

**“Render to God the Things That Are God’s:
The Duty of Worship as the Center of the Church’s Life and Mission”**

Homily – On the Installation of Rev. Roger Gustafson as Pastor of St. Hilary Parish, Tiburon
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year “A”

Introduction

It’s always a happy occasion for me to visit our parishes and be with our people, especially in such an important moment in the life of a parish as receiving a new pastor, a very pivotal moment in the life of the parish. It’s always a good time to assess successes of the past and what has been accomplished, and the challenges that still lie ahead. As we do so, and we assess the needs and challenges and try to strategize how to evangelize – that is, how to make the Gospel reach people who are far from it and make the Gospel come alive – that work doesn’t exist in a vacuum or in silos. It’s the Christian community as a whole coming together as one that does the work of evangelization, and they must take into consideration the practical, immediate circumstances in which they find themselves.

Evangelization in Context

Our second reading gives good insight into this. It gives good insight into what this was like at the beginning of the Church. Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians is the first written Christian work in the world, so it gives us an insight into that early community. Thessalonica, which is the modern-day Greek city of Salonika, was a large, very cosmopolitan city and a major port in the area – it still pretty much is the same. So in ancient times it was characterized by a very diverse and international population. I suppose, in that sense, it’s not much different from us here in the Bay Area, a large cosmopolitan community and major port, with a very diverse international population. So I think we can have an idea, at least a little bit, of what life must have been like in Thessalonica back then.

Paul, Silvanus and Timothy arrived there in the year 50 on one of their missionary journeys, and they stayed because they found a synagogue community there. They had stopped in little towns along the way, but they were small towns, and Thessalonica being a large city, there was a large enough Jewish population to support a synagogue. So they settled there for a while and began preaching. Eventually, though, a riot ensued among the Jewish population because of the success of St. Paul’s preaching, especially among the Gentiles. So we see how they adapted: they found that the non-Jews were responding to his preaching and accepting the Gospel, so they focused on bringing the Gospel to them. But they also understood that preaching is a matter of something more than using words. St. Paul understood that it takes more than speaking words to move hearts and open hearts to receive the truth of the Gospel; goodness and beauty are also necessary paths to open up for people the to encounter Jesus Christ.

He says here, “Our Gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.” Conviction – this word means full assurance, certainty – that is, one must have a deep conviction that this is true, so much so that one will stake one’s entire life on it. Only then can we preach (with example, not just words) and have the persuasive power of the Holy Spirit. The Gospel is true, but it is also good and beautiful. These appeal more to the sort of intuitive part of our nature. No one can deny goodness when they see it. Beauty is instinctive. It can’t be denied. It’s not something that you can argue about. So what St. Paul is saying here is that the power of the Gospel lies not in the force of his own rhetoric, but in the power of the Spirit of God as He is manifested in these other ways.

In particular, I think he had in mind here, how He was manifested in miracles when we see the accounts of the activity of the Apostles, in the Acts of the Apostles, how they modeled and followed after the example of our Lord in working miracles to open hearts to the Gospel, the path of goodness. Christians, in fact, in ancient times, were considered to be something of miracle workers in the way very appropriate to what we're experiencing now how they took care of people in the time of plague. The people of means would flee the city, go to a safe place in the hills, but the Christians would stay behind and tend to the sick (and not only their own, but anyone who was sick). And many people recovered, so they were seen to be something like miracle workers. The Church too has given the world so much beauty, and beauty too, in its own way, manifests God's power and majesty.

So we need creative strategies in every age, and certainly in our own age, creative strategies to use all three: the persuasive truth of the Gospel, but also goodness, putting our faith into action by serving the poor and doing good, and beauty, that we give our best in worship of God and in the view of beautification of our church, as you have here at St. Hilary's. So I'm very happy to welcome Father Roger here, because I know, Father Roger, you're very good at creative strategies, so I am anticipating more great things coming from St. Hilary's.

Context Then and Now

But while each age and culture will have its different circumstances to take into consideration, there's one circumstance that is perennial and universal, and that is the Christian's relationship to the governing civil authorities, and the question of how to act in a responsible way and in a way that is authentic to our faith.

In America, we abide by this principle of separation of Church and State. As I'm sure you know, it's not actually in the Constitution, but it's a guiding principle, and actually when properly understood is consistent with the way the Church would see the relation between Church and State. It's an understanding that goes all the way back to the Gospel reading we heard in today's Mass about paying the census tax. And our Lord gives the teaching right here to give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. The situation regarding the relationship between governments and the Church has varied over the ages, from governments that have been sympathetic and even cooperative with the Church to those that have been hostile and even persecuting the Church. But the Church has always understood this distinction between governance in the temporal realm and governance in the spiritual realm.

