



SUNDAY REFLECTION

When I was a boy we belonged to a Boys Club sponsored by the Heinz Co. During the summers we would go camping for several weeks north of the city on what was known as the Slippery Rock Creek. The short of this story that could grow exponentially is that one of the highlights was when we could go out a pick blackberries along the country roads and fields that surrounded the camp. The excuse was that what we brought back to camp the cooks would bake into a pie for our tent. At least that was the theory. It was a marvelous encounter with the exuberant lushness of God's creation. It is impossible to hold back from tasting the first one plucked, and then from being gratefully amazed at all that is available under the generous provision of God. Such wonderful bounty is provided in the wild. Anyone who has ever done gardening of any kind, even something as simple as planting daffodil bulbs, has also experienced something of the miracle described in today's Gospel.

In the parable God is the sower whose intention is to provide abundance. We can miss this truth if we read the parable alongside an interpretation and thus begin to address too soon the question of how the seed is received and the dispositions needed for it to bear fruit. The application is one thing; the final line of the parable itself is worth savoring: 'the seed sprang up, yielding now sixty, now thirty, now a hundredfold.'

It is good for us to have the image of the gardener to savor alongside the many other images we have of God. We need to let our minds and souls rest in thinking of God wanting to provide abundance for His people, and wanting us to benefit from all that richness. There is a special congruity in this Gospel being proclaimed at this time of year, in midst of summer with the seed having been sown weeks previously now sprouting and growing towards a harvest this fall. A reminder for us to pause and appreciate God's good provision.

And there is more: through Baptism, God has sown the seed of His word in us, so that Christ dwells in us richly. And this word of God does not return empty, but carries us with it to the divine presence itself: 'I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be here is divine power for good planted deep within us which continues to work in us according to God's purpose for our lives, no matter how many setbacks we experience.

The Second Reading can reinforce this message. The groaning Paul mentions, expresses a longing for a completeness, and is a sign that we are still on the way. Even the most committed of us does not yet enjoy the completeness of the glorious freedom of the children of God. Being reminded of this can help us to be less impatient with our own shortcomings and those of others. Coming to understand that God continues to work through the Spirit in each human heart, disregarding past failings, will help people tempted to give up on themselves or on others.

READINGS SIXTEENTH SUNDAY

19 JUL '20

Wis. 12:13, 16-19: God's sovereignty over all makes God lenient to all. This should prompt us to be kindly to one another.

Rom. 8:26-27: Believers do not need to search for words with which to pray; if we are open in love and in faith, the Spirit gives us the words we lack.

Mt. 13:24-43: God brings the Kingdom into being as truly as the seed will provide a harvest and yeast will cause dough to rise. We are challenged to have patience and to leave it to God to bring the Kingdom to its completion.

THANK YOU

On the 28th of June, following the 11:30 a.m. Mass, I was assailed at the door of the rectory by many of you who had been at that Mass. It has been a long time, very long time since I was serenaded with that Birthday melody. It was so good to hear your voices again. Throughout these past weeks of the surgeries and the intervening weeks of therapy to keep the knee mobile you have inundated me with cards of all sorts; funny, serious, a bit odd, prayerful. You have had multiple Masses said on my behalf. Thank you all for your thoughts, good wishes, and your prayers they have been deeply appreciated but no more than for who you all are.

MASS

It is frequently stated that the Mass is the source and summit of our faith. If we know and understand the Mass and what is being presented through the prayers and the actions we come to realize that the core values of our faith in the Redeemer Jesus, Christ, the Creator God the Father and the Sanctifier the Holy Spirit is placed before us time after time. An important aspect of this is the coming together as a congregation to pray together, to support each other in faith, to be there as a physical reminder that we are the Body of Christ. Each individual unique and important in their individuality yet at the same time absolutely essential to strengthening and passing on the faith for those worshiping with us.

But, there has been a disruption in this participation. When we came together, albeit it on a limited basis with the first phase of reopening, I said something to the effect of welcoming you back and there was a crescendo (not too strong of a word) of applause. Which I saw as your own recognition that something important had been missing during those previous weeks. I have been mulling over this point for the past several weeks.

