

FROM FR. CHRIS ALIMAJI'S DESK

Reflections on the Fruits of True Discipleship

On this Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B, May 2, 2021, the Bible Readings are Acts 9:26-31; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8 and our Psalm of Praise is Ps 98. Our theme for reflections is the Fruits of True Discipleship. Three points for reflection stand out from the bible readings: (a) Persecution and Conversion, (b) Unity with Christ, and (c) Growing like vines – Connectedness.

Persecution and Conversion: At this first century Christianity, the Church of Christ was under persecution and fear. There was terror on every side, and Saul was carrying the vendetta of arresting Christians almost from door to door and throwing them into jails. Christ himself then called him to conversion. Notice that the Lord did not see Saul as irredeemable. While the first Christians reacted in fear, Jesus showed mercy. He saw Saul-Paul as having the zeal and talent to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth, and to bear fruit for the Church. With Paul's baptism in Damascus, he immediately continued in his usual zeal, to the effect that he began to proclaim Christ as Lord right there in Damascus, and back to Jerusalem. It is remarkable that we take note of the role of the disciple Barnabas. Taking charge of Paul, he brought him to the apostles and gave the testimony of his encounter with the Lord. Notice also that the apostles were able to trust Barnabas regarding Paul's conversion, trusting his new life and true witnessing. There was peace and consolation of the Holy Spirit in the Church in Jerusalem after those days. Like Barnabas and Paul, what is your role in the Church of Christ for its unity and in bearing good fruit? We too are empowered to bear fruit in answering the call of spreading the Good News. We must also expect our share of hardship before we can bear good fruit in discipleship.

Unity with Christ: In the community of believers, there are always people and persons of various kinds. Some persons are highly talented while some are not so much talented. With patience we discover that everyone has something to offer for the good of the community. It is very important to note first of all, that we are children of God. Our second reading last Sunday, 1 John 3:1-2 made that clear to us. We must hold firm to that whenever we gather. But like the book of Job said, when the children of God gathered to pray, Satan was also among them. (cf. Job 1:6). As in today's Second Reading, we are called to hold on to "love not in word or speech but in deed and truth." (1 John 3:18). Truthfulness is the necessary characteristic to mold us into the true new people of God. Are we true to ourselves in the Church? Are we present, not to deceive but to faithfully put in our best? Hence, St. John wrote: "Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God and receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him." (1 John 3:21-22). So, we can then ask, "What kind of persons make up our Christian community? Do we spread falsehood or truth? The Lord said that by their fruits you shall know the true disciples. So, what kind of fruits do you bear in your Christian community? What effects, that is, how do they affect our Christian community? Do they bring/encourage hatred or love, division or growth and peace? A true Christian community would always bring and encourage unity with Christ, unity in diversity of opinions, gifts, ministries, etc.

Growing like vines – Connectedness: My third point here is that of the vine metaphor in today's Gospel. Like my preceding point, this metaphor also connotes unity with Christ and with one another. But I want to highlight the aspect of connectedness which has to do with vines. In growing like vines, we consider its flexible stem that connects spirally around posts, climbing up fences, wrapping around other plants. It connects to everything in its surroundings. If Jesus is the vine and we are his branches, are we not connected to one another? The vine does not discriminate on what to connect to in its way. It just brings everything together; hence, we also talk about togetherness in the Church of Christ. The Church of God passes through various stages from year to year, built in the spirit. Try to notice its growth and stages. Some think it is waiting for them, whenever they choose to stay away or boycott the community. You must remain in the community if you want to bear good fruit for it. "Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned." (John 15:6). So, stay in your community and become its glue by the fruits you bear to the glory of God (cf. John 15:8). Whoever is not gathering with Christ scatters the community, either by words or by attitude. Therefore, let us become the Barnabas of our Christian community, bringing everyone together with love.