

12th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (June 25, 2023)

[First, a quick “it’s good to be back”: our priest convocation this past week was very worthwhile time spent together with my brother priests as it is every year. It began Monday afternoon and concluded Wednesday around noon (I left earlier that day to run some errands). We heard a number of interesting talks about St. Edith Stein, a Jewish convert to Catholicism and a martyr-victim of the Nazi concentration camps during World War II. Bishop Pates, our interim leader, was also with us—it was good to be with him. In case you are wondering, he has no more knowledge than any of us about when we will get our new archbishop. He has served in this interim role two other times since his retirement after turning 75 (he is 80 years old now)—once he served for six months and in another for eighteen months. I certainly hope we won’t be waiting that long! In the meantime, please keep praying that the Holy Spirit will give us the archbishop we need...and sooner rather than later.]

In this gospel passage from St. Matthew that we just heard, Jesus reminds us of one of the key responsibilities of those who follow him—the duty to witness to our faith in him by our words and actions. It’s not enough to simply believe in him within ourselves; we need to be willing to reflect our faith to others by our way of life. “What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light”, Jesus told the apostles in words that remind us of his call in the Sermon on the Mount to be the light of the world that we don’t hide under a basket as if it’s only our private possession.

In the last few weeks, we have seen a prime example in our country of the great need for that public witness to our faith in Christ. If you follow the news at all, you may have heard of a California-based group called the “Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence”. Despite the word “Sisters”, they are most definitely not a religious order—and the word “Indulgence”, which means giving in to one’s desires of whatever kind, makes that very clear. They are men, basically an anti-Catholic drag group, who dress as nuns in outrageous attire and who are most well-known for their crude and obscene mockery of Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and genuine religious sisters. Archbishop Cordileone of San Francisco accurately describes them as “a group that perversely dresses up as nuns while encouraging lewd and sacrilegious behavior”. The leadership of the U.S. bishops has said that their displays “[are] not just offensive and painful to Christians everywhere; it is blasphemy.” Blasphemy is speech, thought or action involving contempt, ridicule or hatred for God or the Church, the saints, and sacred things—it is a grave sin against the second Commandment (“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain”).

So why are these so-called “Sisters” in the news? Because last week, on June 16, the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team publicly honored them and gave them a ‘Community Hero Award’ before the game they were to play that night. Precisely what kind of ‘community service’ they provided has not been made clear; what is crystal clear is that this group’s main reason for being is to mock our Savior, our faith, and our Church in unspeakable ways.

In the face of their behavior and the Dodgers’ decision to honor them publicly, something good did in fact come about. Besides the strong and clear statements from our bishops, Catholics and other Christians in the Los Angeles area came forward by the thousands to Dodger Stadium that day to protest the team’s action. They processed peacefully and prayerfully around the area outside the stadium; I saw a picture of a local Knights of Columbus council that joined the

march. There was not one moment or incident of violence on the part of any of the protesters; instead, they prayed the rosary and sang hymns to praise God and to make reparation for the offenses and blasphemies committed against Jesus and his Blessed Mother.

In other words: they witnessed to their faith. They wanted to make known their love for Jesus and for their faith and Church, especially in the face of attacks on their faith. Archbishop Gomez, chief shepherd of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, offered a special Mass that day in reparation for the blasphemies committed by this group. During that Mass he said: “Religious freedom and the respect for the beliefs of others are hallmarks of our nation...When God is insulted, when the beliefs of any of our neighbors are ridiculed, it diminishes all of us.” Indeed, it does. And when that happens, we cannot afford to remain silent and fearful.

Jesus told the Twelve to ‘fear no one’—not even those who hate us or mock or insult us. We do need to love them, of course; Jesus was very clear about that as well. We dare not forget his call, also from the Sermon on the Mount, to ‘love your enemies and pray for your persecutors’. Please pray for the “Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence” and for all who support them; pray that they will come to the grace of conversion and to know the truth, the love, and the mercy of Jesus in their fullness. He surely died for the salvation of their souls as much as he did for ours.

But let’s not be afraid to let others know our love for Jesus and our faith; let’s not be ashamed or fearful about doing so. Again: “fear no one.” He also said: “Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father. But whoever denies me before others, I will deny before my heavenly Father.” The Catechism cites this very verse from today’s gospel in saying that “[s]ervice of and witness to the faith are necessary for salvation” (n. 1816). Let’s ask the Holy Spirit on a regular basis to help us to know how and when to witness to Jesus and to our faith and life in him. “Fear no one!”