



Third Sunday of Easter C May 5, 2019

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During the Easter Season, our first reading is always from the *Acts of the Apostles* which narrates for us the events after Pentecost Sunday. *Acts* records for us the beginnings of our Church and how she, like her Founder, also experienced opposition.

Struggle between Light and Darkness

In today’s first reading, we witness a struggle between *light* and *darkness*. Peter and his message symbolize the *light*. The Sanhedrin represent the *darkness*. They seek to stop Peter and the others from “filling Jerusalem with their new teaching.” But Peter and the Apostles will not be intimidated. “*We must obey God and not men,*” they respond. The divine power of God working through the Apostles cannot be stopped. Slowly but surely, it begins to attract thousands of people who are searching for the truth.

“Costly Grace”

In her comments on today’s first reading, Scripture scholar Patricia Sanchez speaks of “costly grace,” a phrase coined by Lutheran martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Sanchez writes:

Within a very short time after Jesus’ resurrection, the community which professed him as Lord and proclaimed the good news of salvation in his name was experiencing what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “costly grace.” An ordained Lutheran minister and professor of theology, Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) was also a member of the Pastors’ Emergency League, an organization which resisted Nazi influence over the German church.

Because of his work with the resistance and his outspoken criticism of Hitler’s Third Reich, Bonhoeffer was hanged at the Flossenbergl concentration camp on April 9, 1945. In this, the 56th year since his death, believers are still being challenged by his ideas. Bonhoeffer believed that Christians are called to a discipleship which shoulders the burdens and struggles

of this world, regardless of the cost. In teaching about “cheap grace” as opposed to “costly grace,” Bonhoeffer explained that cheap grace is that which falls from the sky like a blanket to cover the sins of the world; it is preaching forgiveness without repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without profession of faith, and absolution without admission of guilt. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, without the cross, without Jesus.

Costly grace, however, is that treasure in a field which requires all we have. Costly grace calls us to follow Jesus even to the gallows. Costly grace is exemplified in the gift of God’s only Son; it is the good news which must be told again and again. Costly grace is the door at which we must knock to find life.

In the first reading from Acts, the disciples of Jesus are experiencing costly grace at the hands of the Jewish authorities who wished to silence them.

Second Reading—Heavenly Worship

During the Easter season, Cycle C, the second reading is always from the Book of Revelation, probably the most difficult book in the Bible to understand. This week’s passage takes us to a heavenly realm where there is a victory celebration taking place for Jesus, the victorious Lamb who has returned home to heaven and to God having conquered sin and death. *Seven* great possessions of the victorious Lamb are mentioned: *power, riches, wisdom, strength, honor, glory and blessing.*

In the Eucharistic celebration, we sing of the “*Lamb of God* who takes away the sins of the world.” In our earthly liturgies, we seek to pattern them after the heavenly liturgy described here. Both seek to give fitting honor and praise to the Lamb of God.

Symbolism in John’s Gospel

During the Easter season, the Gospel is nearly always from John. Today’s Gospel has two parts: the Resurrection story and Jesus installing Peter as leader of his Church.

The site of the Resurrection appearance is the Sea of Galilee. A group of Apostles have gone out to fish, following the lead of Peter. The author (writing 60 or 70 years later) wants to present Peter as *leader* of the newly formed church. As you know, John’s Gospel is full of

symbolism, and today's passage is an excellent example of this. *Fishing* symbolizes the Church's movement to bring the Good News to all people. The *boat* symbolizes the Church into which Jesus wishes to gather people. The fishing is done at *night* which in John's Gospel means unbelief or life without Jesus. Without Jesus, they catch no fish. At *daybreak*, Jesus appears and, under his direction, an exceptionally big catch occurs. The obvious point is that successful evangelization only occurs when our efforts depend on Jesus. The fish represent *every* type of fish. The Church is open to *all* kinds of people.

The net does not tear despite the big load of fish—a reference to the *unity* of the Church. God's will is that the Church remains in unity despite its *vast* and *diverse* membership. The Lord is first recognized by “the disciple he loved”—John. The meal of bread and fish prepared by Jesus has obvious Eucharist overtones: “He took the bread and gave it to them.”

Rehabilitation of Peter

Jesus “rehabilitates” Peter as a disciple. His threefold denial of Jesus has left him in need of healing and reconciliation. Jesus helps him to get in touch with the depth of love he has for his Master. Having done this, Jesus installs Peter as the leader of the Apostles and the Church. As we read through the Acts of the Apostles, we clearly see that Peter is the chief spokesperson, just as the Pope is the chief spokesperson for our Catholic family.

The Papacy: Divine and Human Institution

As we read through the Acts of the Apostles, (sometimes called the first history book of the Church), we quickly notice how Peter is clearly the leader of the early Christian community. He is the one who searches for a replacement for Judas (1:15-26). On Pentecost day, he speaks on behalf of the other Apostles (2:14-41). It is through Peter that God reveals to the early church his desire to have the Gentiles included in the new community that he is forming (10:1-48). (For other references to Peter's leadership role, see Acts 3:12, 48 and 5:8-16.)

Did Jesus intend the Successors of Peter to be Head of the Universal Church?

Most, if not all, non-Catholic churches agree that Jesus conferred on Peter a special leadership role so that he could guide the Church and maintain its unity of belief. But they do not accept the Catholic Church's claim that Jesus intended Peter's successors to have the same leadership role, power and authority. In other

words, they say that there is nothing in Scripture to substantiate the Catholic claim of papal primacy for the successors of Peter. The Catholic Church does not teach that Peter was the first pope in the way we see the Pope today, i.e., as someone whose role was very clearly defined and spelled out. Neither need we believe that the first or second successor of Peter saw himself as “the Pope” (that title wasn't used in those early centuries) or as the Universal Shepherd of the entire Christian church.