For centuries, the Pope was actually a temporal ruler – he had a political State – but the governance was always divided between temporal and spiritual. So even when the two types of governance were so closely united, the Church always preserved this distinction. We can see examples of the two extremes of how a secular government can deal with the practice of religion in our readings for Mass today. So going back to the Gospel here, this is the tax paid to Caesar. The Romans, of course, had occupied the Jewish territory and they were oppressive to the people. They taxed them heavily. They ruled with a heavy hand. To some degree, the Jewish people could worship freely and practice their religion, but it was a far cry from the era of when they had their own kingdom with their own king ruling over them. In contrast to that, we have the example of the first reading with King Cyrus. Cyrus was a Persian king who ruled over the Jewish people right after the destruction of their kingdom (so this is in the eighth century BC), and the Temple was destroyed when Jerusalem was sacked.

So he's a Persian. He's not Jewish, he's a Gentile. He's outside of the people who are privileged with the revelation of the one, true God. But he ordered the reconstruction of the

Temple to assist the people in the practice of their religion. He aided them in their religious traditions and identity so much so that, did you notice in this passage, Isaiah refers to him as God's "anointed one"? Anointed one, that is, "Messiah" or "Christ." Kings were anointed for their office, so the Messiah was the future king that God would send to restore the kingdom. That's where we get the prophecy of the Messiah which is then fulfilled in Christ (which name means the same thing, "anointed one"). So Isaiah even goes so far as to give this messianic title to Cyrus, a pagan Gentile king. The point is that the believer has a responsibility toward political authority – that is, the authority of this world – but it must always be exercised in view of our true home, which is not in this world but rather the next.

We're subject to political authority, but we understand that our true home is not here. Political authority is in the temporal realm, which means it's passing away. This is not where our true and lasting home is. Our true and lasting home is in the next world. So the Church has always taught that we have a responsibility to be good citizens, to be involved in public life, and to bring our values into the public square and use them to serve the common good. It seems to me we are witnessing a transition in our country with regard to this – a transition that has been taking place over the last several decades, from a time when we had a Cyrus-type government that was helpful toward the public practice of religion – so much so that it's enshrined in our Constitution – to one that is becoming more like the Roman Empire at the time of our Lord.

For years we have been experiencing increasing restrictions on how we serve the common good, serve the poor, consistent with our religious beliefs and our moral conviction, our moral vision being informed by the values of the Gospel. We've come into conflict with the government over the last many years because of restrictions on how we do this. And now we're beginning to experience infringements on the very act of worship. We are blessed in the United States to have freedom of religion, but we've always understood that freedom of religion is not the same thing as freedom of worship. Freedom of worship is the most essential part of freedom of religion. Freedom of religion means the freedom to practice religion in public life, to bring those values into the public square. But now we've been in some tension over this idea of freedom of worship, and this is where we have this delicate balance between being responsible citizens and giving primacy to God.

All societies that deny the primacy of God eventually fall, and so we need to give the primacy to the worship of God, not just because it's something we want to do, or even that we have a right to do, but because it's giving primacy to God that is most necessary for a society to thrive. But as, the Church teaches, we must also be responsible citizens. We have to do it in a responsible way, especially in the time of this pandemic, and abide by the sound health practices to try to stem the spread of this virus. I guess you know I've been kind of heavily involved in this fight, and I've been repeatedly saying that we have every intention to do this safely. We have safety protocols that work. We even have scientific data to show that they work. A million Masses were studied, and the experts who conducted it could not find one infection traceable to a Mass when these safety protocols were followed.

So we need to be responsible and do it in a safe way, but we also need to insist on the right to do so, because we have a natural right to religious freedom, a natural right to worship, and it has to be respected, but always in a responsible way. But it is together in the unity of the Church, and with the conviction of the truth of the Gospel, that we can promote the goodness and beauty of the primacy of God. It's united together as one. And this is the purpose of the bishop or his delegate presiding over the installation of a new pastor.

Conclusion

The bishop is really the focal point of the communion of the local Church, which for us means the Archdiocese of San Francisco, with all our parishes and Catholic institutions in these three counties on the west side of the bay. Since the bishop is that focal point of communion, it is always he or his delegate who presides over the installation of a pastor.

The pastor is really the hinge between the people in the pews and the bishop. He's really the critical point in keeping the communion of the local church together. This is why after our brief rite of installation, when you will be presented to Father Roger, we'll continue with him leading us in the Profession of Faith and then making his Oath of Fidelity. Our profession of faith – the Church is a communion of faith – is the foundation of his oath to responsibly lead you in the true worship of the one, true God.