

Proclamation of the Gospel

The Lord be with you.
And with your Spirit.

A reading from the Holy Gospel according to St. John.
Glory to You O Lord.

John was in Bethany across the Jordan with two of his disciples. As he watched Jesus walk by, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God." The two disciples heard what he said and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and noticed them following him and asked them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi," which means Teacher, "Where do you live?" "Come, and you will see," Jesus answered them. So they went to see where He was lodged, and stayed with him the rest of that day. It was about four in the afternoon. One of the two who had followed him after hearing John was Simon Peter's brother, Andrew. The first thing he did was seek out his brother Simon and tell him, "We have found the Messiah" which means the Anointed. He brought him to Jesus who looked at him and said, "You are Simon son of John; you name shall be "Cephas," which is rendered Peter.

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ.

Homily by Fr. Gerry Hurley

Interesting Gospel, nice, simple, directive. A lot of little details in it that are worth noting. It's the Gospel of St. John, although in ordinary time this year we will follow the Gospel of St. Mark. Next week, when we come to Mark for the first time in the new year, we will experience pretty much the same recounting, but it will be a different idea of Andrew and Peter. They will be in their boats with their father, and Jesus calls them to mission. And we say how are all of those things true? Don't get too worried about the nuances of the peripheral. The real importance is in the call. The idea of John, he had come into the world with a special mission to identify the Savior, to identify the Christ. And here he is doing it. Here he is preaching and he said, "There He is, behold the Lamb of God." We have enshrined those words in our Eucharist. What does it mean when we say "Behold the Lamb of God. This is the one who takes away the sins of the world."

It had a powerful effect on two at least, Andrew and another. Who was the other? You? Wouldn't you like it to be you? I would love for it to be me! To take off and follow, and then Jesus sees the two disciples following behind Him. He turns around and says, "What are you looking for? What do you want? What do you need?" They said we would like to see where you stay. We would like to see where you're at. We'd like to visit with you perhaps. Jesus says, "Come and you will see."

Is this what our experience of Eucharist is? — That Jesus says come and you will see? When I come, do I see? When I come, am I my seeking? When I come, do I encounter the Christ that is the one gathering us?

Again, the question that we dealt with so well during the Season of Advent — Why do I come?

On December 17, the Sunday before Christmas, I talked about using an example, an allegory for coming to church talking about fine dining. You remember? Like the difference between going to Table 100 and difference in going to McDonald's. You know, you go to Table 100. You have hospitality. People say, well we don't have your table ready just yet, but visit a while, take your time, be relaxed, be comfortable, and then come on in and we will serve you great food and have great conversation, great fellowship and great engagement. They do that, and a little wine helps. You know, just good fellowship and gathering. It's so much different than going to McDonald's where I say, well I don't want all that fellowship and hospitality and all that. In fact I just want my burger and I want to get going. I want to be on the road. And while it's an interesting challenge and invitation, how do I see myself in approaching Eucharist? Am I coming in to really get something, or am I coming in to be part of the experience, the community?

I had a great letter from an individual regarding that. I would like to share it with you because I really want you to be reflective of this because our experiences can be different in terms of these realities.

He said:

Fr. Hurley,

I wanted to take the time to address a few concerns I had regarding today's homily, and a few of the topics presented in your previously recorded homilies.

Frankly, I found myself in discordance with most of the ideas that you presented today. Allow me to first approach the idea that of the Church from the standpoint of a "fine dining" establishment versus a "fast food/McDonald's" environment. You mentioned that essentially the Church is in no condition to cater to individual's in comparison with a fine dining restaurant that had a menu with an abundance of offerings and how that restaurant would not work. Respectfully, I disagree with this approach to the Church. This viewpoint stifles the beauty of everyone as an individual. We all have different wants, needs, and ways of life - and thanks be to God for that! What you are proposing by saying we can't attend to individuals is that we should have "cookie cutter" viewpoints and ideas, but that detracts from the work of God in creating us as individuals and creates a mentality where it will be okay for people to pass down judgement on those that are "different" or would not agree or conform to the ideas of the majority/powerful. How can one expect to see a sense of fellowship from a parish that would even consider the idea of passing this kind of judgement on each other? Rather than encouraging worship, furthering our ministry to the world, and our discipleship to God, I think this would further add to the population you quoted doesn't regularly attend mass anymore.

