

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 5th Sunday of Easter, St. Ignatius Parish, Ijamsville

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April 28, 2018

It is a pleasure to return to St. Ignatius Parish to celebrate a weekend Mass. It affords me an opportunity simply to look in, to be with all of you, and an opportunity to offer you a word of thanks and encouragement as you seek to live your faith at home and at work amid the pressures of daily life. I also want to thank you for your participation in the life of your parish, for all the ways you support its mission and ministries. And with you, I want to thank Fr. Michael Jendrek for his leadership as your Pastor! Thank you, Fr. Michael, for your wise and loving priestly ministry! As you head into a new chapter in the history of your parish, a community that is projected to grow rapidly in the years ahead, I also offer you my support and encouragement. The project of building a new church will require, not only your generosity, but also an ever-deeper dedication to the mission of this parish. As you undertake this project, you have a great friend in your patron, St. Ignatius. May his insight into the spiritual life and his missionary spirit guide you, now and in the years that lie ahead.

As it happens, this evening's Scripture readings are all about the Church's mission, beginning with the famous gospel image of "the vine and the branches." Let me tell you a little story about "the vine and the branches." Long ago, when I was a seminarian at Mt. St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, Mother Teresa, then in the prime of her ministry, came to give us a talk. We thought of her as quite a celebrity, and we were really looked forward to hearing her speak of her heroic service to the poorest of the poor in far-flung places around the globe. We were also hoping she'd share with us how she managed to convert a number of high-profile people who previously had no regard for religious faith.

Well, this diminutive woman, dressed in a sari, didn't do any of that. Instead, she spoke to us about "the vine and the branches." She told us that if we hoped to be good and effective priests, we needed to stay connected to Jesus as branches are connected to the vine. She told us we need to pray deeply, every day, even when we don't feel like it. She also told us that connectedness to Jesus was the heart of her ministry to the poor. Only by knowing Jesus in prayer could she recognize Jesus in the poor and only by knowing Jesus in the poor could she truly recognize Jesus in the Eucharist. At the time, we had no idea what a struggle it was for her to pray but pray she did! Her words about the vine and the branches made a big impact on me. Every day, amid the challenges of ministry, I pray, "Lord, without you I can do nothing. Let me never be separated from you!"

I trust that, amid the challenges of your life, you are praying in the same way. As you strive to live the vocation of marriage, to create a loving home for your children, to excel in your daily work as you cope with workplace pressures, as you face financial challenges, illnesses, and much more - please do not try to go it alone. You and I, just as much as Mother Teresa, need to be connected to Christ just the way branches are connected a vine. In prayer, Scripture reading, the Mass, the Sacrament of Reconciliation - in all these ways and more we strengthen our relationship with Christ. We are pruned or cleansed of our sins and failings so that we may draw our life, our strength, and our goodness from Jesus. The closer we are united to Jesus the more our lives will produce good fruit - the works of love, joy, and compassion that bear witness to our faith. Every day you and I need to examine our consciences: What is the harvest of our lives? Are we producing the good fruit of love? Do we love the sick and the poor? Do we love our enemy? Do we love without counting the cost?

The need to be connected to Jesus as individuals is true of the Church as a whole and it's true of this parish, as well. In fact, when Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower" and later when he says, "I am the vine and you are the branches . . ." ...when Jesus says these things he is describing what the Church really is. The Church was willed into being by the God the Father, the Vine Grower. It consists in our communion, our oneness with Jesus as his disciples. And it is from Jesus, especially the celebration of the Eucharist, that the Church draws its life and its power. From oneness with the Lord the Church receives the wisdom, grace, and

courage necessary to proclaim the Gospel far beyond the walls of the church, to reach out those who are unchurched, to form the young in the ways of faith, to support and sustain families, to serve the poor and protect the vulnerable. To the Church as a whole, the Lord says, "Without me you can do nothing!" But united to Christ, the Church bears much good fruit, namely, the works of love!

What happens when a parish or even a whole diocese opens its heart to the Lord? What happens when we allow the Holy Spirit to deepen our union with Jesus? To fan our faith into flame? To make of us missionary disciples? We have our answer in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles where we saw that, in spite of persecution and a host of challenges, the early Church boldly proclaimed the Name of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that "the Church ... was at peace. [That] it was being built up; [that it] walked in fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers."

In a word, the growth of the Church was due not merely to demographics but rather to the missionary spirit of those early Christian communities that were so deeply connected to Christ in the Holy Spirit - and for that reason - they produced the good fruit of evangelization. This is the challenge that God has given to the whole Archdiocese of Baltimore and to the Parish of St. Ignatius in particular - surely to offer a wonderful spiritual home to all registered parishioners, but also to go out and engage those who no longer practice the faith, and those who are searching for truth and love in their lives, especially the young. In the Gospel and in today's reading from the 1st Letter of John, we are encouraged to ask God for whatever we need - and our needs are many. But the most important thing we need to pray for is that we might do what Jesus asked us to do as he ascended into heaven - to go out and make disciples - to be grafted onto Jesus ourselves and to graft others onto that life-giving Vine!

With this prayer on our lips, may God bless us and keep us always in his love!