

Diocesan observance 50th Anniversary of “Humanae Vitae” 7/25/1968
July 25, 2018 Feast of St. James the Apostle

Aspirations to greatness may very well be a natural part of our human make-up, especially for those who are young and pondering all the possibilities in their lives----or as we just heard in this evening’s Gospel passage, not just for those who are young, but for their mothers, who have dreams of their children’s aspirations for greatness! The mother of James and John, two of Jesus’ closest followers, had dreams of seeing her two boys right up there with Jesus, one on His right and the other on His left, when He made His move to dominant power as the Messiah King. What Jesus gently let her, her boys, and the rest of the Apostles/Disciples know was---- they had a lot to learn! First of all, they needed to realize that their sense of the Messiah King was far different than His. It was not about power and domination; it was all about service and sacrificial love. Secondly, they needed to make sure they had their priorities straight. It was not about rewards or places of honor; that would come later and that was not His to give, but rather His Heavenly Father. Rather, it was about whether they were willing, and able, to “*drink the chalice that I am going to drink?*” Finally, Jesus taught all of them that: for those who aspire to true greatness, as Jesus understood it, you “*shall be a servant*”, and for those who want to be first in His way of counting, you “*shall be a slave*”.

That was quite a lesson for James and John, for their Mom, and for the rest of the Apostles. It was a truly “teachable moment”, because not long after this, they would sit with Jesus at the Last Supper and watch Him wash their feet as a lesson in what it means to be great and to lead. Later that same evening following the meal, they would all run away when Jesus was betrayed by one of their own, and then they hid in fear while Jesus was tortured, crucified, died and was buried, and stayed hidden in fear for the next 3 days until that amazing moment on Easter Sunday evening when the Risen Jesus would stand before them with the words “Peace be with you!” Yes, at this point, they still had a lot to learn.

Obviously St. James learned his lessons well in regard to what it means to be an Apostle, what it means to be a faithful follower of Jesus, and what it means to be a leader who served others in sacrificial, Christ-like love. James went on to be one of the leaders of the early Jerusalem Church, and in fact was the first martyr after the Deacon Stephen. Having aspired to greatness, which he came to understand as Jesus understood it, he is known to us as St. James the Greater! As St. Paul beautifully put it in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians which we heard in today’s First Reading, St. James held that “*treasure*” of faithful love for Jesus in the “*earthen vessel*” of his life as an Apostle who, though “*afflicted was not constrained, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed*”, as one who was “*always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested*”.

Following Jesus is about loving as He loves sacrificially; serving as He serves generously, and saying “Yes” as Jesus constantly says “Yes” to His Heavenly Father, not following our own will, but aligning our will to be in union with Jesus’ Will.

Besides being the Feast of St. James the Greater, today the Church also observes the 50th anniversary of the publication of the great Encyclical of Blessed (soon-to-be Saint) Pope Paul VI, “*Humanae Vitae*”.

Some of us here may actually remember when that Encyclical was published----it was on July 25, 1968. The Church had just 3 years before the publication of this Encyclical concluded

the Second Vatican Council, which had an enormous impact on the practice and understanding of our Faith. And beyond the changes in the Church, the world itself was in the midst of a cultural revolution. Here in the United States, there was a good bit of social and political turmoil; our country experienced three major assassinations of national leaders between 1963 and 1968: President John F. Kennedy, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert Kennedy. The Vietnam War, the War on Poverty, the beginning of the drug culture and the sexual revolution---all of these phenomena contributed to changing people's opinions, and even their moral practices. As the world was racing forward headlong into an understanding that individual freedom was the be-all and end-all, meaning that people could do whatever they wanted to do with no consequences, and with no concerns about moral correctness, Pope Paul VI had the courage to issue the Encyclical that reminded Catholics, and all people of good will, what it really means to live our lives as human beings.

That is the very name of the Encyclical: it's all about Human Life---*Humanae Vitae*! And while I think it's safe to say that not too many people took the time to read the Encyclical in 1968, or perhaps since, everyone seemed to have their opinion about it---that they were against it. The general perception of the Encyclical was that it could be summed up in one word: "No!"--no to contraception, no to current practices, no to the trends of society. Actually, if the Encyclical could be summed up in one word, that word would be "Yes!" --- Yes to human life, yes to the beauty, wonder and sacredness of married love, yes to God's plan for salvation through the cooperation of husbands and wives who, shall we say, "aspire to true greatness" in the way Jesus understands what that means: to love sacrificially and to serve generously.

I just saw earlier today that the Canadian Bishops Conference issued a beautiful statement to observe this 50th anniversary entitled "The Joy of Married Love". In that document, they say: "Rather than only saying 'No' to contraception, *Humanae Vitae* provides a resounding 'Yes' to the fullness of life promised to us by Jesus Christ when He said: '*I came that they might have life and have it more abundantly.*' (John 10:10)"

Pope Paul VI talks about how God's Plan for us affirms, or says "Yes" to, enriching marital relationships; to children who are seen as a blessing, and the fruit, of married love rather than a burden; to respect of men for women and women for men; to a sense of cooperation with God's plan for us, rather than ignoring or defying God's plan. And yes, this Encyclical affirms the Church's long-standing teaching from the earliest days of our Tradition up to and including our own day under Pope Francis: that every loving act of love between a man and a woman must be open to it's natural consequences.

When we think about it, it is the mentality of the "contraceptive and abortive movement", those who ignore God's Plan, who are the ones who say No. When they practice contraception in any form, they are proactively and artificially taking steps to say No to the gift of human life which otherwise would naturally follow.

Today, 50 years after the fact, we give thanks for this great Encyclical. Perhaps now, with 50 years' distance from the turbulent days of the late 1960's, we can re-read this great encyclical and the wisdom of Pope Paul VI inspired by the Holy Spirit. Just as James and John, their mother, and the rest of the Apostles had a lot to learn before they became the fearless, courageous, and joyful witnesses who went forth to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus to those who welcomed it and to those who resisted it, so too do we have much to learn about becoming faithful followers of Jesus.

Jesus asks us the very same question He asked James and John: "*Can you drink the chalice that I am going to drink?*" If we answer, "we can" as they did, let us be clear what that

will mean. Jesus told us that if we want to be His followers, we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow in His footsteps. While we may not be asked to be martyrs as St. James was who was beheaded, or as the rest of the other Apostles were, or as so many of the early Christians were, and even today are in various parts of the world, we ARE called to be “witnesses”, which is another word for martyr.

We look to our Holy Father, to our Bishops and to our priests, for the ways that they teach us in the ways of following Jesus. But just as importantly, we look to good and holy lay people, generous married couples called to the kind of sacrificial love for their spouse as Jesus has for His Church. We need happy and loving families who give daily witness to what it means to live as Pope Paul VI called us to in *Humanae Vitae*, as Pope St. John Paul called us to in his Theology of the Body, as Pope Benedict called us to in *Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)*, and as Pope Francis called us to in *Amoris Laetitia (The Joy of Love)*.

50 years after *Humanae Vitae*, we can see this as a roadmap for how married couples and families, who aspire to true greatness of following Jesus, can live up to that great challenge as they “drink the very chalice” that Jesus drinks, and as they find what it really means to love sacrificially.

Let us continue to focus on how to say “Yes” to God’s Plan, how we can say “Yes” to Jesus as we follow in His steps each day, and how we can say “Yes” to loving one another: spouses, children, and those in special needs. As we live in the greatness of being loving and faithful followers of Jesus, let us know, as St. Paul reminded us, that “*the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people, may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God.*”

God bless you, now and always!