

## Homily Notes, Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2020

Readings: Acts 8:5-8, 14-17; 1 Peter 3:15-18; John 14:14-21

Theme: Being open to the work of the Holy Spirit, our Paraclete (Advocate), our Helper, can help us face up to the challenges and fears of the coronavirus “pandemic”.

- 1. Summary: All the readings are preparing us for understanding the coming of the Holy Spirit into our lives. This can be very important at a time of pandemic, as our faith can guide us how to give a winsome testimony.**
- 2. The First Reading: Here we see the origins of the Sacrament of Confirmation.** Last week we heard of the institution of the Diaconate, ending with the preaching of Steven and his martyrdom and to the first great persecution of the Church. Our reading today reflects the success of Philip, the Deacon, who fled Jerusalem after the Stoning of Steven and preached to the Samaritans with great success. Many were converted and were baptized but only in the name of Jesus. Peter and John (Apostles) had to come to give the gift of the Holy Spirit to those he had converted and baptized. This he did through the imposition of hands.
- 3. Apologetic:** This passage illustrates the origin of the practice of the Sacrament of Confirmation. Let us remember this so we can explain to those who do not understand the sacraments of our Church where Confirmation is rooted in the New Testament (See also CCC 1285 – 1321). **Note that the reception of Confirmation is necessary for the completion of baptismal grace.** This is why it is really useful for Catholics who have been baptized but not yet confirmed to take the RCIA preparation for Confirmation. It can also be very helpful for those who were confirmed at an early age or with a weak confirmation preparation also to attend the entire RCIA class for one year to obtain a better formation in our faith. Note that Confirmation is not a class but an action by the Bishop, giving the fullness of the Holy Spirit to the person being confirmed. The classes are important, but they are preparation, so that we understand the faith and how to live it in order to be a good “soldier of Christ.” This is necessary during the pandemic.
- 4. A selection from the Navarre Study Bible explaining in more detail the Sacrament of Confirmation is attached to the notes on Facebook or at the Website.**
- 5. Prepared to give a testimony, even under pressure or suffering.** This leads us directly into our second reading from Peter in which he exhorts those who are being persecuted and suffering for their faith; “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear...” (1 Peter 3:15). This is very timely for our testimony given to our faith amid this pandemic. We need to explain that we are not caught up in fear because of our belief in our salvation and resurrection. In this world, the best testimony is not words but acts of care and compassion.
- 6. Jesus’ gift of the Holy Spirit.** Today’s Gospel which is a part of Jesus’ “Last supper Discourse” describes the gift he will send, the abiding Spirit, as the Paraclete (Greek for Advocate or Lawyer). Jesus was preparing his disciples for the day when he would no longer be with them physically. So, Jesus promised to send his Spirit upon the Church. The Gospel reminds us that the Spirit causes Jesus to be truly present in the Church. The Spirit reveals to us what God is really like by empowering us to practice mutual love and by providing us with trustworthy guidance. This indwelling Spirit enables us to manifest our love of God by observing the commandments of Jesus, especially the commandment of love.
- 7. If we have the Holy Spirit to encourage us in our faith, it can strengthen our testimony to the world.** This was particularly true in the early Christian Church in the Roman Empire. Dr. Rodney Stark documents this in a fascinating new book: “The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries.” He demonstrates how at times of plagues and epidemics, the beliefs and the way of living of Christians were compelling.
- 8. He is describing serious epidemics.** The first starting in 165 A.D. killed between a quarter to a third of the empire’s population. Then in 251 A.D. another plague killed a similar proportion of the population. That shows a morbidity rate of 1 in 3 to 1 in 4!

“The epidemics swamped the explanatory and comforting capacities of paganism and of Hellenic philosophies. In contrast, Christianity offered a much more satisfactory account of why these terrible times had fallen upon humanity, and it projected a hopeful, even enthusiastic, portrait of the future.”

When disasters struck, the Christians were better able to cope, and this resulted in *substantially higher rates of survival*. This meant that in the aftermath of each epidemic, Christians made up a larger percentage of the population even without new converts.

