

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Opening of the 150th Anniversary Year, St. Alphonsus Rodriguez

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Opening of 150th Anniversary Year

St. Alphonsus Rodriguez, Woodstock

July 28, 2019

Introduction

I'm delighted to be with you this morning as we begin a year-long celebration of the 150th Anniversary of St. Alphonsus Rodriguez Parish. At the outset, let's begin by recognizing a priest, a disciple of the Lord and a member of the Society of Jesus, who has written a long and glorious chapter in the history of this parish, Fr. Joe Lacey! Let's also join in thanking your Parish Life Director, who works tirelessly in the service of this community of faith, worship, and service, Dee Papania. I'd also like to say word of profound thanks to all the members of this parish family, for your involvement in the mission of this parish and in the mission of the Archdiocese to bear witness to Jesus Christ, to spread the Gospel, to grow in holiness, to engage the unchurched, and to do the works of justice and charity. Together Father Joe and Dee, you are called to write a new and glorious chapter in this history of your parish - or to change metaphors, to build upon that which you have inherited.

And what a solid foundation upon which to build. Throughout this year, you will be steeped in the history of your parish; but I cannot let this moment pass without mentioning its unique beginnings. As you know, St. Alphonsus Parish literally grew out Woodstock College, that fabled Jesuit house of formation which opened its doors in the year 1869. For some time prior, the Jesuits had been serving the spiritual needs of local Catholics but in 1869, the same year the College opened, this parish was founded on land donated by Woodstock, and the original church was

constructed by the parishioners themselves. The first pastor, Father Salvatore Brandi, saw to it that this new parish would have a special patron saint, a Jesuit lay brother, the gentle doorkeeper of the Jesuit College at Majorca, Alphonsus Rodriguez. His example of humility and prayerfulness unlocks the Scripture readings for today, readings through which the Lord speaks to us about the centrality of prayer.

St. Alphonsus Rodriguez

So, first a word about your patron, St. Alphonsus, born in Segovia, Spain in 1533. He was married, had a family, and had inherited a textile business. What could go wrong, we might ask, but the answer was 'plenty'. Within the space of three years, his wife, daughter, and mother died and his business teetered on the verge of bankruptcy. In such circumstances, people often become angry and bitter, but not Alphonsus. He stepped back, assessed his life, and discerned a religious vocation. Sensing a call to join the Jesuits, he applied, but entering the Jesuits was another matter; it was easier said than done.

Like Abraham in today's first reading from the Book of Genesis, the future saint had to be persistent - he asked more than once if he could join. When finally he was admitted, because of his poor education, he was assigned for 45 years to the humble task of serving as the porter, the doorkeeper, at the Jesuit College in Majorca. When he wasn't at his post, Brother Alphonsus was absorbed in prayer, just as Jesus often spend whole nights absorbed in prayer to his Heavenly Father. And while his assigned task seemed to be dull and routine, Brother Alphonsus brought Jesus and a spirit of holiness to everyone he encountered in the course of his daily work. This humble lay brother had more influence on the community and its students than all its powerful leaders and learned professors combined. His station in life and his assigned tasks were humble, but thanks to his life of prayer, his witness to the Lord was powerful!

The Example of Abraham

What, then, do today's readings teach us about prayer? Mention has already been made of Abraham who teaches us the importance of praying persistently. Abraham also teaches us also to pray in a spirit of mercy and forgiveness. Aware that Sodom

was to be destroyed because of its pervasive immorality, Abraham pleaded persistently with God, asking him to spare those cities for the sake of a mere handful of innocent people, if indeed they could be found. Abraham spoke boldly to God but God was not angry with him for doing so. Rather, I think, God was pleased that Abraham trusted him so much. Long before Jesus spoke about 'asking, seeking, and knocking' - Abraham was doing just that - asking, seeking, and knocking - and his prayers were heard because of his persistence and his spirit of compassion.

In today's Gospel, the disciples observe Jesus praying and even though they had prayed throughout their lives, they ask the Lord to teach them to pray. Since every parish is meant to carry forward the ministry of Jesus, it follows that every parish ought to be a school of prayer, a place where people learn how to pray deeply, to pray well, and to pray wisely. It also follows that every parish should be a community of prayer, heartfelt, faith-filled, persistent prayer, a prayer that filled with that authentic love which '...believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things' (1 Cor. 13:7). Whatever ministries are undertaken, whatever plans are made, whatever problems are to be overcome - all is for naught without prayer.

Intimacy with the Lord

If Abraham is a model for perseverance in prayer, St. Paul unveils for us today the roots of Christian prayer, namely, Baptism. In Baptism - and subsequently in the Sacrament of Reconciliation - the obstacles to prayer, holiness, and intimacy with the Lord are removed, as our transgressions are nailed to the Cross and our hearts are purified. As each of us shares ever more deeply in the Lord's Death and Resurrection, the debt of sin is remitted and the possibility opens before us of a whole new way of life rooted in a genuine intimacy with the Lord, an intimacy that enables us to bear witness to Christ in our daily lives. And when, as a community of faith we enter more deeply into the Lord's saving love, the parish itself becomes a living sign of the Presence of Christ in our world. We are called to be a community made up of men and women who, in the power of the Holy Spirit, are brothers and sisters of Christ and thus sons and daughters of the Heavenly Father.

When our hearts are full of gratitude to God for his mercy and goodness toward us, we will find ourselves praying differently - more thoughtfully, more discerningly.

Aware that the Lord loves us infinitely and everlastingly, we avoid rushing through the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, unthinkingly. Rather, we find ourselves asking what it truly means to address God as our Father; or what it means in practical terms when ask that his kingdom dawn upon us; or how to be genuinely sincere in asking that his will be done in our lives; or that in asking for daily bread we are first and foremost asking to be nurtured by the Word of God and by the Eucharist; or that in asking for forgiveness we must be prepared to forgive others.

Every morning when I spend time in quiet prayer, I ask God for many blessings – blessings for the people of the Archdiocese, blessings for family members and friends, blessings for the many people who ask me to pray for special intentions. As I offer those prayers, I am reminded that I must be persistent but also open – open to the will of God, for, as the immortal Dante said, “In his will is our peace!” And so I ask for the grace to desire and discern in my life and ministry only what God wants for me and for those whom I am privileged to serve. Ultimately, as today's Gospel teaches us, what we, as individuals and as a parish community, must ask God for is his Holy Spirit: the Spirit who recreates our hearts, who unites us to Christ and to one another; the Spirit who transforms us into true missionary disciples; the Spirit who brings about that peace and reconciliation the world cannot give; the same Spirit who inspires every work of charity and justice for which this and every parish ought to be known.

Conclusion

And so as we enter upon this anniversary year, let it be a time to celebrate, to give thanks, to reminisce, and to plan ahead – but let it above all be a time of deep and lasting renewal in the Holy Spirit, a renewal based on a renewed commitment to prayer and to holiness, a life of prayer both personal and communal, modeled on that of your patron, St. Alphonsus Rodriguez. And may God bless us and keep us always in his love!