

Homily – Easter 3 – (Year C) – May 5, 2019

ACTS 5:27-32, 40B-41; PS 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11-12, 13; REV 5:11-14; JN 21:1-19

As some of you know, we are greatly blessed to have a holy relic with us today—the **incorrupt heart of St. John Vianney**, the **Patron Saint of Priests**.

Back in mid-April, when I was in **Ars**, the little French village where St. John Vianney served as a parish pastor for 40 years, I went into the small chapel just a few steps away from the Basilica that was built in honor of St. John Vianney. The chapel is called the **Chapel of the Heart** and it's where the relic of the **Saint's heart** is normally kept for veneration. **His heart was not there when I was there**. It was in the **United States**. How ironic that St. John Vianney's heart was in **my** home country while I was in **his**! In fact, there was a list in that chapel of all the cities in the US where his heart would travel on the relic tour. **Phoenix** was *not* on the list.

At one point, the sacristan of the Basilica there said to me, **“It's too bad the Saint's heart is not here while you're visiting.”** I responded, **“His heart is here.”** The sacristan looked at me as if I had lost my mind. I paused for a moment and then said, **“His heart...is Jesus and Mary...and they are here...so his heart is here.”** After a moment, the truth finally sunk in, and the sacristan smiled and nodded in agreement.

So, you can imagine my surprise and excitement when I discovered that St. John Vianney's incorrupt heart **would** be here in Phoenix **today**—at Ss. Simon & Jude Cathedral—on my first Sunday back after sabbatical.

And this is just the kind of (**seeming**) coincidence that is key to understanding St. John Vianney...and his relationship with Jesus.

Fr. Vianney had discovered early on that, if we are **obedient** to Jesus—always keeping our **eyes** on him—and our **will** aligned with his—he will surprise us time and again with unexpected blessings beyond anything **we can ask for...bring about...or even imagine**.

But this insight didn't **originate** with St. John Vianney. Jesus has **always** worked this way. Take the incident in **today's Gospel**, for instance:

Simon Peter said to [his fellow Apostles], “I am going fishing.” They said to him, “We also will come with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. When it was already dawn, Jesus was standing on the shore; but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, have you

caught anything to eat?” They answered him, “No.” So he said to them, “Cast the net over the right side of the boat and you will find something.” So they cast it, and were not able to pull it in because of the number of fish. (Jn 21:3-6)

The key here is **obedience to Jesus**. Jesus gave a **command**...the Apostles **obeyed** his instructions...and they brought in a **miraculous catch**...after **failing** to catch a single fish when they followed **their own plan**.

It is said that when the young Fr. Vianney crested the hill and saw his new parish in Ars for the first time, he felt utterly ill-equipped to take responsibility for the 230 or so souls in his new parish. So, he lay prostrate before the Tabernacle in his little church that first night and told the Lord he would suffer **anything** the Lord asked him to suffer—**even for 100 years**—if that’s what it took to convert his parishioners.

In less than ten years, this village of mostly **lukewarm** and **indifferent** Catholics was becoming a **powerhouse of holiness**, and a **place of pilgrimage** for people **all over France**—and, eventually, *beyond* France—when they discovered the saintly priest who, in the last 30 years of his priesthood, would spend up to **18 hours per day—every day**—in the Confessional!

This miraculous conversion of his parish didn’t happen overnight, though. In the initial years, Fr. Vianney suffered **criticism**, **detraction**, **verbal abuse**, **false accusations** and **resistance** both from **parishioners** and **fellow priests**, because he **challenged** them—*priests and laity alike*—to strive to reach the same pinnacle of holiness that he sought to reach. And he challenged them just as much by his **example** as by his **words**.

