

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday  
8/27/2023

## THE GIFT OF THE CHURCH

We live in an individualistic age of an individualist society. That being so, some of that individualism can seep into our spirituality. It can become a “me and Jesus syndrome” where we neglect others. People can think, I’m fine with Christ but I don’t need the Church. Pope Francis, relying on St. Paul VI before him, insists that it’s an absurd dichotomy, an absurd division, to separate Christ and his Church. Think of a couple that have been married for many decades. You will never understand one of those people without references to the other.

So too, Christ and his Church go together. St. Paul uses marital language to explore this mystery, referring to the Church as the Bride of Christ and elsewhere describing the Church as the Body of Christ. Jesus came to save a people. In baptism we are brought into the Body of Christ that we call the Church. We are all members of that Body with Jesus as our head. While that call to faith is to be deeply personal, it’s not private. We’re part of a larger reality. We journey to God together, as God’s people.

It’s been noted that at times, some have tried to claim that Jesus didn’t intend to found a church. But as Peter indicates in today’s gospel, Jesus is both the messiah and the Son of God and his profession of faith in Christ has a divine origin. Jesus, as the messiah, clearly gathered a people around him, disciples. He formed a messianic community and you can call that what you want but we call it the Church.

The Church is the sacrament of salvation. Jesus came and revealed God in a new and radical way. He didn’t just speak the word of God as did the prophets of old. Jesus is the word God speaks. You could say that Jesus the sacrament revealing God to us. In turn, the Church is the sacrament of Christ whose work is to continue to make Jesus present. We do this in many different ways such as parishes, schools, hospitals and in seven privileged ways that we call the Seven Sacraments. The Church, despite at times the many human failings of her members, isn’t just a multinational corporation. It’s so much more in so many ways. Simply put, the Church is to be a gift and not a burden.

To love the Church is, at times, to love people we don't want to be around, people who irritate us, but people who are still members of the Body of Christ who are loved by God and ought to be loved by us. Jesus didn't entrust his Church to angels but to weak, sinful people who can mess things up and yet still the Holy Spirit can be at work. Our prayer is that the Holy Spirit may work through us but fortunately, the Holy Spirit can also work in spite of us. And in the meantime, our Church operates the largest non-public school system in the country, possibly the world, and probably the largest non-public health care system and the largest non-public system of social service, all of which serve both Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

I *need* a church in my life and not just some church somewhere. I need *the* Church founded by Christ on the rock of Peter. I need *the* Church to teach me about Jesus and to help me live a life of intentional faith. I need *the* Church to challenge me when I am complacent, to comfort me when I am sad and to encourage me when I am down. I need *the* Church because following Christ isn't easy and I can't do it on my own. I need *the* Church because by myself I can get derailed and perhaps try to twist things to what I want them to be rather than to what God wants. I need *the* Church because I didn't see Jesus rise from the dead. I wasn't there. I believe it happened but I believe it happened because someone saw him who told someone else who told someone else who eventually told me.

The Church isn't just the Jesus Christ fan club. The Church is that body of Christ and we are connected to one another. Sometimes we may wish we weren't so connected but we are members of one another, members of the body of Christ. St. Cyprian in the early Church said, *No one can have God as Father without having the Church as mother.* I need the Church because despite whatever failings, shortcomings and even sin that has been accumulated for nearly 2000 years, it's here that I receive the mercy of God in the Sacrament of Reconciliation and it's here I receive the Body and Blood of Christ, the Son of the living God.

Within that gift of the Church, there is another gift: the ministry of St. Peter. In a few minutes we will again profess that our faith is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. That ministry of the apostles is carried on today by bishops throughout the world who are their successors and that ministry of St. Peter, that we hear about today, is carried on by Pope Francis. That gift is meant to maintain the unity,

strengthen the holiness, enhance the catholicity and uphold the apostolic nature of the Church.

*Who do you say that I am? We already know the answer. Our answer comes not only with our lips but with our lives. Not just as individuals but together, as part of the Church, with our words and lives may each of us say with Peter to Jesus, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**