them in service to others. They were not given to us for our own sake, but for the sake of our brothers and sisters. That may mean giving up your identity, your sense of self and live entirely for others. Our clergy and religious exemplify this. It may mean sacrificing your physical life for another. We see examples of this almost every day. Or it may simply mean going out of your way for another person. Jesus did this, too. He left the bliss of Heaven and came to this sinful world, just to hold out to us the hand of salvation.

A few years ago, internationally known speaker and author Jeff Cavins came to our parish and told this story.

He had just finished a seminar and was sitting on a plane in first class (because, as he put it, that's how disciples roll) when the pilot announced they would be delayed for 20 minutes because they were waiting for one more passenger. The passengers groaned and complained and rolled their eyes. Jeff admitted that he too was a little annoyed, after all, airlines don't usually hold planes for one person, they had never done so for him.

After about 20 minutes a young girl in her 20's rushed on to the plane with her head down and took the only empty seat, the one next to Cavins. She was

greeted by a round of applause from the passengers, a sarcastic type of response, similar to the applause you hear when a poor waiter or waitress drops a tray full of food. Jeff himself made a point of looking at his watch and then looked at her as a sign of disapproval.

The young girl did not respond she just kept her head down and remained silent as the plane took off.

Jeff resumed reading his magazine but after a few minutes he realized the young girl was crying. Sniffling turned into sobbing and it was obvious that she was very upset over something. Jeff tried to ignore her because it was none of his business, and after all, that's how disciples roll. But as much as he tried, he could not ignore the young girl so he leaned over and asked if he could help. She just shook her head, no, holding her head in her hands and continued her crying.

But Jeff persisted. "No," he said, "I really want to help you. My name is Jeff, what's yours?"

"Sarah," she said between sobs.

"Sarah, why are you upset, what has happened?"

Sarah then told Jeff that her parents were on a cruise to Alaska and that her only sibling, her brother, was just killed in an automobile accident. She had just received the call about an hour ago.

Jeff's first thought was of the applause that greeted this woman as she boarded the plane, steeped in sorrow.

Jeff took Sarah's hand and said, "Sarah, look at me." He had to repeat it several times, each time more forcefully, before she looked up at him. "You are not alone here. Are you a Christian?"

"Yes," she admitted, "I am Catholic."

"So am I," said Jeff. "Sarah I am your brother in Christ. You are not alone. I will be with you for this entire flight. I will hold your hand, I will not let go, and I will pray with you."

And that is what he did. He prayed with Sarah, taking her pain upon himself and helping her carry her burden.

When the flight landed and the people disembarked, Sarah ran off. Jeff stood there in the terminal a moment thinking about the encounter. Suddenly he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned and saw Sarah who had returned to give him a hug, before running off again. That's how disciples roll.

Sometimes all it takes to act as Jesus taught us is to reach out to someone in pain.

But this is difficult for us because, here in America at least, we are very quiet about our faith.

One thing that can sometimes hold us back in our efforts to follow the Lord's New Commandment is a false idea of what love should feel like. We tend to think that true love is always accompanied by nice feelings, and if the feelings go away, that means the love has gone away too. That's what radio, TV, and movies tell us, but that's not what the Gospel tells us.

Love, true love, Christ-like love, goes deeper than feelings. It demands sacrifice, self-giving, and self-forgetting. Christ-like love always involves a cross. That's what makes it Christ-like; that's what makes it true love. If we can get this truth to sink down from our heads into our hearts, if we can hear this truth with fresh ears, we will be freer to love more as Christ loves, and we will lead happier lives, and make those around us happier.

Today let us pray that we hear Our Lord with open hearts and open minds; that we take into our heads and our hearts the true deep meaning of His words; that Christian love doesn't mean nice feelings, but self-giving, self-forgetting, and going out of our way to help our brothers and sisters, just as he went out of His way to help us.

Because, after all, that's how disciples roll.