We see a similar dynamic at work in today’s **1st Reading** from **Acts, Chapter 5** when the Apostles were hauled in before the court and interrogated by the religious authorities about their **ministry**—particularly about their **teaching** and **preaching**:

When the captain and the court officers had brought the apostles in and made them stand before the Sanhedrin, the high priest questioned them, “We gave you strict orders, did we not, to stop teaching in that name? Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and want to bring this man’s blood upon us.” (Acts 5:27-28)

Let’s stop and consider more deeply the high priest’s words here, because there’s more to what he said than initially meets the eye...and a much broader truth to his words than even *he* intended. He said:

“You want to bring the blood of Jesus upon us.”

In a sense, the high priest’s words were absolutely accurate...but **not** in the sense that *he* meant them. The high priest argued that the Apostles were **condemning** the religious authorities **who were, indeed, responsible** for the spilling of Jesus’ blood when they demanded to have him executed.

But that’s **not** what the **Apostles** intended. The Apostles did, indeed, speak clearly and bluntly to the religious authorities about **their complicity in Jesus’ execution**...but not in order to **condemn** them.

Rather, their clear and blunt words were intended to **move** the religious authorities to **repentance** and **conversion** in order that *they, too*, might experience **Divine Mercy**, just as the Apostles themselves had experienced Divine Mercy, *even after abandoning Jesus* in his time of greatest **need** and greatest **suffering**.

So, in that sense, the Apostles really did want to **“bring this man’s blood upon [the religious authorities]”**—not in order to **condemn** them, but in order that **the religious leaders** might be *washed clean* of their sin...by the **Blood of the Lamb**. But so blinded by their disobedience to God had these religious leaders become, that they could not see past **the condemnation they deserved**...to the **unmerited mercy** being offered them.

So they persisted in persecuting the Apostles.

In a similar way, Fr. Vianney’s challenges to his parishioners from the pulpit...and his challenges to his fellow priests by his holy example...were often met with **dismissiveness**, **derision** and **resistance**, if not outright *hostility*. Fr. Vianney did not call sinners **out** in order to **condemn** or **humiliate** them, but rather, to invite them to accept the **same grace and mercy of Jesus Christ** that was making him into a holy priest.

So...it wasn’t **Fr. Vianney** who made **himself** holy. It was **Jesus**—the Jesus to whom Fr. Vianney had surrendered his **heart**—and every other aspect of his **life** and **ministry**—out of love for **the Lord**...and for **the souls entrusted to him**.

So conformed to Jesus had this humble priest become, in fact, that an out-of-town visitor to Ars once exclaimed:

“I have seen God in a man!”

Unlike the Apostles who did **not** recognize the Lord when he appeared on the beach after their failed fishing expedition, this visitor to Ars recognized Jesus **in** the humble, unassuming pastor...just as if he were seeing Jesus himself.

Now getting back to relics! It might seem strange to **non-Catholics** who are **unfamiliar** with the practice of **veneration of the relics of the Saints**—or for that matter, to some **Catholics** who don't fully **understand** this kind of veneration—that the **actual heart** of a 19th Century French Catholic priest is here in Phoenix, while the rest of the Saint's incorrupt body is back in the Basilica in Ars, France.

Where did this idea of venerating a **body part** of a Saint come from anyway? Isn't it a bit **morbid** to separate a Saint's body parts and send some of them around the world? And how can a relic **impart grace**...or **bring about healing** anyway?

A person might *even* ask, “**Where is there any reference to relics in the Bible?**”

Well, if we turn to **Acts, Chapter 5**—just a few verses before the section of that same chapter that makes up our **1st Reading** for today's Mass—we find a great example:

Now many signs and wonders were done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon's Portico. None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high honor. And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women, so that they even carried out the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and pallets, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. (Acts 5:12-15)

If the **shadow** of a saint—in this case, **St. Peter**—could bring about healing, why can't the **heart** of a saint—in this case, **St. John Vianney**—impart the healing and grace of God?

Or do we actually—secretly—believe that God stopped working miracles through his Saints when the ink dried on the last book of the Bible?

