

19th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (August 7, 2022)

Have you ever been asked: “have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior? Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?” The closest I ever came directly to such questions was many years ago I was at my sister’s home in Britt. While she was at work, two people came to the door and began talking about world peace. This sounded vaguely familiar; when I asked if they were Jehovah’s Witnesses, they said yes. I told them—kindly!—that I was a Catholic priest, and the conversation ended soon thereafter.

Back to those questions about having a personal relationship with Jesus: we Catholics may think those questions have a Protestant or evangelical sound to them. I mention all this because of our second reading from Hebrews and its treatment of faith. The Catechism summarizes well this most important virtue and its various elements as ‘both a gift of God and a human act by which the believer...freely assents to the whole truth that God has revealed’. Faith begins as God’s gift to us—the truth about himself and who we are, and then our ‘yes’ to this gift. It includes both the content of our belief –what we believe about God and Jesus and ourselves; it also includes our acceptance of those beliefs, how we live them out, and our trust in the One who revealed them to us.

So there is indeed a formal dimension to this faith business: it begins with the God who reveals and our acceptance of that revelation. But we can’t ignore that very important question that we may think sounds more Protestant than Catholic: do you have a personal relationship with this God, with this Jesus? I’m not asking if you know about Jesus. No doubt that is very important, and the Bible—especially the gospels—gives us what we need to know about him. I’m asking a related but different question: do you know Jesus? Do you know him not only as God the Son and Savior that he is, but also as the dearest and closest friend you could ever have?

We Catholics need to wrestle with this question. Pope Benedict set the challenge for us all: “Christian faith is not only a matter of believing that certain things are true, but above all a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.” Pope Francis and St. John Paul II said the same thing in other ways. And there is no doubt at all that Jesus himself very much wants that kind of personal, one-on-one relationship of heart, mind and soul with every single one of us. Yes, Jesus is only begotten Son of the Father, Savior of the world, and the one head of his Body which is the Church. But he also loves every individual person with an absolutely unique and particular love because every one of us is an utterly unique person unlike anyone else. Parents, you love all your children, but you love each one in ways unique to each. Take that idea and multiply it by infinity...and that’s how Jesus relates to each of us.

Consider just a few of Jesus’ words given us in the gospels:

- ‘Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest’ (Matt. 11:28). He means that, you know. He wants to do that for every one of you in your own particular circumstances and challenges of life.
- “Follow me” (John 1:43). He means that, you know. In this moment he spoke specifically to Philip (who indeed followed him), but he issues that same individual, personal invitation to everyone of us--warts and all--without exception.

- And perhaps most amazing of all: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day” (John 6:54). He means that, you know. Jesus not only wants a personal, individual loving relationship with each one of us; he goes way beyond that and actually makes it possible for us to receive him into our own bodies so we can be in full communion with him and he with us.

How can we grow in that kind of very close, intimate and personal relationship with Jesus? One very important, powerful and indispensable way, of course, is through prayer—communication with God. Certainly this includes the prayers that we learned as children and that we still use now. But prayer, in the sense of being in communion with God, is more than prayers that we have memorized. Think about how you talk to those closest to you—your spouse, family, closest friends. You share with them your deepest concerns, joys, heartaches, gratitude. You share with them without hesitation and with trust because you know these people love you and care about you.

That’s exactly how we can and should talk with and pray to Jesus. St. Alphonsus Liguori, whose feast we observed this past Monday, was an Italian priest and theologian in 18th-century Italy. He wrote very wisely about prayer: “*Acquire the habit of speaking to God as if you were alone with him, familiarly and with confidence and love, as to the dearest and most loving of friends. Speak to him often of your business, your plans, your troubles, your fears—of everything that concerns you.*” We can do that, you know...and we should. The more we speak to Jesus in this way, the easier and the more natural it becomes and the stronger our personal relationship with him grows as well. That leads to a deeper trust and a stronger faith...not to mention a stronger and a more loving friendship as well.

In the next few weeks we will look at some other ways we can grow into and deepen our relationship with Jesus on a more personal level. For now, let’s be mindful of just how incredibly blessed and privileged we are that Jesus, God the co-eternal Son of the Father, became one of us to be our Savior and our loving brother and friend as well. At the Last Supper he told the apostles “I call you friends, since I have made known to you all that I heard from my Father” (John 15:15). You have personal, loving relationships with those people—those friends—who know and love you and with whom you can share everything. Jesus calls us his friends as well with whom we can have that same kind of personal relationship and infinitely more...because he is also God the Son and our Savior. Jesus says to us: “I call you friends.” He means that, you know.