

A NEW YEAR'S DAY ENCHIRIDION

A Sermon Delivered by

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At age 66, in the middle of writing his massive book, *The City of God*, St. Augustine also wrote a small, 33 chapter manual on the Christian life called *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love*. I am 62 but I am not in the middle of writing a massive book though I am smack in the middle of a development project that could lead anyone to a monastic vocation.

In 1501, at the age of 35, the renown and remarkable humanist scholar, Catholic priest and reformer, Erasmus of Rotterdam, wrote *Enchiridion for the Christian Knight*. What then is an Enchiridion? It is a word that simply means “manual.” Hence, these are two examples of outstanding thinkers of the Church who attempted to provide a manual for Christian living to their people, one in the Fifth Century and the other in the 16th century. We are in no less need of such a manual today.

Alas, I am not providing you a book for each day of the year or even thirty-three chapters as Augustine provided in his brief enchiridion. Today I simply want to provide a New Year's Day enchiridion. To call it this is really to elevate this sermon since it is comprised mostly of some pastoral reflections for the first Sunday of the new year, 2016.

Rule One A couple of weeks ago while on my morning walk along the bike path in Bluemont Park, concentrating on a consistent pace, I saw coming toward me a person in the other lane. Suddenly they turned and began walking backwards. I kept my distance, scooting further to the right edge of my lane, anticipating they might run into me or fall and break a hip. While walking backwards may have some kind of positive impact on improving one's sense of balance, it is no way to navigate the world. But after more than 30 years of pastoring, I know that a great many people do in fact try to navigate their world by walking backwards into the past.

So perhaps the first “rule” of my New Year's Day Enchiridion is simply this: *chin up, eyes open, walk in the direction of your vision*. Walking backwards may be necessary at times—like when you come to a cliff or raging torrents of water—but for the most part, going backwards cannot get you where you need to go next. You walk in the direction of your vision so you can anticipate intersections, other travelers on the road, and yes, that poetic fork in the road with a road less traveled. As I said, a lot of people spend enormous sums of their time and energy walking backwards. They nurse grudges, replay events, work through decisions that can never be changed, conjure the ghosts of persons past, and otherwise wishfully wonder how their life may have been different if only they had

As painful as it may be to hear the preacher say the past is gone and irretrievable it is just as hopeful if not more hopeful a thing to hear since whatever circumstance, pain or conundrum you find yourself in today will also pass. This means, if we ever fully grasp the truth of it, that life is quite poignant, bursting with meaning and purpose. For this moment is the one you have. Seize it. Maximize it. Or simply become one with it in blissful ecstatic union. Chin up, eyes open, walk in the direction of your vision.

Rule Two The second rule of my enchiridion is founded on rule one. In trying to phrase it I could say, *get out of the intersection* but that only captures part of the rule. You have no doubt been driving and had to wait for a pedestrian to cross through an intersection while they were reading or texting on their mobile phone. This is why I do not put any sticker on my car that would identify me as clergy, otherwise, I wouldn't be able to stick my head out of my car window and yell, “get out of the intersection!” I don't do

that often. Usually I say to myself in the car—and my family can testify to the veracity of this comment—“pick up the pace.” But thinking through how to state this rule I would simply say it this way: *Turn Off*. Turn off your phones and stop texting, scrolling, tweeting or reading. Turn off your tablets, your phablets, your televisions and radios. In the context of your work life, your home and family life and your life-in-God, there are intersections that you should be aware of and moments of encounter that should flag your attention. I don’t want to make light of the terrible accident of persons who, texting or reading their phones, walk off a cliff or get hit by a car, but these are dramatic examples of being so oblivious to one’s surroundings that persons lose their lives or are injured. So *turn off* is one way of saying that you and I need to build into our weeks a Sabbath rest. *Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy* is the command. Turn off. We need to build into our days times to turn off and give ourselves a chance to become acquainted with our surroundings, our fellow travelers and family. *Pray without ceasing* is the admonition from scripture. Turn off.

The irony about all of our devices is that the technology designed to facilitate communication is many times the technology that interferes with our conversation. Cyber communication is a Docetic, gnostic heresy. It is this idea that relationships do not need to be incarnated in flesh and blood but that spirit is all that is needed. The Church rejected those notions as they regarded Christ. There were people millennia ago who insisted Jesus was just a spirit masquerading in the flesh. That the Holy God would not condescend to the messy and smelly flesh and blood of humanity. What we have at times in our families, our culture and workplace cultures is a bloodless communication. This leads to many problems that I don’t have the time to explore with you today but this is easily illustrated by so-called *forums or comments* sections of publications. People say the most awful things in comments they post. They post statements they would not say face to face to another human being. That may be communication but it is not conversation. Turn off and look someone in the eye so you can behold and be beheld. Walking obliviously through the intersections of your life is no way to live and indeed, can injure you and harm those who you love and who love you.

