

September 26, 2021 11:00 a.m. Our Lady Queen of Peace, Bridgman

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time/Jubilee Parish Visit

Comments at Beginning of Mass:

I'm so very glad to be here with you and your beloved pastor, Father Arthur, on this beautiful September morning. I'm also pleased to be joined by Fr. Matthew Monnig, S.J. (chaplain FOCCUS; professor of Theology at Boston College).

There's no particular reason for my visit----it's just good that after being restricted for so long that I am now able to continue making my Pastoral Visits to as many parishes as I can just to spend some time together celebrating our Faith.

However, even though there's no special occasion today, this is a special "Year" for our Diocese. On July 21st, we celebrated our 50th Anniversary of the establishment of our Diocese by Pope St. Paul VI in 1971, creating a new Diocese from areas that until then belonged either to the Diocese of Grand Rapids or the Diocese of Lansing (as you did). So, Happy Anniversary to US!

In addition, this is a "special year" because on August 29th, on the Feast of our Diocesan Patron St. Augustine, I announced a "Jubilee Year of the Holy Spirit". In reality this "special year" is really only 9 months, to be concluded next Pentecost. So, I think we should all think about this "Year of the Holy Spirit" as a *9-month Novena*. I hope that during this special "Year", every Catholic will pray every day 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.

For all those reasons, I'm very pleased to be here with you this morning on this 26th Sunday of the Year to celebrate our Faith together, praying that the Holy Spirit will fill us with His Gifts..... Therefore, as we prepare

Homily:

There are some facts in our human world which are indisputable---they're not negotiable; they just are. For example, on Wednesday of this past week, at 2:21 p.m., Summer ended, and Fall began; there are 24 hours that make up every day; $2 + 2 = 4$ --- $12'' = 1 \text{ ft}$ ---there are 8 ounces in a cup; and the Pittsburgh Pirates, my Hometown Team, are the 3rd worst team in all of Baseball, even worse than the Cubbies---again.

There might be one more fact that could be seen as indisputable; the very sad fact that no one these days seems to agree with anyone about anything. We are living in a time when just about everything is "up for grabs", from historical facts of the past, to current events, to concerns about the future. In my lifetime, I don't think there's ever been a time of such acrimony, great division among people; and not just differences of opinion, but a strong sense that anyone holding an opinion different than mine is suspected of something nefarious or is a person of bad-will. And that sense of divisiveness seems to have infected every aspect of our human interactions. It's most obvious in the political realm, but also in our social and cultural interactions, as well as in the world of sports. And of course the Church is not immune, as we are all too aware of a variety of scandals, and current issues which are quite controversial. And while I have always been the recipient of a lot of "love letters", the tone of those letters has shifted dramatically. To me, that's what's most troubling about this "time" in our human history; it's not the differences of opinion that are troubling, as much as the uncivil, hurtful, and certainly uncharitable ways that people express their opinions.

So, isn't it interesting that we have just listened to today's Scripture Readings which challenge us on these very issues of "who's in" and "who's out", and who gets to decide that?

In today's First Reading from the Book of Numbers, we heard about the Holy Spirit as though He was a "quantity" to be "divided up and spread around". Since the Holy Spirit clearly had been leading Moses for 40 years throughout their Journey thru the Desert, the Lord God (as we heard in the Reading), "*came down in the Cloud, and spoke to Moses.*" That's when we heard that the Lord took "*some of the Spirit that was on Moses...and bestowed it on 70 elders.*" In a previous passage, we learned that Moses had asked God for this help, and in prayer had already selected these 70 individuals who were to be his "helpers".

So, as the Reading tells us, *“the Spirit came to rest on them, and they prophesied.”* The problem came when two of those on Moses’ list to become elders, Eldad and Medad, weren’t there with the other 68. But the Spirit knew where they were, and *“came to rest on them”* as well, and they too *“prophesied”*. The controversy began, as it usually does, when someone jumps to conclusions and acts without all the information; in this case, “a young man” saw Eldad and Medad prophesying, and came to complain to Moses, and Joshua told Moses to stop them. Moses’ response was one of admirable openness and transparency: *“Are you jealous? Would that ALL the people of the Lord were prophets!” Would that the Lord would bestow His Spirit upon them all.”*

We heard a similar situation in today’s Gospel passage. This time it was John who came to Jesus to complain, saying: *“Teacher, we saw a man driving out demons in your Name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us.”* Jesus’ response was even more amazing than Moses’, saying: *“Do not prevent him. There is no one who performs a mighty deed in MY Name who can, at the same time, speak ill of Me....Whoever is not against us is for us.”* That’s a completely “open” and non-defensive response. What do you think would be the response of most of us? Probably very opposite of that: “Whoever is not with us is against us; whoever does not agree with me or think like I do is out to get me.” Even the most inconsequential matters can become problematic: if someone roots for a different team than I do, or dresses differently than I do, or likes different music than I do---they’re wrong. If someone supports a different political agenda than I do, or holds a different opinion about any current event---we might go so far as to try to hurt those with whom we disagree.

So, Moses and Jesus teach us similar lessons. To help us understand what we are to learn from this, let’s think about this. Do you remember two weeks ago when Jesus, after revealing to the Apostles that He would be arrested, tortured, crucified and buried, but then rise on the 3rd day, and Peter tried to contradict Jesus telling Him he’d never let that happen? Jesus rebuked Peter and said: *“You are thinking not as God does, but rather as human beings do.”*

I think that’s the difference between the way Moses and Jesus saw those two situations and remained open, rather than the way we tend to try to “prevent” people from thinking or doing something different than me. Maybe Jesus would rebuke us in the same way: “You are thinking not as God does; but as human beings do.” So, that reminds us that our challenge along our journey of Faith is keep growing in holiness----and a big part of growing in holiness means to think

and act like God does, and not just the way our human nature would have us think and act.

But today's Gospel also shows us that there are limits. It's one thing to allow people who aren't against us to be for us in that way; it's quite another thing to allow people to do what is wrong, or hurtful or evil according to God's Law. So, immediately after that very open response of acceptance, Jesus makes an equally very open and harsh warning to anyone who *"causes one of the little ones who believe in Him to sin"*. And then Jesus uses hyperbole to emphasize that we need to go to any possible length to cut ourselves off from anyone, or anything, that causes us to sin. Jesus obviously didn't mean that we should literally maim ourselves by cutting off limbs or eyes or any body parts; but we should cut ourselves off from any mechanism that allows, for example, pornography in any form to pollute our thoughts and our minds; we should amputate any activity, media, so-called "adult entertainment" or persons who are occasions of sin from our relationships or involvements.

Jesus, Who loves "sinners", clearly hates the "sin". Jesus will always have mercy upon us when we are repentant; but Jesus will never tolerate the sin itself.

As we learned through the Pandemic, we need to protect ourselves from the infection of the virus by social distancing, keeping isolated, and staying away from places where the virus could be; that's exactly what we need to do with sin, and the occasions of sin, which is a far worse "infection" that, left unchecked, can, as Jesus tells us, can cause us a far worse outcome. Our goal is to "enter into the Kingdom of Heaven"; and that means that we will probably arrive "maimed", "crippled", or with "one eye" (figuratively speaking) as a result of the spiritual and moral battles that we need to fight along the way to keep growing in holiness. But that's far better than remaining unhurt because we don't fight against evil, but then, "intact" and looking beautiful", as Jesus so graphically put it, *"to be thrown into Gehenna where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched."*

As I mentioned at the beginning of our Mass this morning, our Diocese has just recently begun a special "Jubilee Year of the Holy Spirit". It is my great hope that ALL of us will use these 9 months as a time of prayer to be renewed in our Faith, and to have our hearts be reignited with our Love for God and Neighbor, so that we can be re-energized as Spirit-filled, joyful missionary disciples of Jesus, rooted in the Eucharist, and with our hearts "on fire" with our Love for Jesus.

I see this as a special **Year of Grace**, filled with wonderful possibilities for our Diocese. I believe this can be, and needs to be, a time of Spiritual Renewal for our Local Church, which needs to begin with each of us spending time in prayer each day, and asking the Holy Spirit to guide us---to show us the way----to remind us of the Mission of the Church that has been entrusted to us----to live the Good News of Jesus effectively in our daily lives, and to be joyful witnesses of that Good News to all those we meet.

In keeping with today's Readings, I also pray that we can continue our Journey of Faith, growing in holiness by trying to learn every day how to think and act like God does, and to move away from what comes naturally to us as human beings. I pray that we can learn to be welcoming of and tolerant toward all who may look and think differently than me, while at the same time maintaining our vigilance and determination to protect ourselves from sin and sinful practices, even when they're camouflaged in attractive and appealing wrappings to make them seem desirable, or that they would make our lives more enjoyable.

We also need "some of that Spirit" that Moses asked the Lord to share with the others. Fortunately we already have that amazing Gift of the Holy Spirit. Through our Baptism and Confirmation, we ARE "Temples of the Holy Spirit". The Spirit already has made His powerful, seven-fold Gifts available to all of us. The plea of Moses that we heard, "*Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets*", is a spiritual reality in us---already. The question is: do we realize that? are we willing to open ourselves to that same Holy Spirit? Through our Baptism, we have been united with the Body of Christ, and in Christ, we have become the "priestly, royal, and prophetic People of God".

Let us pray that the same Spirit Who empowered the Apostles to go into the world, will also keep filling us with those same **Gifts**, so that our lives will bear the **Fruits** of Jesus' Love to all we meet. And let us pray most of all that ALL people will ultimately agree that instead of separating ourselves from one another and from God, that what is most important of all is living in such a way, and enduring whatever it takes, to be able to spend Eternity with God in Heaven. That is the most indisputable Fact of all!

God bless you now and always.