

August 29, 2021

10:30 a.m.

Jubilee Parish Visit St. Thomas More

Twenty-second Sunday of the Year

Votive Mass of Holy Spirit—beginning of Jubilee Year of Holy Spirit

Comments at beginning of Mass:

So glad to be here; no particular reason for my visit---For so long, wasn't able to go anywhere; so now that we can, I'm trying to make Pastoral Visits to as many parishes as I can just to spend some time together to celebrate our Faith.

However it just so happens that this is a special weekend throughout our Diocese----yesterday's Feast of our Diocesan Patron, St. Augustine; AND the launching this weekend of the "Jubilee Year of the Holy Spirit".

I see this "special year"-----which is really only 9 months, from today until next Pentecost, which comes next June---as a 9-month Novena, during which time I hope that every Catholic in the Diocese will take time each day to pray to be "renewed", "re-energized", and "in-spired" by asking the Holy Spirit---to do for us, what He did for the Apostles on that first Pentecost.

They were completely transformed from fearful men hiding behind the locked doors of the Cenacle, into fearless, ardent, bold, convicted, and incredibly effective witnesses to their Faith in Jesus, and their faithfulness to the mission Jesus had entrusted to them.

That is the same mission entrusted to us thru our Baptism and Confirmation---to advance the Kingdom of God that Jesus had come to initiate.

Therefore I'm very pleased to be here with you this morning on this 22nd Sunday of the Year, to celebrate a special Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit, praying that the Holy Spirit will fill us with His Gifts, and empower our lives to bear the Fruits of the Spirit in all that we say and do. Therefore, as we prepare

HOMILY:

It seems that no matter what the activity is that involves more than one person, one of the first questions we need to ask, directly or indirectly, is: “What are the rules?” From a simple card game like “Go Fish”, to any organized sport, to playing “It-tag” with your siblings, to living in a civilized society--- they all involve rules that are set to try to facilitate smooth, peaceful, and harmonious interaction. _And if there is an argument of any sort, it usually sounds something like: “he’s not playing fair”, of “she’s cheating”, which usually requires some impartial entity to make some kind of decision.

Today’s Scripture Readings deal a lot with this very issue of “rules”, “statutes”, “decrees”, “commandments”, “religious directives”, and even the picayune complaints about ritual purification traditions in today’s Gospel.

But perhaps it wasn’t always that way. In today’s First Reading from the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses implies that their “society” was different from other societies that did not have any structure or rules, when he asked the People of Israel: “*what great nation has statues and decrees that are as just as this whole Law which I am setting before you today?*” Laws and regulations are essential parts of an organized and civil society. They’re foundational, and essential; but every society---from the basic social structure of the family, to a religious community, to a secular society----needs so much more than rules.

As we all know, more than once, Jesus was asked by the Pharisees/Legal Scholars which was the most important of all the hundreds and hundreds of commandments in the Jewish Law. Of the 613 that He had to choose from, Jesus chose two and said that together, they were THE most important Commandment: to love God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength; AND to love your neighbor as you love yourself---as Jesus loves us.

Love helps to define who we are, as well as what we long for. Without love, life is not what it should be, or what God intends it to be. _Charity, which is a synonym for Love, is at the heart of what Jesus and the Church teach us---that our God is not about punishment; rather, our God IS Love. As St. John tells us in his beautiful writings, it’s not whether WE love God; what’s incredible and earthshattering about what the Scriptures reveal to us about God is that GOD has taken the initiative---GOD has loved us first, He loves us last, He will love us always---unconditionally. Our sins and our failings diminish US, and may temporarily

separate us from one another and from God from “our side”; but not from “God’s side”---God does not stop loving us; God never cuts Himself off from us, even for a mili-second.

So, perhaps in response to the People grumbling about “all the rules and regulations, (kind of like kids, or even us adults, like to do on occasion), Moses’ point was the fact that God cared enough about us to give us “statutes, decrees, and commandments”, so much so that other pagan nations were envious of the People of Israel, because “their gods” didn’t care enough about them.

In response to the Pharisees and Scribes complaints about some of the disciples not following the rituals for washing before eating, Jesus quoted Isaiah who was condemning people for giving “lip service” to God’s commands, but had no “heart service”---their hearts were self-absorbed. Jesus in effect was saying: “you’re missing the whole point of what God’s Law is really about. They were paying attention to the “fine print” and ignoring the “bold headlines” of the Law, which requires us to live with one another with Justice AND with Charity.

