

During the Easter season, our focus begins on the Paschal (Easter) Mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and ends on the ascension of Jesus into Heaven, and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Mary and the Apostles, by which Jesus confirms his Church, the Body of Christ. On this fifth Sunday of Easter, already over halfway through this most sacred season, we begin to shift our focus more intently onto the Holy Spirit and the Church.

God's work is so radical, so ground-shaking, that even his best disciples need help believing in his plan. Saul is now preaching the Gospel and proclaiming faith in the name of Jesus; the enemy of the Church has become her best friend. Unbelievable. Even the Apostles require Barnabas to testify on Saul's behalf. But the fruit of Saul's ministry is undeniable. He is speaking out boldly in the name of Jesus, and so assertively debating against the opponents of the Church that now they want to put Saul to death, the very one who was entering homes and rounding up Christians to imprison and persecute them. It seems the whole world has turned upside down.

Given that God often acts so radically, it is essential that his faithful take the necessary time to discern how God is at work in our lives, and, likewise, how well we are disposing ourselves for the Spirit of God to work through us and bear fruit for his Kingdom.

How do we "know that we belong to the truth" and "remain on the vine?" Saint John tells us that "if our hearts do not condemn us," and if we "believe in the name of...Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us," then we will "know that he remains in us...from the Spirit he gave us." Jesus tells us that if we remain on the vine, then we will "bear much fruit," will be his disciples, and will glorify the Father. There will be verifiable indicators in our life that identify us as the Body of Christ, or that fail to do so, and we will know ourselves by taking time to recognize them in our life. And these same indicators are how God decides whether to prune us for more fruit or to cut us off and remove us from the Vine of Life.

There is a divine discernment that is happening, and, therefore, we must be a discerning people.

"I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people." If you have prioritized your time to be present today, and you happened to join us in singing the Psalm, then we are off to a good start: the word of God is being made flesh in us. We are completing the command to love the Lord, and to love him first. Is this a regular aspect of our lives; is it a priority to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days? Would we even try to attend Mass sometime during the week, to express to God how much we love him?

Do I love my neighbor? Am I performing works of mercy, especially for those most in need: the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the homeless, the sick, the imprisoned, the doubtful, the ignorant, the sinner, the sorrowful, the enemy, the dead? No one is too far removed to receive the mercy of God. But do we remain in God; are we close enough to the Vine to be his branches and the extending arms of his mercy to all these people who are most in need? Or to whom are we afraid to be merciful? When God expects to find his fruit, will he find the branch bearing it?

If the Holy Spirit is alive within us, if he is allowed to live, and to move, and to have his being within us, then we should expect to see these fruits: charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, perseverance, gentleness, faith, modesty, self-control, and chastity. How well do our lives (our words, our actions) display these characteristics? How well do we bear this fruit? The divine vine grower is on the move, and he is coming with the divine blade of his Word and his Spirit to cut the branches. And, as branches on the vine, we will be cut, one way or the other.

God is at work: cutting. He will cut us all. Every branch will be cut. In fact, the most healthy, most fruitful branches will be cut the most. What is unnecessary, unfruitful, unworthy,

will be cut off. For the fruitful branch, this allows for a decrease in wasted energy, new space for new growth, and an increase in the yield of fruit. For the barren branch, this allows for a more honest look at one's life, no longer joined to and surrounded by those healthy, fruit bearing branches; now only able to see them from afar, detached, and without the fragrance of new life.

A cut off branch, not yet burned, can still be grafted again onto the vine. The mercy of God is all powerful. And even the most stubborn, fruitless branch will still serve a purpose for the vine grower, for he will use them as fuel for the fire that serves to burn away the other fruitless branches.

Are we meek and accepting enough to allow God to cut us, to love us, as he so desires? When the answer is yes, and when the time is right, we will see the fruit, in radical and undeniable ways.