

16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 23, 2006

A friend of mine, who was not Catholic at the time, attended a Holy Hour with another mutual friend of ours. She went as those in attendance prayed, and meditated, and received our Lord's blessing at the Benediction. When asked later what she thought of the whole service, she replied that it was very nice, but "they sure seemed to think a lot about that gold thing up on the altar." Within a few months, she would learn that it was not that gold thing, the monstrance, that we think so much of; but rather the Eucharist which it encompassed. She did gather, though, by the posture and actions of all those in attendance, that they thought a lot of it, and that part is good. Thank goodness, though, that she mentioned what her perception *was* of what was happening, and that she had what she had seen clarified. There is an old expression that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Not that knowledge is dangerous, but a little knowledge, knowledge sufficient enough to draw conclusions but not sufficient enough to lead to clear understanding. There are several elements of our faith that can lend themselves to confusion over our beliefs: my friend could have told anybody who would listen that we kneel down and worship some gold thingamajiggy and act as though it is our God. People have knowledge of our going into that little room called the confessional, but don't understand the teaching on sacramental grace and power, or the role of the priest. The world knows about meat on Friday, but has no idea why it might be a sin. Having just a little bit of knowledge of Catholicism, enough to know the "what" but not the "why," can actually be detrimental, even for committed Catholics, and it's one of the most prevalent reasons why some people who are nominally Catholic end up falling away from the faith.

In the Gospel reading today from Mark, Jesus invites his apostles to get away for a little while, away from all the crowds and activity which had clustered around their miracle-working. But as they withdrew, the people to whom they had been ministering followed them; as they came to know about where Jesus and the apostles were heading, they hurried there ahead of them. And Jesus, looking out at the crowd, was moved with pity, for, as Mark wrote, "they were like sheep without a shepherd." Like sheep without a shepherd: not necessarily totally lost, but without any direction; not necessarily in danger, but not in a safe, secure place, either. And then adds Mark, Jesus began to teach them many things. That's part of being a good shepherd: teaching the sheep, giving them direction and leading down the right path, away from dangers. We know Jesus as our Savior, and Lord; we think of him as priest. But he is also known as Teacher. Most people can recall Jesus telling his followers to "call no man Father." But he also said to call no man "rabbi," which means teacher; you have one teacher only, he said, and that teacher is Jesus. Jesus remains our primary teacher today: he instructs us through his Church, which means that he teaches us through both Scripture, of which the Church is the guardian; and through the Tradition of the Church, the teachings, whether definitive or even just constant, which help us to understand both

the what and the why of what the Catholic Church believes. This teaching comes to us through the magisterium, which is the authoritative teaching branch of the Church: the pope and bishops, together, have been given this special charism to instruct the faithful in Jesus' name. And it's an important component of our faith, was back then, still is today: the people followed Jesus and the apostles a considerable distance, to a deserted place, because they were so hungry for his teaching, and so starved for the truths which he came to reveal. They didn't mind being challenged, they didn't mind a message which contradicted their lifestyles, because they were being spiritually as well as intellectually nourished: fed with truth, nourished on knowledge of God's will.

We live in an era that takes education for granted, and I mean that mostly in a good way: we assume that all people who desire it, and few who maybe don't, will learn the basics, and not only that, but that most people will go beyond the basics and continue their education so that they can specialize in something in their careers. Our culture spends a lot of time and money worrying over our schools, from elementary schools to our universities, as well we should, because education does make a difference. But if education makes a difference in our work lives and in our experience of the created world, so too does it make a difference in our faith. There's the old joke, common to many faith traditions, about the pastor who was trying to get rid of some bats that had taken up residence in his church. He tried everything he could to get rid of them, and yet they either wouldn't leave or kept coming back. So one day, in frustration, he just went ahead and confirmed them, and then they were never seen again. Now, the truth is that most of you here have been confirmed, and here you are back, but how many really continue their Christian education beyond their youth? A lot of people drop out of their Christian education right after confirmation—got what they wanted, so why hang around? Or, some go on through part or all of high school, but then figure that they know enough; why relearn what I learned ten years ago? But study of the faith is not a matter of so much re-learning; each time we go back for more knowledge, we pick up more: things which before we didn't catch, or that didn't sink in. And every age learns the faith differently: the memorization of our younger years gives way to the concrete, facts-and-just-the-facts of our teen years, but for faith to grow, that must eventually give way to the abstract thinking which comes with adulthood. And many, many people, some with as many as twelve years of Catholic education, left the faith because they understood the “that” part of the faith, but not the “why.” Understood that they were supposed to go to confession, but not why; understood “that” the Eucharist is Jesus, but not “why” he gives himself to us in the sacrament. Ask most people, “what happens at Mass,” and you'll more often get a description than a definition. Do you know why I bow to the altar? Do you understand the significance of the co-mingling of the Body and Blood of our Lord which I do right before I receive communion? Do you understand why women can't be priests? People know quite a bit about this faith, but if it's knowledge of actions devoid of understanding, they're in a dangerous place, sheep who may not

be under the watch of the wolf, but who are just a little bit too far away from the shepherd should the wolf suddenly appear.

Although we call the bishops and priests of the Church our pastors, it is Jesus himself who is our supreme shepherd. He it is that gathers us to himself through the structure of his Church; he it is who has the power to keep us safe from the snares of the devil. And although the Magisterium of the Church has the authority to teach in Jesus' name, it is Jesus himself who is the teacher, and as he did in the days of his first apostles, so too now will he teach us many things, if we are willing to gather around him where he is teaching. In a few short weeks, school will be starting, and other classes will be starting. If you have children and are not now utilizing our Catholic school system, give it some serious thought: the difference between Lincoln's excellent public schools and our excellent Catholic schools is that Jesus is the first and foremost teacher in our schools, and his presence and his teaching infiltrate every class and every day. But remember, too, that we offer CCD, and this year at Saint Mary's we will be starting a high school group, and we will be continuing RCIA, this year on Sunday afternoons: there is education available for all, and so much to be gained from our learning. This world is full of people, belief systems, and teachers who would mislead the faithful, and do whatever they can to scatter God's flock. Draw close to the teacher, the one true shepherd who desires only our good. Draw close however best you can to him who's instruction and whose instruction alone will lead us down the path to salvation. Learn whatever you can, whenever you can, from him who still teaches us through his Catholic Church.

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