

The Ascension of the Lord Sunday, May 4, 2008

Today's readings remind us that as he prepared to return to his Father in glory, Jesus sent his Apostles to establish his Church by making disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching them. His promise was that he would be with us always until the end of the age.

The Holy Father, in his homily at the Mass at Nationals Park, picked up on this theme, reminding us that Christ established his Church precisely to continue his saving mission in the world.

"The readings of today's Mass invite us to consider the growth of the Church in America as one chapter in the greater story of the Church's expansion following the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In those readings we see the inseparable link between the risen Lord, the gift of the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, and the mystery of the Church. Christ established his Church on the foundation of the Apostles (cf. Rev 21:14) as a visible, structured community which is at the same time a spiritual communion, a mystical body enlivened by the Spirit's manifold gifts, and the sacrament of salvation for all humanity (cf. Lumen Gentium, 8). In every time and place, the Church is called to grow in unity through constant conversion to Christ, whose saving work is proclaimed by the Successors of the Apostles and celebrated in the sacraments. This unity, in turn, gives rise to an unceasing missionary outreach, as the Spirit spurs believers to proclaim "the great works of God" and to invite all people to enter the community of those saved by the blood of Christ and granted new life in his Spirit."

Living out a life of faith as members of the Church brings us into conflict with many obstacles and barriers. While we seek to encounter the living Christ and draw closer to him, we face numerous challenges in our lives.

Our Holy Father underlines three of these in the homily he gave at the Celebration of Vespers with the bishops in his meeting at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception on Wednesday, April 16.

We are challenged by secularism, the materialism around us and the individualism that is so much a part of our culture.

"While it is true that this country is marked by a genuinely religious spirit, the subtle influence of secularism can nevertheless color the way people allow their faith to influence their behavior. Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in church on Sunday, and then during the week to promote business practices or medical procedures contrary to those beliefs? Is it consistent for practicing Catholics to ignore or exploit the poor and the marginalized, to promote sexual behavior contrary to Catholic moral teaching, or to adopt positions that contradict

the right to life of every human being from conception to natural death? Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel.

“For an affluent society, a further obstacle to an encounter with the living God lies in the subtle influence of materialism, which can all too easily focus the attention on the hundredfold, which God promises now in this time, at the expense of the eternal life which he promises in the age to come (cf. Mk 10:30). People today need to be reminded of the ultimate purpose of their lives. They need to recognize that implanted within them is a deep thirst for God. They need to be given opportunities to drink from the wells of his infinite love. ... Without God, who alone bestows upon us what we by ourselves cannot attain (cf. Spe Salvi, 31), our lives are ultimately empty. People need to be constantly reminded to cultivate a relationship with him who came that we might have life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10).

“In a society which values personal freedom and autonomy, it is easy to lose sight of our dependence on others as well as the responsibilities that we bear towards them. This emphasis on individualism has even affected the Church (cf. Spe Salvi, 13-15), giving rise to a form of piety which sometimes emphasizes our private relationship with God at the expense of our calling to be members of a redeemed community. Yet from the beginning, God saw that ‘it is not good for man to be alone’ (Gen 2:18). We were created as social beings who find fulfillment only in love – for God and for our neighbor. If we are truly to gaze upon him who is the source of our joy, we need to do so as members of the people of God (cf. Spe Salvi, 14). If this seems counter-cultural, that is simply further evidence of the urgent need for a renewed evangelization of culture.”

The first reading describes the announcement of Jesus to his disciples that they are to be his witnesses. His last challenge to them before ascending into heaven was to call them to bear testimony to his life, his ministry and his message. Each of us is called to do that today.

“...you are also called to participate in the exchange of ideas in the public square, helping to shape cultural attitudes. In a context where free speech is valued, and where vigorous and honest debate is encouraged, yours is a respected voice that has much to offer to the discussion of the pressing social and moral questions of the day. By ensuring that the Gospel is clearly heard, you not only form the people of your own community, but in view of the global reach of mass communication, you help to spread the message of Christian hope throughout the world.”

This brings us to a reflection on the importance of Catholic education in all of its many forms. The following is taken from the address of our Holy Father to

the Catholic educators of the United States held at The Catholic University of America on April 17.

“Education is integral to the mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News. First and foremost every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God who in Jesus Christ reveals his transforming love and truth (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 4). This relationship elicits a desire to grow in the knowledge and understanding of Christ and his teaching. In this way those who meet him are drawn by the very power of the Gospel to lead a new life characterized by all that is beautiful, good, and true; a life of Christian witness nurtured and strengthened within the community of our Lord’s disciples, the Church.

“The dynamic between personal encounter, knowledge and Christian witness is integral to the *diakonia* of truth which the Church exercises in the midst of humanity. God’s revelation offers every generation the opportunity to discover the ultimate truth about its own life and the goal of history. This task is never easy; it involves the entire Christian community and motivates each generation of Christian educators to ensure that the power of God’s truth permeates every dimension of the institutions they serve.”

These reflections conclude with the thoughts of our Holy Father as he reminds us that we are to be not only witnesses to the Gospel and educators in the faith, but beacons of hope for all whom we encounter.

“Dear friends, my visit to the United States is meant to be a witness to ‘Christ our Hope.’ Americans have always been a people of hope: your ancestors came to this country with the expectation of finding new freedom and opportunity, while the vastness of the unexplored wilderness inspired in them the hope of being able to start completely anew, building a new nation on new foundations.”