With the initial jump in the rate of infections of COVID-19 back in March the bishops suspended the celebration of public Masses, granted a dispensation from the obligation of attending Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation Masses as a means of helping to attack this virus. At that time it was their suggestion that we Catholics could benefit from increased personal prayer, spiritual reading, reflection and watching a live broadcast of Mass while making a spiritual communion from home.

The hope was that by watching a live-streamed Mass this would be a way for Catholics to stay connected with their parishes and the wider Church, even if they could not be gathering together physically.

I have to admit that celebrating Mass in an empty church, or relatively empty church has to be one of the weirdest experiences I've had. Normally, there is the sound of your voices in prayer. Not just the sound of everyone mixed together but the reality of certain voices being more recognizable than others at times, a constantly changing dynamic. And along with that there was always the chance to look out over the congregation and see who's there, and you know what comes to mind? No, not the chance to take attendance but the opportunity to see individuals, a reminder of the circumstances of individual parishioners and a reminder to remember you in prayer.

As we enter into the Third Phase of Opening limitations still exist. These are due to the diminished number of people who may be in the church due to social distancing as well as the need for caution on the part of those who are more susceptible to infections for whatever the reason may be. Therefore the dispensation from attending Mass is still in effect. When I return and I watch the numbers in attendance it may be appropriate to increase the number of public Masses.

Those of you who cannot attend Mass are encouraged to tune into a live-streamed Mass and to continue to make a spiritual communion and to pray that we as a society, as humanity may be able to develop the means of controlling this virus.

A Spiritual communion is a way for us to say that even though I cannot receive the living presence of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ resting under the visible manifestation of the host I can still receive Christ spiritually into my heart.

What happens at Communion? We enter into a deep relationship, the presence of the grace of the risen Christ and in the Eucharist in particular, His body, blood, soul and divinity. And so as Catholics, we want that. We want that deep communion with our God. But at this period of time it is not always possible.

When making a spiritual communion, a person in prayer to God, knowing that the physical reality at this time is not possible, for Jesus to still come into our hearts at least spiritually, to come into our lives, to continue to fill us with the grace that we need to be sustained, even though we can't receive the Eucharist at this time.

We are still challenged as people of faith to keep the Sabbath holy even though there may be no chance to physically attend a Mass. Are we willing to set aside some time on Sunday or Saturday to go through the readings for the day, to try and pray together as a family, or if we live alone to pray on our own.

THE DANGERS OF LIVE-STREAMING MASSES

Yes there are dangers associated with live-streaming. Dangers for each of us in different ways. Permit me to share with you the observations of a priest of the Arlington Diocese, Fr. Jerry Pokorsky, who has stated the concerns rather clearly. Concerns that we as holders of the faith and transmitters of the faith should be cognizant of.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, bishops have canceled the public celebration of the Mass in obedience to government authorities. Live-streamed Mass on the internet has become the "new normal" of worship for the duration. But this quasi-liturgical innovation may have problematic long-term ramifications.

The Mass is forever the "source and summit" of the Christian life and thus spiritually essential. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." (John 6:53) At the Last Supper, surrounded by his first priests, He commanded them "Do this in remembrance of me." (Luke 22:19)

The components of the Mass are communal and personal. They are rooted in Jewish worship. The Liturgy of the Word fulfills and replaces worship in the synagogues, and the Liturgy of the Eucharist fulfills and replaces the Temple sacrifices with the One Sacrifice of Jesus. The reception of Jesus during Communion—his body, blood, soul, and divinity—prepares us to return to the world and to love others as Jesus loves us.

The Real Presence is Something we touch and experience:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it... (1 John 1-2)

Jesus is present during the Eucharistic celebration in various ways: in the person of the priest, in the proclamation of the Word, and in the assembled people: For "where two or three are

gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them.” (Mt 18:20) Above all, Jesus is present under the appearance of bread and wine after the Consecration: “...Christ becomes present whole and entire, God and man” (Mysterium Fidei, no. 39).

