

5th Sunday of Easter (A)
May 13, 14, 2017

St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes

We are now just beyond the half way mark through the Easter Season ... 28 of the 50 days. The mysteries we celebrate are, of course, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the Glorification of Jesus. Sent to us by God the Father, which we celebrate at Christmas, Jesus came as the long anticipated Jewish Messiah. But more than that, we believe that through his Passion, Death and Resurrection Jesus became the Christ, the anointed one of God.

All of this we know, and have heard and considered many times. These events in the life of Jesus must not remain simply 'events', special days that we celebrate such as Christmas, Holy Week, Easter, etc. They must be recognized as the redeeming and saving mysteries they truly are, not only in the life of Jesus but most especially in our own lives. Through these mysteries of Jesus the gift of salvation becomes ours.

When the Church moved the celebration of the Ascension from a literal 40 days after Easter, to be celebrated on a Sunday, some got all confused. I consider that confusion a healthy thing, however. It helped us move from thinking of these salvation moments merely as historical events. And no longer was it even Ascension Thursday any more. The Ascension stopped being just a date, but a real moment of grace not bound by time and a calendar of days. This leads me to what I want to share with you in today's homily/reflection.

More and more we are aware of similarities between our Mass and the Sunday Service of some Protestant churches. Some times we have a common set of Scriptures on a given weekend, and Holy Communion has become more frequent in some denominations. But while the pastor, (preacher or priest) is essential in most traditions, in our Catholic tradition the priest represents Jesus in our liturgy. The priest is as it were a physical 'stand-in' for the resurrected Jesus.

This is difficult to speak about, because it is not my intention to suggest that I or any priest is Jesus, or even in any way a worthy substitute for Jesus at the Mass. Yet, theologically, we do say and we do believe that the priest represents Jesus in our worship experience, the Mass. The point I want to make and have us consider is that it is Jesus who is the true leader of this Assembly, it is Jesus who is the real presider at each Mass. This is not simply a SERVICE celebrated by those of us here, and completely independent of Jesus. First of all, we are here at the invitation of Jesus, and what we do here we do IN, WITH, AND THROUGH JESUS.

So, once again, where does this all lead? Maybe something first about me, or any other priest at Mass. The liturgy, the Mass, is not and cannot be about the presider. The presider should make some effort to at least make the Sunday celebration of the Mass meaningful and relevant to the Assembly, those participating in it. But this should never overshadow the mystery ... what the priest does, how the priest celebrates, should

never overshadow the real presider of the Mass who is none other than Jesus himself. I am not sure we give enough credence to this fact. (This is not an easy or simple thing to talk about. It is not easy, at least for me, to say that during the Mass the priest represents Jesus.) There is a real difference between representing Jesus and thinking one is Jesus. The latter is to be avoided at all costs. Nonetheless, it is true.... at the liturgy we are gathered around the Table of Eucharist with Jesus, who is our priest. To think that the particular priest you see is the true presider waters down the mystery. It makes the Mass simply a human endeavor, something we celebrate together independently from Jesus. Soon we forget what the Mass really is the baptized (The Body of Christ) gathered around the Table of Plenty with Jesus, and worshiping the Father IN, WITH, AND THROUGH JESUS.

The other part of this is realizing how this should form our attitude whenever we gather for Mass. The Mass is not a duty to fulfill ... the Mass is a sacramental moment during which we join Jesus in worshiping His and our Father. We do this in memory of Jesus, but we also do this WITH AND THROUGH JESUS. We must learn to see the Mass not as a duty, but as an opportunity. Where else, how else, do we have the opportunity to worship God in union with the Savior of the world. This is more than an obligation this is a privilege. That many take this so casually today seems to suggest that we don't understand what it is we have here, what it is that we do here, and with whom we engage while here.

This was the reason that during Lent we turned to face the cross and welcome Christ into our Assembly. We focused on the fact that what we do here is IN, WITH, AND THROUGH JESUS. The Mass is the prayer of Jesus to his Father. We are invited to offer this prayer with Him. What a sacred privilege!

The early church was very mindful of this fact.

St. Ambrose of Milan: "And the priest says, 'Therefore, mindful of His most glorious passion and resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, we offer You this immaculate victim, a reasonable sacrifice, an unbloody victim, this holy bread, and the chalice of eternal life.'"

St. Ignatius of Antioch: "The Lord said, 'You will celebrate the memorial of My death, that is, the Passover Sacrifice ... at the cock's crow, at dawn, you will perform My feast of love and My memorial' The Apostles said, 'Lord, haven't You drunk to the full of the Passover Sacrifice? Is it then necessary that we do it again?' Jesus responded, 'Yes, it is necessary, until I come again from the Father;'"

Anamnesis: the prayer of remembrance after the consecration part of the Mass. In the words of anamnesis, the Church calls to mind the Lord's passion, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. This is the high point of the Mass as a memorial of what occurred during Christ's visible stay on earth as a pledge of what he continues to do invisibly through the Eucharist. (Today, I will call your attention to it when those words are prayed)

We must do everything we can to know what we actually engage in here, and actively do this IN, WITH, AND THROUGH JESUS. May it be so.