The source of the power we speak of here is not the **physical** heart of the saint. **The source of the power is Jesus Christ.** It just so happens that St. John Vianney's absolute surrender to Jesus *did something* to his heart.

We might even say—**spiritually speaking**—that St. John Vianney had a *heart transplant* because he embodied what the Lord promised through the **Prophet Ezekiel**:

...I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations...and the nations will know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. (Ez 36:23, 26)

In the same way that the visitor to Ars could say that he had seen **God** in Fr. Vianney, we can say that the heart that is here for veneration is really **Jesus' Sacred Heart** which he *lent*—**spiritually speaking**—to Fr. Vianney.

Here's another **characteristic** of the Saints: They **always** point people **away** from *themselves* and **toward Jesus**, just as St. John Vianney did.

In fact, so deep was Fr. Vianney's faith in Jesus—particularly in the **Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist**—that his homilies often ended up being little more than his **pointing** to the Tabernacle, with his **eyes welling up** with tears, saying, "**He is here.**"

There's another part of the fishing scene in **today's Gospel** that has an amazing parallel with the life of the holy priest of Ars. We heard in the Gospel:

When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you just caught." So Simon Peter went over and dragged the net ashore full of one hundred fifty-three large fish. (Jn 21:9-11)

It's the reference to "**large fish**" that is key for us here. Here's why:

Fr. Vianney used to be tormented by the Devil, especially at night. The Devil knew how effective this humble priest had become in bringing sinners back to Jesus. So, he would try to deprive Fr. Vianney of sleep with horrible **noises** in the rectory; move his **bed** around violently while he tried to sleep; and, once, the Devil even set **fire** to the priest's bed!

The Devil once said to Fr. Vianney, following one of these night attacks:

"If there were *three* such priests as you, my kingdom would be *ruined*."

Three Saintly priests could bring down Satan's Kingdom! Not three **million**. Not three **thousand**. *Three!*

All the more reason to venerate St. John Vianney's incorrupt heart today—and to ask him to pray for the holiness of **priests** and **seminarians** in the Catholic Church **today!**

Eventually, Fr. Vianney began to notice that the **Devil's violent actions** corresponded to the **return of serious sinners** to the Sacrament of Confession. Fr. Vianney would call these serious sinners—people who, for example, had not been to Confession for decades, or whose sins were particularly egregious—he would call these sinners “**Big Fish**”. Fr. Vianney brought many such **big fish...and little ones** as well...to Jesus.

Jesus had long before promised that his Apostles would no longer be **mere fishermen**, but rather, “**fishers of men**” (cf. Mt 4:19). Perhaps it was just such a Gospel scene as today's that formed the foundation of **Fr. Vianney's absolute trust in—and obedience to—Jesus** and that made his ministry miraculously fruitful—so fruitful, in fact, that **people would stand in line for three days** just to have Fr. Vianney hear their Confession.

[**Three days!** That's good to keep in mind when you're ready to give your priests here at the Cathedral a piece of your mind when you have to stand in **our** Confession line for **only three hours!**]

The Son of God, **Jesus Christ**, assumed our humanity in order to **redeem** it, to **save** it and to make it **holy**.

The **Saints**—through their humble obedience—assumed the **holiness of Jesus** and allowed it to **transform them into little copies of himself**.

It is in that very **exchange** that we can understand how the physical heart of a Saint who died 160 years ago can still carry the healing power and grace of God, just as it did when it was beating in the humble priest's chest.

Jesus became what we are in order that we could become what he is. ***The Saints took this so seriously that it actually happened!***

The **relics** of the Saints **remind** us of our **connection** to Christ and to each other—a connection that even **death** cannot separate.

The **examples** of the Saints form a wonderful **pattern** to follow as we, too, pursue a life of holiness.

And the **prayers** of the Saints provide us **heavenly assistance and encouragement** to become what they became—**little copies of Christ**.