Looking at the *Evangelii Gaudium* from Pope Francis provides a good viewpoint on this: "A Church which "goes forth" is a Church whose doors are open. The Church is called to be the house of the Father, *with doors always wide open*. One concrete sign of such openness is that our church doors should always be open, so that if someone, moved by the Spirit, comes there looking for God, he or she will not find a closed door. There are other doors that should not be closed either. **Everyone**

can share in some way in the life of the Church; everyone can be part of the community, nor should the doors of the sacraments be closed for simply any reason. **But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.**”

By adopting the mindset that we must all be identical within our beliefs as a parish, we are closing the doors to allowing people to share in their way to the life of the Church. We're quickly going to become the tollhouse that Pope Francis is warning us of if we adopt this way of thinking and fail to adapt to the needs of our modern society's congregation.

Your proposal here also included and your homily furthered the idea that we should create "rules and expectations" for our parish's masses/Eucharistic celebrations. I'm afraid to say that I feel like this once again is contradictory to the mission of the Church. Yes, to an extent there are rules and unspoken expectations that guide our services. But to micromanage who shares a sign of peace with another is beyond the responsibility of the Church. This strikes me as a sign of trying to evangelize an already evangelized congregation.

Looking again at the *Evangelii Gaudium*: "Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: **I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.** If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: "Give them something to eat" (Mk 6:37)."

If you continue on with the idea that we must add further regulation to be able to "get something" out of our Church, then we're going to be quickly caught in the web that the Pope warns of. We should turn our focus of being disciples and ministering to our society through evangelization within the community, and eventually on a global scale - something our parish is lacking in. We should be bringing Christ to the people around us (and in turn people to Christ) that don't know Him the way we do, not trying to shove these ideas down the throats of those who already believe.

I'd like to pose a different version of your "Why do you come to Church?" question to you...."Why don't people come to Church regularly?"

Largely, I believe that people are beginning to see the Church experience as a boring and authoritative one. Rather than ideological differences, people are finding a much more **personal, resonating** spiritual message from other

religions....religions that refrain from talking above, down to or past their congregations during their sermons/homilies by going on about teaching abstract ideas that have no relation to their daily life. The goal of a homily should be to pass along inspirational messages about our faith and how it can be intertwined in a confusing world to make order from the chaos that surrounds us. Needless to say, that's not what many parishioners are getting. My suggestion: consider the movie "Field of Dreams" and the timeless line "If you build it, they will come." You, as with all other priests, should be providing powerful and motivating messages from the Church to which people can relate to and apply to daily life.

I agree the declining population of Catholics in the United States as well as the decline of those attending mass is alarming, but ultimately I feel that the Church is forgetting its people. By failing to show adaptation to the times and suggesting changes that are unreasonable reforms to the Church - especially those on a parish level - this population will continue to decrease. It's time to stop looking down upon the congregation from the pulpit and trying to evangelize within your own Church....these are the people that already believe.

You proposed to us that we should remember *fellowship, discipleship, ministry, evangelization, and worship*. Perhaps we should place some focus on the true meaning of these words within our congregation and the path we're already headed down rather than trying to relive the days of the past. We can turn back and look at history of the "good old days," but let's not forget that history can also reveal what we've done wrong and can reveal why the Church is where we are today.

What a brilliant letter. Because it raises so many of the issues. I would say this letter would have a resonating effect with possibly 70% of our people. I'm not sure exactly what percentage, but I would say a very high percentage. And I commend him because, hey I when I was 19, I had the very same thoughts. And, when I was 20 I had the same thoughts, and when I was 30, when I was 40, when I was 50 — at 60 I was beginning to change. God, I've changed radically now. Being a priest for 42 years, I look totally differently at those things — those questions and issues and realities. But, they are powerful. They're a powerful enunciation of the truths that we roll with sometimes. But, do we question them? Do we live comfortably with those realities?

So, I commend him. It's one of the best letters I've received. I've received a lot of letters in almost 42 years. But, it's one of the better letters in terms of construct, in terms of question, in terms of "Why do I go to Church?" It hits at some of the real, central, kind of antagonistic issues. It addresses: "Father, don't push too hard." We know that one. "Father, don't be angry, don't be upset with us. Father, remember we are the choir and you don't preach to the choir." Right?

I mean it's an old adage: "Father, we are the ones who show up. We are the ones who pay the bills. Father, your responsibility is to preach the word and to tell us stories, so that we can apply it to our lives." Hey. Wonderful thoughts. What do you think? I'd enjoy hearing from you.

Next week, as we take Mark's version of the same portion of today's Gospel, worth reflecting on the call, the invitation of Andrew and Peter, as the early disciples. Then, next week I will talk about some of these great questions.