

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time; World Day of the Sick

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Basilica of the Assumption

Feb. 10, 2019

Introduction

Some of the biggest lessons of my priesthood were taught to me by people suffering from terminal illnesses. Years ago, as a newly ordained priest, I visited a parishioner diagnosed with a debilitating disease. Until that point she had been vivacious and involved in many parish ministries. At the time of my visit, however, she had begun to understand that she would no longer be able to do the things she enjoyed so much. I prayed with her, heard her confession, anointed her, and gave her Holy Communion. And afterwards, we talked for a while and I offered her my sympathy. "Oh, Father," she said, "Don't think I'm giving up. I can do a lot of good from my sick bed."

And so she did. She was a powerhouse of prayer. When I had problems or needed encouragement, I called her up and asked her to pray - not only me but many others as well. She called grieving friends and parishioners to offer them a word of comfort. She helped many to persevere in the faith and married couples to stay the course. Hers was a ministry of hope in a situation many considered hopeless. She lived out the rest of her life filled with hope and joy at the prospect of eternal life and the resurrection of the dead.

Hope in the Resurrection

I thought of her shining example of faith and hope in the Resurrection as I prayed over today's reading from St. Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians. As you sensed, that

reading is an early version of the Creed, a summary of the faith, the faith which was handed on to St. Paul and which he everywhere preached, viz., *“that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve...”* Yes, this is the faith St. Paul preached and that the Church continues to preach. For, you see, our faith is not merely a series of abstract truths and teachings. Rather, our faith is tied to an event – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus— as taught by the Apostles and handed on to us in the Church’s teaching and worship. And once it dawns on you and me that the Lord loves us, that he gave his life for us, that he rose from the dead so that we too might rise from the dead, that we encounter the Risen Lord personally in the Mass and the Sacraments – once that life-giving truth dawns upon us, invades our heart and pervades our way of thinking, speaking, and decision-making once that happens – our lives are never again the same! What joy, peace, and inner freedom do we experience when with living faith we share in the victory of Jesus over sin and death!

So when I visited that wonderful parishioner so long ago, what I encountered was the very faith St. Paul preached to us this morning. She was not merely a good person, not merely a generous person, not merely a lively and outgoing person – she was a woman of living faith. When an illness struck that would debilitate her and eventually take her life, she did not give up but kept believing, kept hoping, kept loving – all in view of the resurrection of the dead. To be sure, her doctors did all that they could for her. They staved off the effects of her disease; they eased her pain; and they offered her ever greater support as her illness advanced. But it was her medical team who were ultimately inspired by her and by her faith.

Years later her example of faith amid illness was confirmed for me in the priestly example of Msgr. Art Valenzano, the former Rector of this Basilica; many of you, like myself, had the privilege of knowing him and sharing his friendship. When I met him in 2012, he had been battling leukemia for a number of years, the disease that ultimately would take his life. But he didn’t act like a person on borrowed time. He was full of life, joy, good humor, and priestly love. As he underwent treatment at Johns Hopkins, he brought that same zest for life, joy, humor, and hope to his fellow patients, many of whom began to attend Mass here at the Basilica. His secret? I can tell you firsthand. He believed! He believed in the Lord, the Resurrection and the

Life. Like the parishioner who impressed me so long ago, Msgr. Valenzano was filled with the same faith that St. Paul preached – faith in Jesus who is our hope of resurrection and eternal joy. And like my parishioner of old, Msgr. Valenzano made a deep impression on those who offered him such beautiful, loving, and competent medical care. He was grateful to his medical team who prolonged his life and kept him active in ministry almost until the very end. Dear friends: Is there any reason for me, who has seen these things, not to believe? How can I ever finish thanking the Lord for all the people in my life who have borne such beautiful witness to Jesus, our Risen Savior, and to his presence among us in the Eucharist, and in the Sacraments of Mercy? How can I finish thanking God for those who practice medicine in a spirit of faith, hope, and love – who not only seek to cure their patients physically but also encourage them to open their inner selves to God’s love? Many of you are here today and what a debt of gratitude we owe you!

Put Out Into the Deep

All of which brings me to the Gospel where we find Jesus with his Apostles. After a night of work in which those experienced fishermen had caught nothing, Jesus orders them to put out into the deep waters and to lower their nets for a catch. Filled with obedient faith, Peter did as the Lord had commanded. And the result was such a tremendous catch of fish that their nets were torn and their boats almost sank. This Gospel episode stands for all time as a living image of the Church’s ministry. Even when it seems futile, even in times of crisis, disbelief, and persecution, the Church must obey the Lord’s command to put out into the deep, that is to say, to preach the Gospel, to seek souls for Christ.

That’s what my wonderful parishioner did so beautifully before she got sick. That’s what Msgr. Valenzano did from the day of his ordination in 1975 onward. But what happened to them when they were beset by illness? Were they no longer able to go out into the deep waters and lower their nets? On the contrary, with hope in the Resurrection they cast their nets in the deep waters of their pain and suffering – they cast their nets in those waters that are often regarded as lifeless and when they pulled them up there was a tremendous catch of “fish”. They who could not escape a daily meditation on their own mortality brought healing, peace, and the new life of the resurrection to countless souls. In an era when many say that suffering is

meaningless, that physician assisted suicide should be a legal option for the terminally ill, my former parishioner and our former rector testify from eternity to the contrary.

All this continues to inspire me in my life and ministry, and I hope it is a source of inspiration and encouragement for all of you, but especially those of you dedicated to the care of the sick. The Church's faith in the bodily resurrection of the dead underlines the importance of all that you do to restore health and to ease physical pain; faith in bodily resurrection underscores the value of ethical medical research and celebrates the legitimate advances of medical technology. For, both as medical professionals and as men and women of faith, you know that the mortal bodies that you treat will one day will be raised from the dead and clothed with unimaginable glory. Today, let us entrust ourselves and all those who are sick to the Bl. Virgin Mary under her beautiful titles of Our Lady of Lourdes and Health of the Sick. I've gone on pilgrimage to Lourdes with the Order of Malta and have witnessed Our Lady's beautiful care for the ill and the distressed. Just as Mary suffered with Christ, so too she suffers with us. And just as Mary was the first to share in the triumph of her Son over sin and death, so now she beckons to us, she prays for us, she sends us her love - encouraging us all the while to have faith in her Son, Jesus Christ, the Resurrection and the Life. Our Lady of Lourdes, pray for us! Our Lady, Health of the Sick, pray for us!