

Sunday after the Ascension (12 May 2024)

“And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins. Use hospitality one to another without grudging. As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”

+In the Name...

What person in your life is the embodiment of our readings this morning? Have charity with one another, use hospitality, and minister to one another? Let's word it another way: who taught but also **SHOWED** you that she always loved you **NO MATTER WHAT?** Who not only taught you to be generous but was also the epitome of generosity in her own life? Who taught you to not only treat other people the way you wanted to be treated but was the textbook definition of turning the other cheek? Your mother, of course! At least, I hope your mother exhibited these qualities. And if not, we can at least agree that they are good examples of

motherhood. While Mother's Day may always be the second Sunday in May, because the date of Easter varies, every year has a different set of readings on Mother's Day. But today's readings seem to embody the spirit of motherhood.

What's more, we get to the Gospel, and we hear the promise of the Comforter. In the Gospels the Comforter is another name for the Holy Ghost. Far from being like a warm, snugly blanket, the Holy Ghost is strong and powerful, represented in art as a dove surrounded by flames. Comforter, as you have likely heard, comes from the Latin words "cum forte" meaning with strength. The Holy Ghost represents strength, understandably as a member of the Holy Trinity, but also He empowers us with strength by the grace of the Holy Sacraments. For example, at confirmation we are strengthened by the power of the Holy Ghost so that we may do battle with the world. This fact is underscored by the bishop slapping us (albeit ever so lightly) across the cheek at the end of the rite. It is as if he is saying, "Even though you have been

confirmed into Holy Mother Church, the devil will not stop trying to bring you down. If anything, you are now more of a target than ever because you have told him that you will stand against him.”

Our earthly mother however, exhibits the qualities of both kinds of “Comforters”: she is the snuggly blanket when we have skinned our knee or had our heart broken, but she can be a ferocious Mama Bear when one of her cubs is threatened, with the strength and fortitude of a creature many times her size!

While the Sunday of the Church Year on which Mother’s Day falls may vary from year to year, it is always near to the feast days of St. Monica and her son St. Augustine of Hippo. St. Augustine was one of the great fathers of the Church, reading and writing at a frantic pace. You might think that it was at least partially due to his having grown up in a good Christian home, but this was not the case, or at least not entirely. His mother was a Christian, but his father was not. After Augustine left home he became known for his decadent and worldly lifestyle. Yet all during his

wanderings (both physical and spiritual), Monica dutifully prayed that her son would return to the Faith. She never gave up on him, just as our God never gives up on us.

Most saint's feast days are celebrated on the anniversary of their death because it is the date of their entry into the next world. St. Augustine's feast day is in August, but he also has this extra one specifically commemorating his conversion. St. Monica, his mother, is frequently credited with his conversion by means of her unending prayers for her son, but St. Augustine wrote of three different stages of his conversion:

The first was when he was a child, and the fact that his mother took the time to teach him the faith. The second was when he was well-entrenched into his hedonistic lifestyle. One day he heard a boy singing to himself, "Tolo legere, tolo legere". That is, "Take up and read, take up and read." Augustine inexplicably picked up a Bible for his book to read and turned to St. Paul's letter to the Romans where he read, "Let us walk honestly, as in

the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.” St. Augustine was convicted by the words he read and decided to change his life then and there. He became a disciple of St. Ambrose and brought great joy to his mother when she received the news.

But the final phase of St. Augustine’s conversion might be the most telling, or even the most surprising to some people. In some circles, the conversion, the decision to follow Christ, is the end. But for Augustine, it might not have been the beginning exactly, but not too far off. The third phase is the daily grind, the everyday tasks of choosing to follow the Savior, choosing to do God’s will instead of our own or anyone else’s. St. Augustine realized what many Christians nearly 2,000 years later still do not get: Being a Christian is not defined just by how many Sundays we show up at Mass, but what we are doing the other 167 hours a

week. We do not believe in a “Once saved, always saved” theology. In fact, Alice Frazier was fond of saying as she came through the receiving line after Mass, “Ah, converted again for another week!” Interestingly, at least to me, is the measure Augustine used to examine himself during those 167 hours. Most examinations of conscience start with the penitent comparing his activities to either the Ten Commandments or the Seven Deadly Sins, but Augustine suggests the Beatitudes. Do you remember those? You probably had to learn the Ten Commandments in Sunday School, but if not you hear them in this Parish on the first Sunday of every month. And most of us have a pretty good idea of what is covered in the Seven Deadly Sins, even if we would have trouble naming them all. But the Beatitudes: that sounds a little too much like memorizing Scripture, not a favorite pastime of most Anglicans. Those are the “blessed-s” from the Gospel according to St. Matthew. There are nine of them, to be exact, including “Blessed are those who mourn”, “blessed are the meek”, “blessed are those

who hunger and thirst for righteousness” and “blessed are the peacemakers”. We can all take time to mourn, but what about hungering and thirsting for righteousness? That sounds like a full-time job, not just for an hour on Sunday. And what about “blessed are the peacemakers”? That one is deceptive: none of us are out causing a war in the Middle East. True, but this beatitude says nothing about war. We need peace in our homes, our schools (the PSU library comes to mind) and our political system. My parents watch way too much news (which for me is anything over about ten minutes), but it seems like it boils down to “This person called that person this name, so then that person called this person a different name.” Then they interview a lawyer, followed by a political science professor, both of prestigious East Coast universities. Fabulous: grown adults are capable of talking to one another in ways I would not have allowed my middle school students to conduct themselves. “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called to sons of God.”

I hope this sermon does not sound too much like a lecture. (That would have been more appropriate for Father's Day!) But a little of that charity and hospitality described in our epistle this morning would go a long way towards making peacemakers in this world. And the best part? Your mom would approve!

+In the Name...