

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The National Football League is going through a horrendous, crazy time right now with criticism of the way its handled domestic abuse issues among a handful of the players, as well as questions with regard to the long-term brain injuries that players have suffered. The amazing thing is that professional football still dominates the airwaves all afternoon and evening on Sunday, as well as Monday and Thursday evenings. The NFL is poised to be more profitable by billions of dollars this year than it ever has before. The criticisms and the questions do not seem to have had the least effect on its fan-base, nor are they expected to. The league officials, the owners, the players, the players' union, and, apparently, the fans, are all standing together.

Now, I'm not knocking the NFL. I can't wait to watch the Eagles take on the 49ers at 4:00 o'clock this afternoon. But I would like to suggest that maybe we, as a Church, can learn something from what's been going on there.

A healthy Church is one where people look out for one another. There is an interesting phrase that has entered our conversation in recent years. It is the phrase, "I'll have your back". If I say to someone, especially someone in a difficult situation, "I'll have your back," it means I'll be there for you, look out for you, help you through your troubles.

That certainly seems to be St. Paul's message to the Church today: "Brothers and Sisters, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but also for those of others.

In other words, St. Paul is telling us: "If we are encouraged by being united to Christ; if we take comfort from his love; if the Spirit of God is in us, we have to have each other's backs. We have to look out for each other. Not only that, but we have to put the needs of the others before ourselves, just as Christ did—emptying Himself, taking the form of a slave, not clinging to his equality with God, but pouring Himself out for all of us on the Cross."

St. Paul is telling us that our attitude as members of the Church must be that of Christ. While it is true that God accepts us just as we are. However, He loves us too much to leave us as we are. He wants us to become like Jesus.

Some of us come to the Church after wrestling with God, like the first son in the parable Jesus tells us today, At first, we say, "No, I will not," and, then, through grace, we change our minds and decide to serve Him. But, I think there are a whole lot more of us who are like the second son, who says, "Yes! I'll serve," but sit around, waiting to be served. As

you heard, the Lord's word to those of us who merely give lip-service to Him are rather harsh—"tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God before you".

Another great analogy for the Church that perhaps you heard before, but is worth repeating especially at this time of year as we see flocks of geese heading southward. We're told that as each goose flaps its wings, it creates uplift for the birds that follow. By flying in V formation, the flock adds 71 % extra flying range. In the same way members of the Church who share a sense of community can help each other get where they are going more easily...because they are holding each other up.

When one goose falls out of formation, it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of flying alone. If it doesn't quickly move back to take advantage of the lifting power of the birds in front, it will fall away and be lost. If we are as wise as the geese, we will also stay in formation with those headed where we want to go. We are willing to accept their help and give our help to others.

When the lead goose tires, it drops back in the formation and another flies to the point position. It would be so helpful in the Church if the members thought to see the Pastor tiring from time to time and stepped up to offer their own unique skills, capabilities, talents, and resources.

The geese flying in formation honk to encourage those up front to keep up their speed. Well, there is a lot of honking that goes on a Church, but it's rarely of a positive and encouraging nature. If it were more so, how much more productive could the Church be in building up God's Kingdom in our midst.

When a goose gets sick and falls out of formation, two geese drop back and follow it to help and protect it. They stand by each other in difficult times, they "got each other's back".

As a Church Family we are to study the life of Jesus, says St. Paul, and "to have the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

Can you imagine what our Church would be like if we took these words literally? When we say that the Church is the Body of Christ, it means we ought to live like Jesus and serve like Jesus. St. Paul was writing to us, the Church, when he said that we are to have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. Our job is not to protect the Church, but, as the Church, to love and serve one another, and be willing to lay down our lives for those who are outside our doors. Love one another, love for the poor, the broken, the homeless, the unchurched, the dechurched, indeed, all those outside our doors. Love for one another, love for the world—this is what it means to live like Jesus.