

7th Sunday of Easter cycle B

It was just as the soon-to-be-married couple was getting ready to take their vows; right between the giving of their consent, and the moment when, with all eyes upon them, they would consecrate themselves in holy matrimony. I heard, faintly as though in the distance, and not from right above us, “the bell.” Tolling slowly, mournfully. I knew that at any minute, people would come streaming into the church, into the midst of this couple’s special day, and that these strangers to the two families would not be crying tears of joy. There would probably be television cameras, if not inside, then certainly outside awaiting us; and there were. Most of us, I am guessing, can remember exactly where we were and what we were doing when we got the news that Pope John Paul II had passed away—I was concelebrating a wedding up in Omaha, at the Cathedral of Saint Cecelia. We still recall it well: a time of sadness, yet of special celebration of the incredible life of a man who truly towered over other figures of his age. But remember, too, what there was not among Catholics at that time. There was no panic, no “what are we going to do without Pope John Paul II,” no “what’s going to happen to our Church now that he’s no longer there to steer it?” We knew what we were going to do, and we knew what was going to happen. We, as a Church, would have a new pope soon. We trusted that the Holy Spirit would guide the process, and guide the selection. The workings of the Church did not come grinding to a halt, there was never any real worry that the theology of the Church might soon change. At the passing of the pontiff, we would mourn, the Cardinals would elect, and we as a Church would carry on as we had before.

In today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we are given a solemn reminder that faith is not a done deal for any of us: one of the twelve, one of the ones chosen by Jesus to be a priest, fell away right away. And so, very quickly, the Church goes about selecting a replacement for him, and it fell upon Matthias, and so he became counted with the eleven other apostles. Quotes the first pope, Saint Peter, “it is written in the Book of Psalms, may another take his office.” From the very beginning, the Church, while certainly being shaped by the personalities of her members, has never been about those members as individuals, and certainly has never had her existence rest upon them. The Church hierarchy is made up of offices. The very structure of the Church is not one of people assuming power within the structure, but one of people being called through the structure to serve the rest of the faithful; one called to fill one of these offices may have the power to make things happen, or demand that some things be done, but it will come at a price; the life of service is also one of long hours, and of self-denial; a strange career choice at best, which is why it is not and cannot be a choice, but rather a calling, and callings do not come from within, although they may be recognized from within; they come from outside a person. I may say that one of you called me on the phone; no matter how strongly I may feel that it was you who called, it’s only true if you actually did call me. So certain people are called to fill these various offices, and the people who fill them are, to be blunt, replaceable. Everybody has unique gifts and talents which they bring to their work, but the nature of the Church is that people will come and go, but positions will remain. We see the transitions of Popes, of bishops, and of pastors over the years; and of principals, and choir directors, and CCD coordinators; what a wonderfully humbling thing for all of us to be reminded of, that even though none of us can be duplicated, neither the universal church nor the parish is dependant on any one of us. And it’s wonderful because it means that the Church will not rise or fall upon any mere man; it is not a man-made institution, it is a divine institution, created and sustained by God. That’s one of the fundamental differences between a religion and a cult; a cult depends upon a person, or a couple of people, who

assume power and control over others. The hierarchy of the Church depends only upon Jesus Christ, who is the head of the Church; from him, through the lips and hands of those whom he selects, flow the graces, and is handed on the truths which he wishes to impart to his world still today.

John quotes our Lord in the Gospel reading today, as he prayed to the Father, “as you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth.” And he also says “consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth.” One of the perplexing notions of religion, and one that unfortunately keeps many people away from religion, is that of truth: how do you know when you’ve found the one true faith, how do we know that this faith is true? It’s not by the intensity of our feelings about our faith, because many people believe just as intensely as we do that their belief system is correct. It’s not by the duration of our certainty that this is all true, because some people have clung to falsehoods for entire lifetimes. So, if our faith is mostly a matter of, “well, this is what I’ve always believed, this is what I’ve always been taught” that’s all well and good if you’ve lucked on to the true faith, but really, shouldn’t it be more than just that? This is why knowledge of the faith, catechesis, is so important at every age. It’s only fair, and right, that this faith of ours passes a few reasonable tests. It should stand up to the test of time, and it does, on a couple of counts. It stands up to the test of time as far as duration, in that it’s still standing after all these centuries. But the Church also stands another test of time; the theology has always been essentially the same; more developed over time to be sure, but if you read documents from the earliest days of the Church, the theology of the Trinity, of the Eucharist, of the humanity and the divinity of Christ, even the very structure of the Mass, all essentially the same now as it was during the first century. The marks of the Church attest to its stability and its truthfulness: the Church is still one, with the visible office of the Pope along with the bishops giving us unity in belief and practice and discipline. The Church is Holy, not that her members are sinless by any means; but she is ordered towards sanctifying us, who are sinners in need of God’s graces. The Church is Catholic, not just using the name but living the reality; it is a Church for all people of all ages, rich and poor, young and old, men and women—whoever will come to belief. The Church is apostolic, tracing her theology and liturgy all the way back to the time of the apostles. The ancient creeds attest to the stability of the Church throughout history; her practices and language may change and evolve with time, but her beliefs are steadfast.

Saint John wrote in his first letter, “we have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us. God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.” We may not always think of it as such, but the hierarchical structure of the Church, a faith built on offices more than on men, is one of God’s great gifts of love. It is a sign to us of stability and certainty; even with the death of a historical giant such as Pope John Paul II, this Church is not going to go away. Individuals may help to shape the Church, but they do not define it; it is defined by her head, by her Lord, by her spouse, Jesus Christ; and for that reason it will endure until his return, and for that reason it will transmit but one message of salvation. Even if the world changes, and the message once transmitted by preaching to huge crowds is now being transmitted to the world by satellite, it is still our Lord’s message. I will not leave you orphans, he said before he ascended; and indeed he comes to us still through a Church built not of men who will one day die, but of offices, offices that our Lord himself will call men to fill until his return.