Graduation: St. Perpetua School, 2019
Isaiah 60:19-22/John 15:5-17

THE LIFE OF CHRIST IS YOUR LIFE

The other evening, when I was getting out of my car at the end of the day, I did something I don’t do often enough. I stopped, I looked up and I saw the moon.

It was glorious. I don’t often enough look up at the night sky to appreciate its beauty and grandeur – the myriad stars and the bright moon. What about you? How often do you look up at night? This summer marks the 50th anniversary of arguably the greatest scientific accomplishment in history: the night of July 20, 1969, when Americans Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin took their historic first steps on the surface of the moon. For three hours they did experiments, picked up bits of moon dirt and rocks, placed an American flag on the moon’s surface and left a sign etched with the day’s date and these words: We came in peace for all mankind. I thought of that moment as I gazed at the moon a few nights ago.

When President John F. Kennedy took office fifty years ago, America was cautiously experimenting with rocketry and space exploration. The Russians had successfully launched Sputnik in 1957. Space exploration took on a new urgency. In a speech to Congress, the new President made this astonishing commitment: “I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before the decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth.”

That was an ambitious goal. No policy nor an agency existed to make it happen. But President Kennedy marshalled the resources and talent from the civilian, military, corporate and educational sectors to “leapfrog” the early Russian achievements and take the lead in the “space race.” For Kennedy, going to the moon was about winning, about beating our Russian Cold-War adversaries — but it was about more. President Kennedy spoke of his vision of America’s space program as the noblest illustration of the American pioneer spirit, a journey that would open not only new frontiers but new technologies in communications, medicine and transportation. Among other things, we can thank Project Apollo for our cell phones and cordless appliances and tools, for our cars’ radial tires and the laser technology that make many surgical procedures possible.

Today, as we mark your graduation and inaugurate the beginning of the next phase of your education and growth, your parents and grandparents, your teachers and your pastor are thinking about your future... about the grand vision of all the amazing roads that will open before you. And we’re praying with you and for you that you will be a part of a new generation who will
make a difference in this world, setting your sights high as President Kennedy did fifty years ago.

Another first took place just before those two astronauts climbed out of the lunar module Eagle and set foot on the moon. It was kept quiet at the time by NASA: Communion was celebrated on the moon. Two Sundays before the launch of Apollo 11, Buzz Aldrin participated in a Communion service at his Presbyterian church where he served as an Elder. During the service, a small piece of the communion bread and a small chalice of wine were sealed in plastic packets. The packets were safely stowed in Aldrin's personal preference kit. When the lunar module touched down on the moon, Aldrin took the communion elements and set them out in front of the guidance-system computer. He then radioed to Houston:

"Houston, this is Eagle. This is the Lunar Module pilot speaking. I would like to request a few moments of silence. I would like to invite each person listening in, whomever or wherever he may be, to contemplate for a moment the events of the last few hours, and to give thanks in his own individual way." Next came the moment of Communion. Aldrin writes in his autobiography:

"I opened the little plastic packages which contained the bread and wine. I poured the wine into the chalice our church had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine slowly curled and gracefully came up the side of the cup. It was interesting for me to think: the very first liquid poured on the moon, and the very first food eaten there, were the communion elements . . . Just before I partook of the elements, I read the words which I had chosen to indicate our trust that as man probes into space, we are in fact acting in Christ. I sensed especially strongly my unity with our church back home, and with the Church everywhere . . . I gave thanks for the intelligence and spirit that had brought two young pilots to the Sea of Tranquility. I read: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me." That’s the same gospel passage we just heard.

Bread blessed and broken on the surface of the moon. . . bread blessed and broken on Palestinian hillsides centuries ago . . . bread blessed and broken here in our own humble church... with you graduates... many times during your years here at St. Perpetua; on many Wednesdays when you gathered with parishioners in our chapel for a more intimate experience of the Mass, which both you and they, as you told me this week, appreciated so much ... bread blessed and broken uniting all humankind into a
community transcending time and space, a community of thanksgiving to the God who gives and sustains every molecule of life. Christ, the bread of life, present to us today in this sacrament that is given to us in order that we might become sacrament for one another.

For all my joy in being pastor at St. Perpetua and the great things we’ve accomplished as a parish and a school community -- most recently our glorious new Community Center -- there is one disappointment that burdens me. Too often, for students and even for parents, graduation from Catholic school implies graduation from participation in the life of the Church, especially the Mass. It’s inspirational to me that an astronaut, Buzz Aldrin, a man of science, would have had such profound faith that he would not carry out the most significant event of his life without the Eucharist -- the Lord’s Supper -- being present to him.

How present to you is the Eucharist as you leave St. Perpetua School? When you’re in the midst of an argument with your parents or a friend, would it help to remember that here in the Eucharist you have taken within yourself the one who could forgive his enemies even from the cross? who loved to the end even his closest friends who betrayed him? When you’re feeling like you’re at the end of your ropes, stretched to the limit and have no more energy or time left to give, do you ever think of the little boy in the gospel story who didn’t have much – only five barley loaves and two fish - yet gladly offered it to Jesus who blessed and multiplied it, making it more than enough to satisfy others? When you’re ranting at God because you feel shortchanged, that life has been unfair to you and that you drew the short end of the stick, could the Spirit of Christ, living within you through the Eucharist, be a profound reminder of the abundant blessings that God has given you?

My prayer for all of you graduates, as you leave St. Perpetua School, is that you will carry the faith, hope and love that we have shared with you. May you always know the love of God and the friendship of Jesus that you have learned and witnessed here. May you set your sights high, aim for the moon, and know that Jesus is the vine; you are the branches. United with him, especially in the Eucharist, you will bear abundant fruit.

We don’t have to go to the moon to be awed by the Eucharist. Right here, around this Table, we are united with all creation, with the Church throughout the world and with one another. The life of Christ becomes our life. From this simple morsel of bread... from this tiny sip of wine... we all share the very life of God. May that life always be yours wherever your path takes you.

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