

July 6, 2014 - Homily

Jesus gives us a beautiful invitation in today's Gospel. "Come to me all you who labor and are burdened ..." and this invitation is extremely heartfelt. Jesus desires us to come to him. Upon the cross he thirsted for souls to come to him. Jesus established his Church as his Body on earth with the mission to draw all souls to his Sacred Heart, burning with love and compassion for all.

And yet, recent surveys indicate that only one in three self-identified Catholics attend Mass regularly. And of those, only half are absolutely certain that the God they believe in is a God with whom they could have a personal relationship. What a sad statistic! How can a person respond to the Lord's heartfelt invitation to communion with him if that person does not believe such a relationship is possible?

Pope Benedict XVI stated: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, who gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."

There are in fact three dimensions to the spiritual life: the interior journey [being a disciple of Jesus], the ecclesial journey [being a member of the Church], and the journey of active practice [attending Mass and celebrating the sacraments].

Yet, many people are under the impression that the spiritual journey - being a disciple of Jesus - can just be taken for granted if one is a Church member and a Church-goer. However, discipleship, by its very nature, can never be taken for granted. Discipleship is our daily response to the daily invitation of Jesus: "Come to me ... learn from me..."

St. Paul is writing about the same reality in today's Second Reading: "Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Christ." However, "having" the Spirit of Christ is not passive. We receive the Spirit in Baptism and Confirmation, but we must live in the Spirit daily through intentional discipleship, by going to Jesus, being with Jesus, and learning from Jesus each day. The opposite of such discipleship is what St. Paul calls "living according to the flesh," and if we live according to flesh, Paul warns us, we will die.

By contrast, Jesus is always inviting us to the fullness of life that can only be found in him.

Now, all of what I have been saying might lead one to think that being a Catholic Christian is simply a private matter between me and Jesus. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Jesus invites us to come to him and learn from him by taking his yoke upon our shoulders.

A yoke is a piece of wood to which two or more animals are bound. Because of the yoke they share, the animals can together pull a heavy load that they could not have managed individually.

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And so it is with the yoke of Christ. We are bound to him in the relationship of discipleship, and we are bound to one another in his Body, the Church. You can't have one without the other. Our life as members of the Church must be nourished by our relationship with Jesus, and our relationship with Jesus overflows into our relationship with others as members of the Church.

St. Pope John Paul II expressed it this way: "The Good News is directed to stirring a person to a conversion of heart and life, and a clinging to Jesus as Lord and Savior; to disposing a person to receive Baptism and the Eucharist, and to strengthen a person in the prospect and realization of new life according to the Spirit."

I like the Pope's use of the word "stirring," as in "stir into flame the gift you have received" from St. Paul's Letter to Timothy. It's important to remember that the "rest" to which Jesus invites us in the Gospel is not the rest of "retirement" but the rest of refreshment, so that we can continue the journey with him and with one another.

My dear brothers and sisters, as we begin our sixth year "yoked" together in this parish, it is my prayer that each of us will be stirred to making a renewed personal choice to entrust ourselves to Jesus, and a recommitment to serving him in active discipleship as members of his Church.

I would like to conclude with another quote from Pope Benedict:

"Faith is above all a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus ... to experience his closeness, his friendship, his love; only in this way does one learn to know him ever more, and to love and follow him ever more. May this happen to each one of us."