

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter (Year A) – May 14, 2017

ACTS 6:1-7; PS 33:1-2, 4-5, 18-19; 1 PT 2:4-9; JN 14:1-12

*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* (Jn 14:6)

In **this**—one of the most well-known statements that Jesus ever made—we can glean important insight into the implications of Jesus' words for our lives.

Jesus called himself the **truth**.

Jesus doesn't just preach and teach the truth. In his very person, as well as in his **relationship** with his Father, he shows us the truth of who God is...and who we are in relationship to the Father...**through** Jesus. His total **dependence on**...and total **obedience to**...his Father models for us the right relationship between human beings and God. = **God is love** (cf. 1 Jn 4:8)—and he created us to receive his love. This is the foundation—the most basic truth—of our very existence. And this truth is most perfectly embodied in Jesus.

Jesus also called himself the **life**.

Jesus is the **life** most prominently in the **Holy Eucharist**. If we do not eat his flesh and blood we do not have life—**eternal** life—within us (cf. Jn 6:53). But our intimate union with Jesus began even earlier—at **Baptism**—when we became part of Jesus by becoming **members of his living body**—the **Church**. Jesus is the only one to have conquered death, so if **we** are also to conquer death, then we **must** be part of **him**. Baptism grafted us on to Jesus so that his power **over** death passes to us. It's pure gift for sure, but we must **cooperate** with that gift. If we **choose** a life of habitual sin—we disconnect from Jesus and thus, get disconnected from eternal life.

But it's actually the **first** thing that Jesus said—that he is the **WAY**—that is the most cryptic, and the one aspect of his statement of identity that people **today**—not to mention his Apostles **back then**—had the most trouble grasping.

How, then, **is** Jesus the **way**? How is it that Jesus doesn't merely **point** the way to God the Father, but rather, he himself **is** the way? If we don't immediately understand this, we're not alone, as we can see in the Gospel verses where Jesus said:

*“In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be. Where [I] am going you know the way.” Thomas said to him, “Master, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?”* (Jn 14:2-5)

At this point, we may be just as much at a loss as **Thomas the Apostle** was about this whole “**way**” business. But remember, this conversation occurred at the **Last Supper**, **before** Jesus suffered, died and rose from the dead. This is also *well before* Jesus ascended into heaven and then poured out the Holy Spirit on the Apostles at **Pentecost**. Without the full empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles were not yet operating fully **on**, nor cooperating fully *with*, God’s grace and **power**...not to mention his *wisdom*.

But in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading from Peter’s 1<sup>st</sup> New Testament Letter, **Peter—now empowered by the Holy Spirit after Pentecost**—helps us see **how** Jesus is the way...and *what that means for us*. Peter said:

*Come to him, a living stone, rejected by human beings but chosen and precious in the sight of God, and, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.* (1 Pet 2:4-5)

Peter’s words give us a clue how to follow Jesus—how to follow the **way**—that he **is**—to the **place** in the Father’s dwelling that **Jesus has prepared** for each one of **us**. *Let’s not pass over that fact too quickly*. Jesus has prepared a place in Heaven, particularly for **you**. And **he is** the way—the **only** way—to get there. Peter’s words are important because they reveal the key role that “**spiritual sacrifices**” play in following Jesus.

Now, I hope everyone is aware that yesterday marked the **100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary** of the first Apparition of Mary—the **Mother of God**—to the three shepherd children at **Fatima**, Portugal. **Our Lady of Fatima** appeared at a time when the world was in chaos.

In his book *Fatima for Today*, Fr. Andrew Apostoli writes:

**Our Lady came to Fatima to warn her children that great evils would come upon the world if they did not lead good lives and offer reparation for the sins of mankind by *prayer and sacrifice*. These evils would include war, famine and persecution of the Church, as well as of the Holy Father. She exhorted her children to become fervent in working for the salvation of souls, for whom Christ her son died so painfully and yet so lovingly upon the Cross. *Our penances and prayers for others are central to our Lady's message because she identified the salvation of souls as the key to peace in the world.*** Fatima For Today (Kindle Locations 2914-2918)

Not surprisingly, one of the central messages of Our Lady of Fatima was the importance of making *sacrifices*. In fact, the Blessed Mother gave the children a prayer to say when they offered their sacrifices. Mary said:

**Make sacrifices for sinners, and say often, especially while making a sacrifice: *O Jesus, this is for love of Thee, for the conversion of sinners, and in reparation for offences committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary.***

<http://www.ncregister.com/blog/joseph-pronechen/10-must-know-facts-on-fatima>

There's a level of **deadly seriousness** in Mary's words that's easy to miss. When Mary spoke to the children on another occasion of the conversion of sinners—and “**poor sinners**” in particular—she said something that should shock us into reality:

**You have seen *hell where the souls of poor sinners go*. To save them, God wishes to establish in the world devotion to my Immaculate Heart. If what I say to you is done, many souls will be saved and there will be peace.** Fatima For Today (Kindle Locations 926-927)

Clearly, when Mary referred to “**poor sinners**” she didn't just mean people with bad habits and commit a few minor sins here and there. Mary had shown the three children a vision of hell. Lucia, the oldest of the three children would explain—many years later as an adult—that, had Our Lady not revealed to them *before the vision* that they would go to heaven, the three children would have died of terror from what they saw.

So, devotion to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and the offering of sacrifices—especially our sufferings—for *the conversion of sinners bound for hell*—is at the heart of Our Lady of Fatima's message. So important are these aspects of Mary's message that she even said that *peace in the world depends on it*.

