

11th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (June 18, 2023)

One of things that we often encounter in the gospels is the concept, the reality of miracles. The Catechism describes ‘miracle’ as “a sign of wonder, such as a healing or the control of nature, which can only be attributed to divine power.” We think, for example, of Jesus calming the stormy sea with a simple word or multiplying a mere handful of bread and fish into enough to feed thousands of people. In today’s gospel we see Jesus giving miraculous powers to the apostles—driving out evil spirits, curing every disease and illness, and even raising the dead.

Some, of course, remain skeptical about the very idea of miracles—especially now in our own time of great advances in science and technology. Even so, there are still events that occur that leave our most brilliant scientists and doctors scratching their heads in wonder; for example, total and immediate cures of terminal illnesses that have no natural explanation. These often show up in the process of canonization of new saints, and those episodes are examined in minute detail by medical experts, many of whom are nonbelievers.

Other kinds of miracles continue to manifest themselves. For example, there is the growing interest in Eucharistic miracles. Last Sunday we celebrated the feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ—our belief that we receive the real Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion under the mere outward appearance of ordinary bread and wine. But the great mystery/miracle of the Eucharist has at times throughout history shown itself in some very dramatic ways—for example, when a consecrated Host has changed in its visible appearance to that of real flesh and blood that medical examination has determined to be such. There is an exhibit making the rounds these days that gives examples and details of these miracles, and this exhibit will be on display at Notre Dame parish in Cresco beginning this Wednesday, June 21, and going through July 2. There is a flyer on the church bulletin board, and I’ll have further information in next weekend’s bulletin.

Now, at this point you may be wondering: why does all this talk about miracles? It’s because of what we hear in another part of today’s gospel--Jesus choosing, from among his many disciples, twelve particular men who he named his apostles: Peter and all the rest. Now, it’s not a miracle that Jesus chose these twelve...but let’s think for a moment about who Jesus chose. Remember: he gave them the authority to heal the sick, expel demons, and raise the dead. And later on he would give them further power and authority—to teach, to baptize, to forgive sins in his name, to celebrate the Eucharist that he instituted at the Last Supper.

Some very important responsibilities, to be sure. In many ways he empowered them to do what he himself did with such great authority. Therefore, he surely must have chosen some experts from the teaching, medical, and ministerial professions, right? Wrong! Let’s consider some of those that Jesus chose:

- A few fishermen like Peter, Andrew, James, and John—nothing wrong, of course, with such humble labor, but not exactly the kind of background we would think helpful in this brand new responsibility;
- A tax collector—a tax collector, of all things—the first-century equivalent of an IRS agent! What in the world did Matthew know about proclaiming the kingdom of God?

He was considered a traitor by his fellow Jews because he was in cahoots with the hated Roman empire...and Jesus chose him??

- A political revolutionary—Simon the Zealot. The Zealots were one of many Jewish groups who wanted to throw off the chains of Roman oppression, by force, if possible. They failed to do so...so why would Jesus choose someone like that?
- And, most scandalously of all, Jesus chose Judas Iscariot who, as the gospel says, ‘betrayed him.’

Hardly the cream of the first-century crop, to say the very least! And add to that the fact that these twelve so often showed themselves to be very slow learners and that they squabbled among themselves about petty things, and we could conclude that there is no way on earth that Jesus’ project had any hope whatsoever of getting off the ground—let alone succeeding or being fruitful in any way. In a recent book, Peter Kreeft writes that the Church at times and especially at her beginning must have resembled Noah’s ark: “...she looks like an amateur rather than a professional job...she was manned by a small coterie of inexperienced, incompetent, confused sailors who know next to nothing about sailing.”

But we know what happened—this group of twelve men, very much frail and flawed individuals, received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as we heard three weeks ago on that feast, and they began to do the work that Jesus commissioned and empowered them to do. They did so by the power of God, and thanks be to God, they relied on that power...because they would have been utterly powerless had they relied only on themselves. Once again from Professor Kreeft: “The fact that the storms of history had not sunk that leaky old tub [the Church] was miraculous.”

That’s exactly right. Remember that description of ‘miracle’ that I mentioned earlier—a sign or event that can only be attributed to divine power. The Church’s survival, let alone the continued progress in her work throughout the centuries, comes first and foremost from the power of God and the Holy Spirit’s presence. Absent that divine presence, the Church would have crumbled into the dust of history centuries ago. Those twelve apostles didn’t see the full fruits of their labor in proclaiming Jesus as Savior, but they began that work—and the Spirit is the One who made that work fruitful. The same is true now. Despite the efforts of those who want the Church to go away or to even shut it down, despite the scandal that the sins of Church members and even leaders cause to others, those human efforts and sins will not and cannot destroy the Church. The reason is simple: because she was founded by Christ and is sustained and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Let’s keep that in mind when we are tempted to disillusionment or fear or despair about the Church—whether because of attacks on our faith, concern about our own parishes or low priest numbers, or concern about loved ones who have rejected or fallen away from the faith. The miracle of the Church—her existence, life, and work—is ongoing, because it is the work of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Nothing and no one can destroy that work.