Rule Three So rule three has to be special because three is a very special idea. You notice I didn’t say it is a special number. It is a remarkable idea. You, for example, are three: body, soul, mind. This mysterious idea is captured in the geometric emblem called a triangle. The three-in-oneness of life is also illuminated in scripture in a number of places but none as famous as Paul’s chapter on love in his first letter to the church at Corinth. Indeed, St. Augustine’s handbook is entitled, *The Enchiridion of Faith, Hope and Love*. And in it from the beginning he says, “God should be worshipped in faith, hope, love.” Augustine argues that in the shortest form, this is his enchiridion. It might help us to understand Augustine if we hear Paul’s words, [I Corinthians 13:]

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. **9** For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; **10** but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. **11** When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. **12** For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. **13** And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Rule three then is this: faith, hope and love abide and the greatest of these is love. The purpose of the enchiridion is not to explain this mystery since that would be a work of theology, but the purpose is to remind you of this, to urge you to inscribe this somewhere in your mind or heart so you never, ever forget it. When you are tempted to betray; when you are betrayed. When you are tempted to revenge; when you are wounded by misdirected anger. When you are prone to despair and giving up on the world; when the world has given up on anything remotely just or sane. Faith, hope and love abide, these three and the greatest of these is love. When you hear preachers preaching hate; when you read or hear expositors

refuse to condemn terrorism generated out of their own religion; when others insist that we give up the work of peace; when the long winter of human wickedness leads to short days and long nights. May this idea, the three-in-oneness of faith, hope and love be a light in your darkness. Evil will not win. Darkness has not and will not overcome the Light of God. You are not silly or superstitious or uneducated for believing this. Far from it! Those who continue to insist on violence, who demean, insult and wreak revenge do nothing but spin the ticket wheel of futility. They progress the human race not one inch further. We believe not because we must make some leap into the unknown but we believe because of the evidence of God-in-Christ, the remarkable Trinitarian nature of all of life and the victory of love secured for us at Calvary. I love how the prayer known as St. Patrick's Breastplate begins:

I arise today

**Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the Threeness,
Through confession of the Oneness of the Creator of creation.**

There's a prayer for your New Year's Day Enchiridion! Keep it close and pray it is my suggestion.

Rule Four

Before discussing the final rule of my enchiridion, let's review what the handbook says:

- *chin up, eyes open, walk in the direction of your vision*
- *Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy or, Turn Off or, Get Out of the Intersection*
- *God should be worshipped in faith, hope, and love*

Now, we have arrived at my last rule for today's enchiridion. What last rule should I provide you in this little handbook as you launch off into another year of spinning in orbit around the sun? You might expect something lofty, noble, poetic and maybe even magisterial. Instead I want to direct your attention to a verse of scripture that has probably never been the centerpiece of any sermon. It is a very human request made by an old apostle. Turn to II Timothy 4:13.

II Timothy 4:

13 When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments.

We are so used to reading the Thou's and the Thee's of holy scripture, of hearing commands *Thou Shalt Not!* And overtures, *In the Beginning*, that a verse like this strikes us as rather dull. And indeed it is! There is nothing magisterial about it. And yet, that is exactly its allure because it captures the Apostle Paul as one of us, a human being with needs, dependent upon the generosity and kindness of others. "Bring me the cloak I left please and the books and by all means, bring me the parchments." He apparently needs something to keep him warm, books to keep him company and something to write his thoughts upon. I love this for its humanity. And that is why I conclude this little New Year's handbook with this scripture so that Rule 4 of my enchiridion goes something like this: *Thank God you are human.* Or we could say it like this, *it is okay and good to be a human being.* To be human is to be dependent upon the kindnesses and generosity of others.

We, all of us, step into another calendar year with this reminder of our humanity. We are needy. We are interdependent. And that is okay. The Incarnation of God in Christ is God's YES to our humanity. When you find yourself in need then, speak up and talk to someone. If you must ask for help then you simply reveal that you are human. When others approach you for help, it is a reminder that you are also a human being in need and now are presented with an opportunity to meet a need in someone else's life.

This reminder of our humanity is a reminder that we carry within us our own mortality. So New Year's celebrations play with the idea that we might exchange exhausted time, worn-out time for new time, fresh and yet-to-be-lived time. We exchange the old year like we throw out frayed and torn jeans. This happens year after year after year because time wears out. And because nature and the cycles of nature cannot transform us.

If my fourth rule were a coin, on one side it would read: you are mortal. But if you flip the coin and look at the other side, you will notice an imprint of the Good Shepherd and words to this effect: *Christ is in you*. Yes, we carry within us our own mortality but as people of the Way, persons redeemed by the great love of Christ, we also have Christ in us. Thank God for your humanity. Your interdependence is a reminder that God was generous and kind to you and so, when asking for help or offering it, we remind one another that God in Christ has met our needs. Listen to how the Apostle Paul said it to the church in Roman [8]:

10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. **11** If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Do not fear. Though you are mortal, Christ has overcome death. Do not be afraid as this new year begins, but know that while you have tribulations in this world, Christ has overcome the world.

Chin up, eyes open, walk in the direction of your vision/remember the Sabbath/worship God in faith, hope and love/it is good to be a human being, loved by Christ.

Amen. +