What our Church does believe and teach is that *Christ intended* that the special leadership role that he bestowed on Peter would be passed on to the successors of Peter. We believe that the Holy Spirit was guiding the historical development in which the Bishop of Rome would in time be recognized as the Universal Shepherd of the whole Christian world.

As Catholics, we reason that if Christ decided that the Apostles and the early Church needed one person to be her leader and head, then surely the Church that was much larger in numbers after the Apostolic era would need someone to be her leader and head. She would need someone who would maintain its unity, someone who would have the final say when disputes arose. Common sense and experience tell us that someone had to take the place of Peter as the leader and visible head of the Church. There is ample evidence from early Church documents to show that that “someone” was the Bishop of Rome and his successors. Catholics do not need a verse from the Bible to prove that Christ intended the successors of Peter to have a leadership ministry to hold the Church together when threatened by division. Implied in Jesus' desire for his Church to continue is his desire for her to have an office or ministry that would be the visible center of her unity. It is in this context that Catholics believe that the office of Peter, now exercised by his successors, is of divine origin.

A Good Story for Parents with Teenagers.

Reflecting on today's gospel, Jay Cormier writes:

Bobby messed up—big time. Mom and Dad let him take the car Saturday night to take his girlfriend to the movies. Well, things got out of hand. On the way, they picked up a friend and then another friend. . . Bobby wasn't paying attention as he should have and ran a red light. . . He was stopped by the police. . . An open container (not Bobby's) was found in the back seat . . . His parents were called. Without a word, Bobby handed over his set of car keys to Mom and Dad—and didn't expect to see them for a long time.

The following Monday, Mom asked Bobby if he could take his grandmother to her doctor's appointment after school. Sure, Bobby said, and Mom gave him the keys. Bobby got Grams to the doctor on time, waited for her, and then took her to the mall to do some errands. They both

had a great time. Returning home, Bobby handed the keys back to Mom.

A couple of days later, Mom was delayed at work. She called Bobby and asked him to pick up something for dinner. Sure, he said. He took the keys from his dad's desk drawer and headed downtown. He saw some of his friends from school. They were on their way to the mall asked him to go along. No, he said, he had to take care of some stuff. Bobby picked up dinner and got it home. He helped his Mom and sister unpack everything and set the table. Then Bobby returned the keys to his dad's desk.

On Saturday, Bobby was in his room when his dad came in. Would Bobby take a run to the nursery and pick up some bags of top soil and mulch? Dad tossed the keys to Bobby and Bobby headed out. He returned an hour later with the material. He then spent the morning helping his dad spread the mulch and plant new shrubs and spring flowers in the yard.

When they both went in for lunch, Bobby handed the keys to his father.

"No," his dad said matter-of-factly, "you hold on to them."

Bobby's Mom and Dad understand that just as they must hold their son accountable for what he had done, they also must give Bobby a chance to restore their trust in him. That's what Jesus does for Peter in today's Gospel. In asking Peter to profess his love three times, Jesus is not taunting Peter but calling Peter to move beyond the past in order to take on the new challenges of apostleship. In forgiving Peter as he does, in affecting reconciliation with Peter, Jesus transforms Peter's regret and shame into a new understanding and conviction of the Gospel the fisherman has witnessed. The Easter Christ calls us to embrace that same model of forgiveness: to possess the greatness of heart to forgive and seek forgiveness; to seek to rebuild and restore trust with those from whom are estranged, with those we have hurt and who have hurt us, with all who "mess up" - big time.

Reflection Questions

How do you think and feel about how the parents dealt with their teenage son? How would you have handled the situation?

Reflection on Failure

Reflecting on today's Gospel, Fr. John Vella writes:

Much of our reading for today puts the spotlight on Peter. It's good to think about Peter because we have so much to learn as we examine his relationship to Jesus. Jesus' reaction to Peter's denial doesn't make sense, does it? Jesus doesn't seem to have been put off by the way Peter treated him. Instead of throwing Peter out of the group of the chosen ones, he gives him a special responsibility in his Church. Jesus did not treat Peter as a failure, but rather as one who had failed. Jesus knew that there was more to

Peter than his failures.

But isn't it true that we often deal with our failures as if they told the whole story of our lives. How many times do we catch ourselves saying, "I'm nothing but a failure", when what we really mean is, "I have failed this time". Failures are never to be given the status of being so important that nothing else matters. If we allow failure to take over the most significant position in our minds and hearts, then we have made our failures into our gods. We then allow ourselves to be controlled by our failures. God's forgiveness and mercy can take care of our failures in the blink of an eye. And what is even more, our failures, far from dragging us down, can even help us to grow in humility and compassion.

The way in which each of us uses our failures is going to be different. We can give the gift of understanding to others because we understand certain types of failure, as it were, from the inside. Yes, we have been there. We have some idea of what others are going through, and because of that, we can listen and support them in a unique way.

The following story appeared in last week's *Action 2000* daily devotional, which many of you have. It fits in very nicely with the above piece.

Katherine Gordy Levine is a professor at Columbia University. She and her husband have dealt with foster children all their lives. Her book *When Good Kids Do Bad Things* tells how a "good kid," the Dalai Lama, future Tibetan spiritual leader, did a "bad thing". He went into the palace garage, "borrowed" one of his country's four cars. And smashed it into a tree. Today's reading tells how another "good kid" did a "bad thing."

How do I react when a "good kid" does a "bad thing"? How do I decide how I should react in such a case?

Every parent is at some time the father of the unreturned prodigal, with nothing to do but keep his house open to hope.
John Ciardi

Have a blessed week,

