

“You Will Be My Witnesses...”

As we celebrate the Ascension this weekend, we hear in our first reading Jesus give the commission to His apostles that they are to be His witnesses; meaning now is the time for them to continue His mission. Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to give them strength, and they will now go forth to proclaim Jesus to the world. It's a mission we continue to embrace as we go out into the world.

However there is much hostility out there in being a witness. Pope Francis has referred to some of this as the “friendly persecution” of the times we live in. On the one hand, there is freedom of religion. But there are also many storm clouds. Consider some of the incredibly draconian Covid regulations against churches in many nations including our own that are still ongoing in many spots; only through intervention of courts were Churches ensured to be kept open in the United States (after a long slog) but with what continues to go on in places such as Canada and Ireland should send a chill down the spine of any Christian; consider how speech can be called “radical” and shut down by some governments if it goes against relativism when speaking of moral truths on issues such as abortion and gender and marriage between a man and a woman; consider how Big Tech companies set themselves up as arbiters of what constitutes appropriate speech; consider the hate a Christian can face from elements of society or on social media; or even among families and friends consider the difficulty in trying to articulate faith and morals to a growing child or a family member or friend who has fallen away. All of this is a reminder of what we hear in John 15:26-16:4a (from Monday, May 10th's daily mass readings): “Jesus said to his disciples: “When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me. And you also testify, because you have been with me from the beginning. “I have told you this so that you may not fall away. They will expel you from the synagogues; in fact, the hour is coming when everyone who kills you will think he is offering worship to God. They will do this because they have not known either the Father or me. I have told you this so that when their hour comes you may remember that I told you.”

This “being a witness” thing doesn't sound easy does it? But it is part of what all of us are called to do. So how can we strive to do it effectively.

As a starting point, we pray and maintain our connection to the Lord. Jesus gave us the gift of the Eucharist to help bring us closer to Him. When we pray, when we come to Mass, when we celebrate the sacraments, much like Jesus prayed before the Passion, we get the strength to carry out the mission God gives us.

Second, we listen. This includes listening to our conscience, which God gives each of us to help us determine right from wrong. Our conscience can help us make good moral choices and set a good example for others. But our conscience can also inspire us to know when to act. Listening also includes listening to others who disagree with us or who may be angry with us. Sometimes when we do this, we can learn the root causes of their anger. It can also cool someone down who is expecting you to fight fire with fire.

By listening we might find a person was never taught the truth about a Catholic teaching, or we might find a person is really angry at about a changing life circumstance, or are fearful of something, or has a feeling of inadequacy. By listening we can learn how to better engage the person.

Third, we learn the faith. The apostles have the Spirit to open their minds, but they still grow in their knowledge of the faith. Think of Paul, who had the moment where he encounters Jesus. But after this, there is a period of time he is sent away first by the other apostles before resuming his mission. Sometimes we can be so emotional on something we don't take the time to learn what it is we are talking about; this means learning about the person we argue with or who may have a different point of view, but also learning clearly what our faith teaches on something so we can engage with the person.

Fourth, the engagement. This is the hard part. Certainly sometimes the engagement needs to come quick when we see someone in a very bad situation such as abuse or addiction or on a downward spiral. But more common situations can be someone who is always being negative on the Church; or who maybe always argues against what our faith teaches on certain things having been formed by society rather than the Church; or maybe a person making a series of poor moral choices that might not be horribly wrong, but inhibiting their true growth as a person. Sometimes we want to keep "kicking the can down the road" so to speak, or hope that someone else will address the person. But we can't be afraid to admonish the sinner and instruct the ignorant as these are key works of mercy to help people along in the faith.

Fifth, the testament of our lives. Actions speak so loudly. I think of a story of Mother Teresa bathing and cleaning a man who was angry and shouting at her and finally saying something to the effect of why are you doing this and her response was seeing Jesus in that man. When we are patient and don't retaliate with angry attacks on someone; when we go to Mass even if other loved ones aren't going with us but know we go; when we pray for others; when we do good deeds; when we argue with patience rather than emotion, these things get people to think. Remember, the Christian should look different. We live in this world and make this world better because we don't want to be popular so much as to bring people to heaven.

Sixth, patience. It's so frustrating when we see such evil in the world. Sometime we want to look back. Some think there was some magical time when there was no problems and everyone got along. But there was no golden age unless you are going back to before original sin. Evil is always there. And it takes time for people to realize what evil is. Closing a church while allowing an abortion clinic to be open is evil. Racism is evil. Hating someone based on their political point of view is evil. Objectifying the human body and dismissing it as not hurting anyone is evil. But society too often turns blind eyes to these things. Patience though can ultimately result in people finally finding their way out of the abyss of sin.

Seventh, perseverance. We must never give up, even if it seems the message of society is this is how things are, you can't change it. Think of the apostles and the early Church; a small group of people who were expelled from the Jewish faith and then persecuted by the Roman government. It would seem they had every reason to give up, to think this Church won't grow and the odds are too great. But they persevered and here we are, more than 2000 years later. God doesn't give up on humanity, and we can't give up on one another with respect to proclaiming the truth.

Lastly, we need to review how we are doing. This is why we examine our conscience and go to confession. Sometimes we make mistakes and aren't living the kind of life we can lead and become a poor witness to the faith. Other times we may not be delivering the message as effective as we can. Through prayer and sometimes getting advice from others we can ensure we stay on the right track and become an effective evangelist.

No, being a Christian isn't easy. The faith is persecuted in many parts of the world, and we face a growing secularism in so many countries. But we must remember we are witnesses to the faith, and when we persist in proclaiming it through word and deed, ultimately we become fishers of men and win souls for Christ. So let us, like the apostles, make sure that as we gaze on our Lord at Mass, we also use the strength that we are given to go out into our homes, our work, on social media, and into society and never fear proclaiming who it is we receive, and help people learn how much God loves them and how to respond to that love.

God's blessings to you,

Fr. Paul