Moses asked an important question: “*What other nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord our God is to us?*”. But for us, perhaps a more important question is: “**How close are we to God?**”

In today’s 2nd Reading, St. James begs us to “*welcome the Word that has been planted in you!*” And then he urges them, and us: “*Be doers of the Word, not hearers only!*” God is not concerned with whether we are following the ritual rules for washing, nearly as much as God is concerned with whether we “*care for the orphans and widows in their affliction*”. Our deeds of Charity and Justice help us to be “doers” and not just “hearers”; they demonstrate whether our faith is vibrant, or stale.

So, Jesus tells us that we must love one another; AND we must be just to each other; Charity AND Justice---two sides of the same coin, and both a part of God’s Plan for how we are to live with one another. Acts of charity, such as loving our neighbor and caring about their well-being; but also acts of justice, such as honest dealings, and treating them with fairness----both are necessary, and both are Virtues. And as with all virtues, these are practices that don’t necessarily come naturally to us----therefore they are habits that must be intentionally practiced, and which we may find to be quite difficult.

For most of us, being charitable ---such as being nice, kind, generous----comes easier to us than practicing acts of justice---such as righting wrongs, reconciling differences, asking for forgiveness. Yet, we can't separate them. The only way that we can practice these Virtues, like Charity and Justice, which don't come naturally to us, is by the Grace of God. And Jesus has provided that Grace for us through His two most powerful Gifts: the Gift of the Eucharist, which is why we need to come together at least once a week to receive the nourishment and strength of this Spiritual Food and Drink; AND the Gift of the Holy Spirit, who empowers us, encourages us, and guides us to do what is right, good, true and just.

As I mentioned at the beginning of our Mass this morning, this very weekend initiates a special "***Jubilee Year of the Holy Spirit***" for our entire Diocese--- beginning today until this coming Pentecost, on June 5, 2022----a time for ALL of us to pray together to be renewed in our Faith, and to have our hearts be reignited with our Love for God and Neighbor. My hope and prayer for every Catholic in the Diocese of Kalamazoo, including me, is that we will listen to the Holy Spirit speaking to our hearts; that we will be reenergized as Spirit-filled evangelizers, as joyful missionary disciples; that we will center our lives on the Eucharist, and allow our hearts to be "on fire" with our Love for Jesus. I also hope and pray that the Holy Spirit will en-courage us all to DO what Jesus asks of us; not just LISTEN to what He says---that we will love God with a deep and strong faith; and that we will love our neighbor in word, in deed, and in fact----not just our friends, or the people living next door, but those who Jesus defines as "our neighbor"---all people, especially those most in need. And that we will be Joy-filled witnesses of Jesus in our world---willing and ready to stand up for what is True as Jesus has revealed it to us.

As we all know so well, we're living in very challenging times---- as we continue to deal with a deadly virus that keeps mutating; as we struggle with polarization among people like never before, leading to anger, hatred, division and violence; as we witness huge migrations of refugees, fleeing oppression, poverty and violence, and looking for those who will welcome them and help them find safe and secure circumstances; as our hearts go out to people in countries devastated by natural disasters who need our help---and as our own country braces for the impact of another major hurricane later today; and now with the upheaval, violence and terror in Afghanistan, and a renewed worry about terrorism elsewhere.

No matter what is going on in the world, or in our own lives, the Holy Spirit remains with us as the “unseen” and abiding Presence of God, who will guide, comfort, instruct, admonish, inspire, comfort and encourage us along the way.

But even as we pray for the Holy Spirit’s guidance, and for a renewed outpouring of His Gifts as we move forward on our journey of Faith, we also must move outward in loving service to those who are in need, and to all those we serve as we help to advance Jesus’ Mission of building up the Kingdom of God in this world. We will only be able to be up for that Mission by following the example of Jesus and opening ourselves to the Grace and Guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray that the same Holy Spirit who filled the Apostles with the Gifts they needed to initiate the Mission Jesus gave to them---to go into the whole world and proclaim His Saving Message---will fill us with those same, power-full Gifts, so that our lives will bear the Fruits of His love in our lives through our acts of charity and justice to all we meet.