The crisis in Catholic belief in the Real Presence is beyond dispute. The extended cessation of the public celebration of Masses throughout the country threatens to further undermine our faith. So it’s understandable for pastors and diocesan bureaucracies to propose stopgap practices such as encouraging acts of “spiritual Communion” within the context of live-streamed Masses.

The Church has always advocated the practice of “making a spiritual Communion” outside of Mass. St. Alphonsus Liguori’s prayer anticipates a future reception of Communion; he does not propose it as a substitute:

My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the most Blessed Sacrament. I love You above all things and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot now receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there, and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.

Homebound Catholics feel some connection to the Church when they watch Mass on TV. So the growing recourse to live-streaming Masses may, at first, appear as a reasonable interim means to keep parishioners connected to their pastor and the daily celebration of the Mass. But there are distinct dangers to habitually “attending” Mass in the virtual reality of television and the internet and this may explain why some Catholics avoid streamed Masses. It’s not real.

Some of the faithful—among them very pious folks—report that they “attend” Mass by watching the televised version. As a result—as many priests know—some seniors very gradually lose the desire to receive Holy Communion outside of Mass invoking their TV Mass “attendance.” The lack of interest facilitates a priest’s occasional neglect of his homebound visitation duties.

Hence even before the pandemic, television and internet broadcasts of the Mass tended to replace the Real Presence of Jesus in Holy Communion with his Virtual Presence (to coin a phrase). The great beauty of our sacred art, music, and architecture testifies to our need to receive the Sacraments within the context of transcendence. Mediation through a digital screen distances us from this reality.

One hopes those who view streamed Masses during these challenging weeks will return to the Real Presence celebrations when government and religious authorities once again permit church attendance. But appearances affect the cultural-religious zeitgeist for better or for worse. Culture flows from the cult, the form of worship. We have already reaped unintended consequences of liturgical practices (such as Communion in the hand) we’ve thoughtlessly implemented.

Appearances accentuate or imply certain realities. A live-streamed Mass does not anticipate the reception of Holy Communion; it substitutes for our communal participation. The images focus on the prayers of the priest (feeding his narcissism?). Participation is decidedly passive—or completely interior/spiritual—which can be Protestant at best, gnostic at worst. The trajectory of these appearances may further erode the Catholic sense of need and desire for the Real Presence.

In 1979, Pope John Paul II encouraged priests in their sacred ministry. [His words](#) were remarkably prescient:

...think of the places where people anxiously await a Priest, and where for many years, feeling the lack of such a Priest, they do not cease to hope for his presence. And sometimes it happens that they meet in an abandoned shrine, and place on the altar a stole which they still keep, and recite all the prayers of the Eucharistic liturgy; and then, at the moment that corresponds to the transubstantiation a deep silence comes down upon them, a silence sometimes broken by a sob... so ardently do they desire to hear the words that only the lips of a Priest can efficaciously utter. So much do they desire Eucharistic Communion, in which they can share only through the ministry of a priest....

During these unfortunate times, it seems better to emphasize the Real Presence of Jesus in traditional ways: in the gathering of two or three (but not more than ten so as not to violate governmental decrees!), reading of the Word, and a spiritual Communion—yearning for the Real Presence in better times.

In the meantime, active clerical and lay resistance to governmental claims that church attendance is “non-essential” would affirm authentically Catholic worship: We must not allow the virtual reality of electronic images to replace our desire for the Real Presence.

WEEKDAY REFLECTIONS FIFTEENTH WEEK

Monday 13 Jul

Isaiah 1:10-17; Psalm 49; Matthew 10:34-11:1

In today's passage from the book of the Prophet Isaiah God tells his people that ritual sacrifice no longer pleases him. He wants the people to truly believe in what they are doing rather than just performing. He wants the people to be concerned with justice and peace. The Psalm takes up this theme. In the Gospel from St Matthew, we see Jesus telling his listeners that he has not come to bring peace but trouble. This is because his message calls for a conversion of heart and a new way of life which many will and, indeed, still do reject. Our readings challenge us to make this conversion and become true Christians in thought, word and deed.

Tuesday 14 Jul

Isaiah 7:1-9; Psalm 47; Matthew 11:20-24

In our first reading today from the Prophet Isaiah the Lord is telling his people to stand by him and they will be safe, but if they do not stand by him then they will not stand at all. This takes place about the year 733 BC when the rulers of Israel (the northern kingdom) and Aram had forged alliances with foreign rulers. Isaiah tells King Ahaz of Jerusalem to place his trust in God and God will defend him. In the Gospel, Christ exhorts his hearers to listen to him and to believe in him. Christ names a number of towns in which he had worked most of his miracles but where true faith had not materialized. He tells the people that these towns will be punished more severely than Sodom unless they listen and convert. We too are called to conversion of heart and a new way of life.

Wednesday 15 Jul

Isaiah 10:5-7, 13-16; Psalm 93; Matthew 11:25-27

The people are reminded by the prophet Isaiah in today's first reading that kingdoms and powers rise and fall but that everything is subject to God's power. Isaiah foretells that the King of Assyria will be used by God as the stick to discipline the people of Judah for the sins they have committed. In the Gospel, Jesus says that it is children who truly understand the message of the kingdom. By this he is saying that those with no preconceptions or theories can easily grasp the message he brings. To truly understand that message we need to have a clear mind and childlike trust.

Thursday 16 Jul

Isaiah 26:7-9, 12, 16-19; Psalm 101; Matthew 11:28-30

Our first reading today tells us that those who live righteously before the God who judges all will have a happy life. Those who do not live by the law of God will have a troubled life. Christ calls the people to himself in the Gospel and tells them that if they believe in him he will support them. The yoke which each of us has to carry is an easy one because faith in Christ will make the burden lighter and easier to carry. True faith is what we must have and that faith is demonstrated in righteous living.

Friday 17 Jul

Isaiah 38:1-6, 21-22, 7-8; Psalm 38; Matthew 12:1-8

In our first reading we see that Hezekiah is now King of the southern kingdom of Judah. He is told by Isaiah that he is about to die so he prays to God and is cured because of his faith. In the Gospel, Jesus admonishes the Pharisees for being too legalistic about the Sabbath day. His disciples had been out walking with him and had picked a few heads of corn as they passed through the corn fields. What the Lord wants is mercy and not legalism for only in mercy is true faith to be seen.

Saturday 18 Jul

Micah 2:1-5; Psalm 9; Matthew 12:14-21

Our first reading today comes from the Prophet Micah – a contemporary of Isaiah – through whom God warns that those who plot evil and mischief will themselves be plotted against by God. Micah speaks about how those who commit evil even lie awake at night thinking up even more ways to deprive the poor. In the Gospel, Jesus is forced to move on from a particular district sooner than he intended because the Pharisees had decided to destroy him and were looking for

a way to do it. As he goes he cures more people but tells them to say nothing about it – his time has not yet come. But our time has come and now is the time for us to live as true Christians and to proclaim the message of the Good News.

PRAYERS

Prayer of St. Ambrose before Mass

Lord Jesus Christ, we approach Your banquet table as saints and sinners, and dare not rely on our own worth, but only on Your goodness and mercy.

Gracious God of majesty and awe, we seek Your protection, we look for Your healing.

We appeal to You, the fountain of all mercy.

Lord Jesus Christ, eternal king, crucified for us, look upon us with mercy and hear our prayer, for we trust in You.

Merciful Father, purify us in body and soul, and make us worthy to taste the Holy of Holies. May Your Body and Blood, which we intend to receive, unworthy as we are, be for us the remission of our sins, the washing away of our guilt, the end of our evil thoughts, and the rebirth of our better instincts. May it incite us to do the works pleasing to You and profitable to our health in body and soul, and may it deliver us from evil. Amen.

