

# Archbishop Lori's Homily: Faith Fest

*24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C*

*Faith Fest — Parishes of Harford County*

*Sept. 14, 2019*

Jesus said that, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20). With thousands of us gathered here this afternoon, how can the Lord not be with us in the power of his love?

That you have come to spend the better part of your weekend celebrating your faith, strengthening your faith, bearing witness to your faith— that you have chosen to do so in such great numbers can only mean that the Spirit of the living God is alive and active in our midst.

No headwinds, my dear friends, are too strong for the Holy Spirit!

And as together we celebrate our faith, we cannot fail to thank those who are the Lord's instruments in bringing us together - beginning with the dedicated priests of Harford County - thank you, dear brothers. And in the same breath I thank all of your lay co-workers and leaders in the Lord from all the parishes of this great county of the Archdiocese of Baltimore!

## **The Faith We Celebrate**

So, what does it mean to celebrate our faith? To have a Faith Fest?

Surely it means giving thanks to the Risen Lord, who, in the power of the Spirit, opens our minds and hearts to the truth of the Gospel, the Spirit who brings us into an intimate relationship of love with our Father in heaven and at the same time unites us to one another in the communion of the Church!

Faith Fest is a celebration of the truth and beauty of God's Word, God's Word which has the capacity to touch and transform our hearts with a power that no other of

human words, no matter how brilliant, ever could.

Celebrating our faith means rejoicing in the Holy Spirit because in faith we recognize the transformative power of the sacraments, most especially the Holy Eucharist, through which we truly partake anew in the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ offered on the Cross for our redemption.

Some studies claim that fewer and fewer Catholics believe in the uniquely Real Presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements, but I don't think that's true here in Harford County - not here and not now - where so many of you have spent time today adoring the Blessed Sacrament and thanking the eucharistic Lord for his true, personal and substantial presence; thanking the eucharistic Lord for his great gift of self - his body broken for us and his blood outpoured!

### **Celebrating Faith in Divine Mercy**

But as we listen to God's Holy Word this afternoon, another reason for celebrating our faith overtakes our minds and our hearts, and it's this: the overwhelming truth of God's abundant mercy and forgiveness.

This is the loud and clear message that tonight's Scripture readings proclaim: the everlasting, patient, generous, mercy of God - let's briefly review them!

In the reading from Exodus, we find Moses on the mountain encountering God's glory. Meanwhile the people down below give up on Moses, thinking him to be dead, and so they revert to idolatry, the worship of a calf made of gold, just as we can sometimes substitute other things for God's love in our lives!

In his mercy God had guided his people away from worshipping lifeless objects. And now, after they fall back into idolatry, God listens to Moses' plea on their behalf, and in his patient mercy forgives them their sin, just as he forgives us our sins!

In the reading from his first letter to Timothy, Paul makes it abundantly clear that he was rescued from his former way of life by the Risen Lord.

In his prior life, Paul had cursed and persecuted the Lord's followers, only to be forgiven by God's mercy and called to be an apostle: "Christ Jesus came into the

world to save sinners,” he proclaimed, “[and] of these I am the foremost!”

His message is clear: if he can be forgiven and called to do great work, so can we!

And in the Gospel, we heard of the lost sheep and the lost coin, powerful images of ourselves when we stray from friendship with God. How are we like lost sheep or like lost coins? It’s like this: Neither sheep nor coins can find themselves once lost; someone has to find them.

So too, merely on our own, we cannot find our way back to God once we’ve sinned. Instead, the Good Shepherd comes in search of us, and the good news is that every one of us matters to him.

No matter how far we stray, he continues to love us with an everlasting love. So too the Church is like the woman searching for the lost coin, looking everywhere for members who have ceased to practice their faith, seeking out those who no longer practice the faith, whether because of the scandals, or unresolved questions, or mere apathy. And when these members are found, there is great rejoicing, not only on earth but in the very halls of heaven.

### **Celebrating God’s Capacity to Transform Our Hearts**

But the greatest story of mercy is that of the prodigal son – he has so much to teach us about conversion and recovery of faith!

Jesus’ parable describes how a young son decides to leave his Father’s household, and to take his inheritance to a distant land where he squandered it and finding himself alone, underemployed, hungry and bereft, an apt description of ourselves when we deliberately separate ourselves from the Body of Christ and the Household of our Heavenly Father.

What should bring us so much joy today is that the prodigal son came to his senses!

In the power of the Holy Spirit he had a conversion, his heart was transformed, and he made his way back home only to be met on the road by the father whose mercy was both patient and persistent.

What an image of God the Father of mercies whom we encounter in the sacrament of reconciliation!

What a powerful story of how the Holy Spirit can touch our hearts no matter how far we've strayed or disillusioned we may have become!

Not everyone shared the father's joy, especially the elder son who mistook his father's mercy for moral laxity.

But this evening, let us not pause too long over the elder son and instead dwell on the joy that comes with forgiveness! If you've ever had to forgive a loved one, you know it isn't always easy to do so, but it is in forgiving that the depth of our love is tested and deepened.

Usually we forgive only when the offending part apologizes. But imagine this: the Lord is pursuing us, almost chasing us down, seeking only a little opening of repentance in our hearts so that he can lavish his forgiving and transforming love upon us, especially in and through the sacrament of reconciliation.

When we stop to think about the God of mercy and love, how we should rejoice! And if our joy is born of the Holy Spirit we won't be able to keep that joy to ourselves.

Let me tell you a story about a wonderful priest friend of mine who died last year. Even on the worst of days, he was joyful, he was always happy.

As a young priest, I asked him why he was always so happy. He answered, "I guess it's because I go to confession so often.

If God can forgive my sins, what's there to be unhappy about?"

In my own life, I can attest to the truth of his words! The more we experience God's tender love, his endless capacity to forgive us, his desire to restore our dignity and to raise us to the heights of holiness, the more capable we shall become of touching the minds and hearts of others with a love at once tender, powerful, and transformative; the more capable we become of evangelizing not only hearts but the culture in which we live and of which we are a part.

So as we continue to celebrate our faith, I pray that we shall always be living signs of God's mercy at work in our hearts, in our Church, and in our world, living signs of that mercy that can accomplish more than we could ever ask or imagine!

"To the king of the ages, incorruptible, invisible, the only God, honor and glory forever and ever. Amen!"