Faith in the resurrection of Jesus has seen us through many trials

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

Nov. 10, 2019

32nd Sunday – USCCB

In my state of North Dakota, and I would imagine in many of yours, the fall harvest is in full swing, and the sleep of winter is coming. At this time of year, as nature begins to shut down for a few months, the Church is reminding us of the temporary nature of all things on earth and of our own mortality. But in today’s Gospel, it also reminds us of the hope we have, that God is the God of the living, and that he calls us to a new life with him in eternity.

From the time most of us were children, we’ve been taught the resurrection of our Lord. We may not have completely understood, but we believed. And for all of us here, faith in the resurrection is a given, it is assumed, it is part of who we are as followers of Jesus.

But it’s not so for everyone. More and more we encounter the skepticism and cynicism of our times. Faith is challenged and undermined, and many have doubted what was once firmly believed, even taken for granted. We’ve heard often of the many Catholics who are leaving the Church, especially the young. One study says the ratio of those leaving to entering is 6 to 1. What does this exodus indicate but a loss of faith, a loss of hope, a loss of confidence.

Our culture is also working to seduce and coerce people away from the faith, much like the brothers in the Book of Maccabees. I’m always struck by this passage, the account of the seven brothers and their mother. The courage of these men of Israel is astonishing; they were willing to endure torture and to give up their lives; Why? because they trusted in the God of the living who would raise them up - they hoped.

All the more then do we have every reason to hope. What the Maccabees believed in shadows, we know in the full light of our Lord’s resurrection. I often think of the witness of the apostles, who saw our Risen Lord. They then went to the ends of the earth telling of what they had seen and heard. They endured horrific tortures and deaths, but they wouldn’t flinch from their purpose of announcing the Kingdom. Why? Because the Lord is risen, and they knew that they would rise with him. It seems to me that the very fact of the Church’s survival in those earliest days is a miracle of the resurrection.

Pope Francis recently beatified a group of bishops in Romania who also experienced great suffering. They too died at the hands of those who demanded they recant their faith. But they would not, because like the apostles, they had come to know and believe in the Risen Lord. Jesus was everything to them, he gave them hope, he was the God of the living, and he promised them life, so they persevered. And beyond anyone’s expectation, the faith survived because of our Lord’s resurrection. We can’t help but be inspired by their faith.

So many of our brothers and sisters have fallen into a sort of nihilism, a Sadducee-like notion that this is all there is, that there’s nothing more to hope for. No resurrection, no heaven, no eternity. Others are faced with the pressure and coercion of our culture. More and more openly, it tries to entice the people of our time to give up faith, and sometimes that enticement becomes force. And more and more of our brothers and sisters drift away, sometimes for no reason at all.

But our Lord tells us just as firmly as he told the Sadducees, he is God of the living, and he gives us every reason to hope, every reason to be joyful and confident, and the world needs our joy and confidence. Even when the powers of the world are arrayed against us, he lives. Even when we are weighed down by the burdens of life, he is risen, and he lives. Even when we are discouraged or disillusioned by the failings of others, or our own failings, he lives and he calls us to eternal life.

With the same confidence that strengthened the Maccabees, and the apostles, and every martyr and saint of our times, we must put our faith in the resurrection of Jesus. And even more, we must
continue to proclaim it. Faith in the resurrection of Jesus has seen us through many trials, and it will sustain us now too.