

Thirty five years ago this coming fall I participated in the funeral mass of Father Ray Herman, one of our archdiocesan priests. Father Ray, as he was known, was ordained in the mid-1950s. Following Pope John XIII’s call in the early 1960s for “priest rich” dioceses to share their treasure of vocations with dioceses in mission territories then Archbishop Byrne released Father Ray and Father Ardel Sodawasser for pastoral work in Bolivia. With archdiocesan support they established San Rafael Parish in Cochabamba, Bolivia. In time, a satellite education center and chapel were established in a small mountain village about a two-day horseback ride from Cochabamba. The native Indians who lived there were poor, uneducated and lacked basic health care. The wealthy landowners on whose plantations they worked had little or no interest in their plight.

With the help of the natives Father Ray began some basic instruction to teach the natives to read and write and, in time, set up a rudimentary medical clinic. The night after the clinic opened Father Ray was bludgeoned to death. His assailant was eventually caught. Yet, following trial and conviction, the assailant “escaped” from prison never to be seen again. As Father Ray’s body was being prepared to be shipped back to the archdiocese for burial, his personal effects were also collected. Besides the clothes he was wearing at the time of his death, the rest of his personal property fit into a wood cigar box, of about four inches high and a foot long. From what I later learned about Father Ray, not only did his love extend to the poor for whom he gave his life, his was also a forgiving love toward those who through ignorance or social custom oppressed the native population and eventually arranged his killing. Father Ray, for me, exemplifies the “new commandment” of love to which Jesus calls all of us today.

We might wonder how Jesus, or anybody, can “command” us to love. We need to understand the difference between our usual understanding of love and that of the bible. For the authors of the bible, love does not consist of warm, fuzzy feelings, or dreamy eyed visions. In the bible, love is not a feeling, but a lifestyle imperative. Love consists in visible acts toward others that bespeak divine parentage and common

commitment to one another. To love as Jesus commands and demonstrates, it is not necessary to like or even feel kindly toward the other person. But it is necessary to act toward the other in the way God does as exemplified by Jesus treatment of his disciples as he washed their feet at the Last Supper. This is the context of today's gospel. At the Last Supper Jesus washed all of the disciples' feet, including Judas who would betray him and Peter who would deny him. Throughout the Gospel we see that Jesus never gives up on anybody, even those who do not return his love. He continues to offer them opportunities right up to the end even the two thieves crucified with him. We are told one accepted him and his offer of salvation, the other turned him down—but both were offered the same gift. Such is the love of God, a total selfless, self-giving, self-emptying love. Love for the sake of love.

The new creation of which the author of Revelation speaks is not something magical that appears out of the sky. Rather, it begins in the here and now with each act that aims at fulfilling Jesus' command to love. Every act of love, no matter how small, through which we transcend our natural tendency to put selfish interest ahead of another's need or good, brings "heaven to earth" in some way. The kind word, text, tweet, e-mail or old-fashioned hand written note of encouragement; giving someone preference in traffic or at the check-out aisle in the store; the attempt to reconcile a situation with someone who has offended us or whom we have offended; the daily acts of "laying down our lives" through our jobs and daily household tasks for our families—all of these can be, if we choose to make them, acts of self-emptying Christ-like love.

Pope Benedict XVI writes: *"Love makes a demand that cannot leave me untouched. In love I cannot simply remain myself, but I always have to lose myself by having my rough edges taken off, by being hurt. And it is just this—that it hurts me so as to bring out more of my potential—it seems to me, that constitutes the greatness of love."*

This is kind of love that Father Ray lived. This is the love made present at every Mass. This is the love to which Jesus says, "Do this in memory of me."