

6th SUNDAY OF EASTER – C (May 22, 2022)

Even though the feast of Pentecost is still two weeks away, we can't help but notice the increasing presence of the Holy Spirit in the readings today. In the first reading we heard about the first major dispute within the very early Church: how to handle the gentile (i.e. non-Jewish) converts to this new Christian faith. Some of the Jewish converts said these gentiles needed to follow the laws of Moses in their entirety—circumcision and all the rest, while others said that wasn't necessary. The apostles met to decide the issue...and did you catch what they said in their reply? “It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities...” followed by the details. In other words, the leaders relied explicitly on the Holy Spirit to guide them to the right decision. This in turn is directly related to what Jesus told the apostles at the Last Supper as we heard in the gospel: “the Holy Spirit...will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you.”

What a blessed promise Jesus gave the apostles, and what a critically important promise it was! For nearly 2000 years that same Holy Spirit has provided that same guiding and teaching function for the Church and her leaders, especially for the bishops in union with Peter's successor, the pope. I'm well aware that many people have no time at all for the Church, especially in their disgust at the sins, scandals and weaknesses they have seen in the Church in recent years. Frankly, this is nothing new—we need to confess that sin and scandal have plagued the human dimension of the Church throughout her history.

But—thanks be to God—the Church is so much more than human sin and scandal. And that is because the Church at its foundation is of divine origin—it was established by Jesus Christ himself who is God from God, light from light, true God from true God. And it is guided and protected by the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus promised the apostles. Any honest look at the Church must also confess the reality of her truth, beauty and goodness when her human members sincerely seek and act on the grace and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Consider for a moment three brief examples:

1. The Spirit has been at the heart of the Church's ever-growing and deepening understanding of the truth about God and his will and plan for us. A little later on in John's gospel, Jesus at the Last Supper also told the apostles that as the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit would guide them to all truth. We already saw an example of that guidance in the first reading on the question of the new gentile converts to Christ and the Mosaic law. There have been many other gatherings of church leaders and other occasions for the Spirit to guide the Church to help clarify the Catholic faith on a whole variety of issues—from Jesus being both fully divine and fully human to the nature and power of the sacraments to the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints and many others besides.

We can and we ought to thank God for the Holy Spirit's work in the Church to lead us to know more deeply the truths that God has revealed to us about himself, about us, and about how we ought to live and be in loving communion with him. That the Spirit does so in spite of the sins and failings of the Church's human nature is even more awe-inspiring, is it not?

2. The Spirit is also the source of the great and bountiful beauty found within the Church, especially in her saints. No, we can't ignore the ugliness of sin and evil that results from ignoring God's law and his call to holiness. But who can deny the beauty and shining example of the saints—those folks who truly loved God and genuinely sought to do his will? Let me cite just one example: St. Damien of Molokai, whose feast the Church celebrated on the tenth of this month. He was a Belgian priest who in the late 1800's went to the Hawaiian Islands to do mission work. At that time, leprosy (Hanson's disease) was present there, and the local king had ordered all victims of the disease to be quarantined on the island of Molokai for the rest of their lives. In 1873 Fr. Damien volunteered to go to Molokai to provide pastoral care for those victims, and he spent the last sixteen years of his life there. He lived with the lepers, ate with them, prayed with and for them, and offered the sacraments and the Church's love and concern for them. He eventually contracted the disease himself and died from it in 1889 and was canonized as Saint Damien by Pope Benedict in 2009.

We can and we ought to thank God for the Holy Spirit's work in raising up St. Damien and so many other saints whose love for God and neighbor demonstrate in so many ways the beauty of God and of lives dedicated to such love for service. That the Spirit does so in spite of the sins and frailties of those saints is even more awe-inspiring, is it not?

3. Finally, the Spirit is the origin of all the goodness and generosity shown in and by the Church and all followers of Christ. Think of all ways you show your love and concern for your friends, neighbors, fellow parishioners, and so many others in their needs. Think of all the ways you contribute to the work and mission of the Church here in this parish and Holy Rosary Cluster through your generous stewardship of your time, talent and treasure. Think of your willingness to contribute to the needs of those outside your own area through the Acts of Kindness and our recent soup supper that raised over \$2000 for relief of the victims of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is all done in response to the Holy Spirit's call to love and serve those in need.

We can and we ought to thank God for the Holy Spirit's work in challenging and prompting us to reflect his goodness and sharing it with others in these and all other ways. That the Spirit does so in spite of our own sins and weaknesses is even more awe-inspiring, is it not?

As we prepare to celebrate Pentecost in two weeks, let's remember Jesus' promise to the apostles—and to us as his Church--that the Holy Spirit would teach them everything and remind them of his own teaching. When the Spirit's guidance is not sought or is ignored, then spiritual and moral laziness will set in, and sin and scandal will inevitably follow. But when we desire and seek that guidance, then the truth, beauty and goodness of God will shine forth radiantly through us and the Church that Jesus gave us. How genuinely we live our faith will determine in great measure how those around us think about the Church—it really is up to every one of us. May the Holy Spirit lead us, as he did for the apostles, to always remember and live out all that Jesus teaches us.