**9. How could this be that Christianity was actually *efficacious* compared to the other religions?** Stark argues that the *contents* of the Christian and pagan beliefs were *different* in ways that allowed Christians not only to explain the situation better but also to be able to mobilize human resources better to confront the challenge.

**10. First, the leaders of the pagans felt no need to stay to help.** The pagan priests, the highest civil authorities and the wealthiest families fled the cities. This added greatly to the disorder and the suffering. This is happening even today in certain eastern states in the U.S. Reference to Fox News.

**11. But our Christian faith does claim to have answers.** Christians are called by our faith to sacrifice in love as Jesus offered himself for us. Matthew 25:31ff makes it clear that the “saved” will be those who serve; feed the hungry, clothe the naked and by implication, tend to the sick and dying, including burying the dead. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage claimed that only non-Christians had anything to fear from the plague. He noted that although

“the just are dying with the unjust, it is not for you to think that the destruction is a common one for both the evil and the good. The just are called to refreshment, the unjust are carried off to torture; protection is more quickly given to the faithful; punishment to the faithless... This plague and pestilence... examines the minds of the human race; whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinsmen as they should, whether masters show compassion for their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted... This mortality shows that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death. These are trying exercises for us, not death; they give to the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown. They should not be mourned, since we know that they are not lost but sent before; that in departing they lead the way...”

**12. Dionysius, Bishop of Alexandria, explained this difference between pagan mortality and Christian mortality.** Having noted at length how the Christian community nursed the sick and dying and even spared nothing in preparing the dead for proper burial, he wrote:

“The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.”

**13. Our Collect today represented this, not only that Christian Scripture stressed love and charity as central duties of faith, but that we are to sustain them in everyday behavior** (See Matt 25:35-40).

**14. Note how this contributed to the multiplying of Christians.**

“When all normal services break down, quite elementary nursing will greatly reduce mortality. Simple provision of food and water, for instance, will allow persons who are temporarily too weak to cope for themselves to recover instead of perishing miserably.”

Contemporary medical experts believe that conscientious nursing *without any medications* could cut the mortality rate by two-thirds. He shows how a hypothetical city of 10,000 inhabitants, starting out with forty Christians, could have become a city with 1 in 4 being Christians after two epidemics and ninety years.

**15. Furthermore, superior survival rates would have produced a much larger proportion of Christians who were *immune* and who could, therefore, pass among the afflicted with seeming invulnerability.** This would look like a miracle as the immune Christians went out to care for the dying.

**16. How superior our Christian belief concerning salvation is!** How it frees us to live amid dangers and disease! How powerful to have our beliefs and our lifestyle! Yet we should be prudent. We have to evaluate when we should risk and when we should be engaged. May we be good witnesses to our faith at this time of pandemic when the morbidity rate is about 1/1000! How much is there really to fear?

**From the Navarre Study Bible:** The Navarre Study Bible shows how this reading illustrates the origins of the Sacrament of Confirmation.

“This passage bears witness to the existence of Baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit (or Confirmation) as two distinct sacramental rites. The most important effects that Christian Baptism has are the infusion of initial grace and the remission of original sin and any personal sin...

There is a close connection between Baptism and Confirmation, so much that in the early centuries of Christianity, Confirmation was administered immediately after Baptism. There is a clear distinction between these two sacraments of Christian initiation, which helps us understand the different effects they have. A useful comparison is the difference, in natural life, between conception and later growth. ‘As nature intends that all her children should grow up and attain full maturity [...] so the Catholic Church, the common mother of all, earnestly wishes that, in those whom she has regenerated by Baptism, the perfection of Christian manhood should be completed.’”

“The nature of the sacrament of Confirmation,” St. John Paul II explains, “grows out of this endowment of strength which the Holy Spirit communicated to each baptized person, (who by baptism and faith has become a **“child of God”**) to make him or her – as the well-known language of the Catechism puts it – a perfect Christian and **soldier of Christ**, ready to witness boldly to his resurrection and its redemptive power: ‘You shall be my witnesses’” (Acts 1:8). Jesus prophesized it: “But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.” John16:7). This was first established on Pentecost when Jesus sent the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles.