

20th Sun. Ord. Time (C)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
August 13, 14, 2016

Everyone seems to be 'fact-checking' these days, so I thought I would try to check a fact for myself. What is the number of Catholics currently in the U. S. Senate, and in the House of Representatives? I remembered hearing that it was higher than most people think. Yes, 31% of the combined Congress identifies as Roman Catholic compared to 22% of the overall U. S. population. This is according to the Pew Research's Religion and Public Life statistics. Among them Nancy Pelosi and John Boehner (and now Paul Ryan). The important piece of this is how this is reported 31% 'identify' as Catholic. Another interesting fact is that, while much is made of the Hispanic vote, the Black American vote, the Evangelical vote, it is no longer significant or valid to speak of 'the Catholic vote'. While 22-24% of the total Catholic population is Catholic, you can't count on this 24% to vote according to Catholic teaching. Catholics today vote more on ethnicity, culture, political preference, and personal interests. There is no 'Catholic block' to be sure.

Why did I look at this in preparing for this week's homily? It was the words of Jesus in today's Gospel: *“Jesus said to his disciples: “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!”*

It seems to me at least, that Jesus had an intense desire for the Kingdom of his Father to break forth upon the earth. As some would say today, Jesus had 'fire in his belly', or Jesus knew deeply “what his passion was”. It seems that Jeremiah had 'fire in his belly' as well: he challenged people to the point that they were so tired of hearing him that they threw him into a cistern. And then, how about Ebed-melech, the man who came to his defense and with 3 others pulled Jeremiah out of the cistern and saved him. They had enough fire in them to risk the authorities and pulled out Jeremiah.

Dipping into today's Second Scripture, the writer of Hebrews refers to a 'cloud of witnesses'. These are the Saints in heaven, and the writer suggests that they should inspire us to *“rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eye fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.”*

The point of all three of today's Scriptures, and the question that is then posed to us, do we as the Church of today have any fire for the Kingdom within ourselves. What is the level of our intensity, what is the quality of our love and our desire for God? Do we have within us, as a community of Catholics, to be leaven and salt to the earth, to bring about change first within ourselves, and then within the society in which we live ... be that family, parish, work place, town in which we live.

This entire past week, you have probably at least a few times checked in on the Olympics. Speaking of intensity, 10,500 athletes are participating in Rio. Every one of them is there because of drive, intensity, 'fire in their belly' for gold. They have given

great amounts of time, energy and even money to train to get where they are. Some of them have sidelines careers as well. The gold Olympic medal could not be sought seriously and realistically while holding a full-time job, or being full-time in school. *“Where your treasure is, there will your heart also be.”*

Fire is a great Scriptural image; it is used through the Old and New Testaments. And each time it is used to express passion, desire, commitment of the heart to God. We see it first as the burning bush, we find it also when Jesus speaks of a baptism by fire, and in today's gospel when Jesus says he came to set the earth on fire ... this is always fire for God. Another NT use is the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit is experienced in the form of 'tongues of fire'. In more common terms, we say that a 'team is really on fire', that 'or cheer 'get fired up'. We sometimes say that an idea has 'lost its fire', meaning that it no longer has any impact, any force, it doesn't have what it needs to be influential or effective in terms of its purpose.

The Church as a whole, and parishes in particular, must have a degree of fire about them, and a degree of fire about them for their mission. Our time and our resources can sometimes be used and expended for our own needs BUT we are not Church if we have fire in our belly only for OUR STUFF, OUR NEEDS. We are not Church, nor an effective parish until we have fire for others, fire for the mission of Jesus and for the Kingdom of God. Archbishop Jackels has 4 priorities that he speaks of: Catholic Education, Sunday Mass, Stewardship, and Vocations. In terms of Catholic Education, he means all forms,... Catholic schools, Faith Formation Programs, and Adult Faith Formation. And he has said that if you can't do all of these, then first do Adult Faith Formation. He also says, that if any of these are not producing life-long Catholics, then stop doing it and try something else. Increase Mass attendance, and participation in the other Sacraments, give justly and generously of your time, and talent and treasure to the things of God, and ask yourselves how the parish can produce vocations to priesthood and religious life. If the parish has not and is not doing this, it is not doing what it should. Actually, if a parish is not doing these things to a noticeable degree, then it is also not doing what it meant to do. Where is the fire in you? Where is the fire in us here at St. Athanasius? (St. Francis?). Please join me in a prayer to conclude

God of radiant light,
you spoke to Moses through the burning bush.
You led the people through the desert by a pillar of fire.
And you sent the purifying fire of your Spirit
to renew and transform the earth.
Strengthen our families as we face the seductions of this world.
In these days of fulfillment, purify us so that when the test come,
families will stand united in their choice of you.
And in our own baptism by fire,
give us the grace to withstand the trials of our lives,
so that, like gold fashioned by fire,
we, too, may be fashioned in your brilliant image. We ask this through Christ, Our Lord. Amen