So, these days, when we **watch, read or listen** to the *news*, and are tempted to despair, we are reminded—both by **St. Paul** and by **Our Lady**—of the absolute importance of offering **“*spiritual sacrifices acceptable to the Father*”** (cf. 1 Pet 2:5). Such sacrifices conform us to Christ—who offered his unimaginable sufferings on the Cross to save us from sin and to open the way for us to get to heaven. **Self-offering was the way of Jesus...and Jesus is the way we are to follow.**

**Peter** said as much in his **1<sup>st</sup> New Testament Letter**, where he wrote:

***Christ...suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.*** (1 Pet 2:21)

By now, we should see more clearly **how** Jesus Christ—***and our union with him***—**is** the **way** to the Father, not only for **ourselves**, but also for **those for whom we offer** our **sacrifices**, and in particular, our **sufferings**.

But how does this dynamic look in the concrete reality of our life?

Let's say, for example, that you're experiencing tremendous **anxiety**, or **despair**, or **weak faith** or even **physical pain** at this moment of your life. All of us can identify **some area of our life** that involves suffering—**physical, emotional or spiritual**.

Now, stop for a moment and think of **someone you know who is far from God**—whether a self-proclaimed **atheist** friend or co-worker; a family member who has **drifted or fallen** away from their **Catholic faith**; someone you love who is addicted to **drugs or alcohol or pornography** and is so immersed in darkness that it strains your hope to its very limits to believe that they can find their way back to God.

So...you've got **your** suffering...and you know of **someone** who is far from God.

In a few minutes, when the altar is prepared during the **Offetory**, **that** is the time to offer your sacrifice—to consciously place your suffering on the altar with the bread and wine that are to be consecrated into the Body and Blood of Christ. And just as the **priest** will offer the Body and Blood of Christ to God the Father for the salvation of the world, so too, **each person** at this Mass is called to offer his or her sufferings to God the Father for the conversion of poor sinners—those we know...and those we don't. If we don't have someone in mind, we can be sure that God does...and we can leave it to him to use the offering of our suffering for that person's soul!

And here we can see the more personal significance of the phrase in the **Eucharistic Prayer** where the priest makes **this** invitation to the congregation:

**Pray, brethren, that *my* sacrifice and *yours* may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.**

Every one of us has some sacrifice—some suffering—to offer. And if we recognize Mass as our opportunity to offer personal sacrifice for the benefit of others who are in great need, and to offer that personal sacrifice *in union with the Sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ to his Father* at the altar for the salvation of the world, then our sufferings become valuable and meaningful because they can be used for the greatest good—the salvation of poor sinners headed for hell.

Our Lady of Fatima was clear about the reality of hell when she exhorted the children:

**Pray, pray very much, and make sacrifices for sinners; for *many souls go to hell*, because there are none to sacrifice themselves and to pray for them.**

Fatima For Today (Kindle Locations 1509-1510)

For someone *without* faith in Jesus, suffering is nothing more than meaningless evil to be avoided at any cost.

For someone *with* faith in Jesus, suffering becomes a powerful means to grow in holiness, to unite ourselves to Jesus' self-sacrifice, and to lead others back to God.

Now, since we are celebrating **Mother's Day** on the same weekend as the **100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Our Heavenly Mother's appearances at Fatima**—it's important to say a word about the **sacrifices of mothers**. And the image I use here is borrowed from one of the most articulate defenders of feminine dignity and authentic motherhood that I know—my good friend **Becky Greene**. A few years ago, at our Eucharistic Congress here at the Cathedral, Becky and her husband **Steve** gave a very moving talk on the **centrality of the Eucharist for marriage and family life**. During that talk, Becky spoke of **how *motherhood itself is Eucharistic***.

Think about what a mother does when she becomes pregnant. **First**, she literally **gives her flesh and blood** to the baby in the womb. **Then** when she advances in pregnancy, **her own body changes**, and, in many ways, she must sacrifice the

societal standards of female attractiveness—*as superficial as they are*—to give life to her child. Then, **after the birth**, she **nurses** the baby, **literally feeding her child from her body**. In the **pain of childbirth**, not to mention the **death of vanity** that she suffers from the physical changes to her body, she must die to self in many ways in order that her child might live...and have life to the full. Sounds a lot like Jesus' sacrifice—offering himself so that others may have life to the full—doesn't it?

Thus, **Jesus' words** at the last supper *become a mother's words* to her **baby** from the moment of the child's conception:

**“...this is my body which will be given up for you.”**

Now, let's add in a little **science** to really open our eyes.

When a woman becomes pregnant, there is an intermingling of cells between mother and child. Even **after** the child is born, *some of the child's cells remain in the woman's body forever*.

Now, consider this mind-boggling fact. **Mary** is in **Heaven**, *body and soul*. And since Mary is a real mother, who really gave birth to Jesus, then **she has Jesus' cells in her body—today**. So, when Mary comes to visit humanity, as she did 100 years ago in Fatima, she *literally* brings Jesus with her...**in her own body!**

It should not surprise us, then, that when Jesus wanted to remind a world in crisis and chaos 100 years ago to follow his **way of suffering and sacrifice** for those we love, he sent someone who is the very acquainted with such sacrificial love—a **mother—His Mother—Our Mother—Mary, the Mother of God**.

It is perhaps the **understatement of the year** to say that—due to God's providence—this Mother's Day, which coincides with the anniversary of Fatima, is a celebration like no other in our lifetime.

And it's perhaps **an even greater understatement** to say that the message of the Mother of God at Fatima is more **urgent**...and more *encouraging*...than ever!