

Fifteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

In today's Gospel Jesus is sending the twelve on their first missionary journey. The number twelve reflects the twelve constellations of the zodiac and so is symbolic of the complete journey of the sun through the heavens. What is said of the twelve is said of every disciple. We are all sent out on a mission. The details, too, are symbolic. They are to wear sandals and carry a staff, just like the ancient Israelites when they left slavery in Egypt and struck out on the journey to freedom and the Promised Land. This is not a journey that they we can manage on our own resources. Jesus promises to nourish us and to supply what we need for the journey. Hence the instructions not to take our own bread or money. Jesus will be with us and we will have all the grace we need to do the will of God.

In November 2013 Pope Francis called us all to be missionaries when he exhorted us to experience the joy of living the Gospel and of sharing it with others.

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church there is a quotation from Saint Cyril, a 5th century bishop of Alexandria. He speaks of the communion which we are meant to enjoy in the Church: 'All of us who have received one and the same Spirit, that is, the Holy Spirit, are in a sense blended together with one another and with God. For if Christ, together with the Father's and his own Spirit, comes to dwell in each of us, though we are many, still the Spirit is one and undivided. The Spirit binds together the spirits of each and every one of us ... and makes all appear as one in him. For just as the power of Christ's sacred flesh unites those in whom it dwells into one body, I think that in the same way the one and undivided Spirit of God, who dwells in all, leads all into spiritual unity'(On John's Gospel, 11.11; Catechism n.738).

Since every single person in this world is created by the one God, and since it is the same Spirit who breathes life into every one of us, and since Jesus came to draw everyone to himself (John 12:32) and so to God, the same Catechism reminds us that it is God's desire that everyone be united to Jesus in the one community of faith: 'The Church 'is the visible plan of God's love for humanity'[Paul VI, June 22,1973], because God desires 'that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit'[Ad Gentes 7§2]'(Catholic Catechism n.776). 'The Church is the place where humanity must rediscover its unity and salvation'(Catechism n.845).

Perhaps the most beautiful expression of this truth is found in the New Testament, in the reading from Paul for today's mass (Ephesians 1:3-14). I recommend that you take time off today to reflect on it. Paul is overwhelmed by the wonderful love of God who wants to draw the whole created universe into a bond of love by uniting everyone to his Son, Jesus.

This has been the dream that has inspired missionaries throughout the two thousand years of the Church's life, and it is still behind the thrust of Pope Francis's frequent request that we become aware of the missionary dimension of our faith. Jesus longs to draw everyone to know and love his Father. As the Catechism says: 'The ultimate purpose of mission is none other than to make people share in the communion between the Father and the Son in their Spirit of love'(Catechism n. 850).

The more people truly share in this communion of love, the more we will treat each other as brothers and sisters. What a world that would be! Jesus commissioned his first followers to go

into the whole world and to every nation. 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you' (John 20:21). Because God is love, we know that his Spirit will reach out to everyone even if they never hear the good news about Jesus or come to know the beauty of God as revealed by Jesus (Catechism n. 847-848), but that does not in any way lessen our desire to tell them about Jesus and to invite them to know him and to experience the fullness of his life as members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church where they can experience a family that has no boundaries and is open to the whole world. In the words of the Second Vatican Council: 'The Church is catholic: she proclaims the fullness of faith. She bears in herself and administers the totality of the means of salvation. She is sent out to all peoples. She speaks to all. She encompasses all times. She is 'missionary of her very nature'[AG,2]' (Catechism n.868). How can we be close to Jesus and enjoy the life that comes to us through the Eucharist and through the teaching and prayer of the Church without wanting to do all we can to share this life with others?

The readings of today's mass also remind us that, if we are going to be part of Jesus' outreach to others, we must remain close to him. Paul speaks of 'living through love in his presence'. The entrance antiphon speaks of our seeing his face, and the communion antiphon speaks of communion, of living in Jesus and his living in us. When Mark first describes the calling of the twelve, he tells us that Jesus called them to be with him and to be sent out to preach and heal (Mark 3:14). If we are with him, then of course we will want to go out with him sharing his mission of love. If we are reaching out to others, we must do it not on our own but with him.

A story is told of some soldiers who were advancing against a retreating army. They came upon a church which had been shelled and found a large broken statue of Christ in the rubble. As an act of devotion they attempted to reassemble the parts, but were unable to find the hands. Since they had to move on, one of them took a board and scribbled on it: 'I have no hands but yours'. They propped the board up against the statue and left.

'I have no hands but yours!' The risen Christ is longing to draw everyone into communion with him. He wants there to be one flock and one shepherd. If he is going to draw people in to enjoy the Eucharist which we are enjoying this morning, and to find a community that has all the richness which we have in our Catholic tradition, calling on the experience of grace and prayer that have been ours since the time of Jesus - then he wants to invite them through us. As part of our loving others as he has loved us (John 13:34), just imagine what could happen if everyone of us found one person who might just be waiting to be invited, to either come back into communion with us, or to take a further step of grace into full communion with the Catholic Church. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) will begin soon in most parishes in preparation for next Easter. It is an Emmaus Journey'. At the end of their journey the disciples enjoyed communion with Jesus at the Eucharist. All along the way their hearts were burning with longing. This is our hope for those who will journey with us this year into full communion with the Catholic Church. This could be a marvellous opportunity for many hungry people to take steps to see whether the life we live as a parish is what they too are wanting. Why not invite them? They are free to say no, but your invitation may open a door to them and lead them towards a life that will fulfill their heart's desire.

I conclude with two quotations that you might like to reflect upon as you think of church. The first is from Cardinal Franz König, former Archbishop of Vienna. He was one of the leading bishops of the Second Vatican Council and remained a staunch supporter of its central vision,

especially its focus on ecumenism and the outreach of the Church to the world. He died in 2004 at the age of 98. I quote (see the Advent calendar of Wir sind Kirche-Jugend, 8 December 2002): 'The Church of Christ must be an inviting Church, a Church with open doors, a warming, motherly Church of all generations, a Church of the dead, the living and the unborn, a Church of those before us, those with us, and those after us, a Church of understanding and sympathy, thinking with us, sharing our joy and sorrow, a Church that laughs with the people and cries with the people, a Church that is not foreign and does not act that way, a human Church, a Church for us, a Church that, like a mother, can wait for her children, a Church who looks for her children and follows them, a Church that visits the people where they are, at work or at play, at the factory gate and at the football stadium, and within the four walls of the home, a Church of those in the shadow, of those who weep, of those who grieve, a Church of the worthy, but also of the unworthy, of the saints and the sinners, a Church not of pious pronouncements, but of silent helping action.'

The second is from John O'Malley SJ, the finest contemporary historian of Vatican II writing in the English language. He has provided us with 'a simple litany' of the changes in church style indicated by the council's vocabulary (see 'What happened at Vatican II?', Harvard Uni Press 2010, page 307):

'from commands to invitations,
from laws to ideals,
from threats to persuasion,
from coercion to conscience,
from monologue to conversation,
from ruling to serving,
from withdrawn to integrated,
from vertical and top-down to horizontal,
from exclusion to inclusion,
from hostility to friendship,
from static to changing,
from passive acceptance to active engagement,
from prescriptive to principled,
from defiant to open-ended,
from behaviour modification to conversion of heart,
from the dictates of law to the dictates of conscience,
from external conformity to the joyful pursuit of holiness.'

Finally, we have Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation 'The Joy of the Gospel', in which he invites us all to be missionaries of the Gospel.