

# 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time

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Preached July 8, 2018; St. Peter Catholic Church, The Dalles, Oregon

Last Sunday, if you remember, we heard in the Gospel about the woman who had suffered a flow of blood for twelve years, who passed through the crowd and touched Jesus' garment and was healed. Jesus commended her faith saying, *Daughter, your faith has saved you. Go in peace and be cured of your affliction.* (Mk 5:34) We also heard about the synagogue official, Jairus, who asked Jesus to heal his twelve-year-old daughter who was deathly ill. Before they arrived, they received word that the girl had already died; Jesus told Jairus, *do not be afraid, just have faith.* (Mk 5:36) He then proceeded to raise the girl from the dead.

Today's Gospel, which follows immediately upon what we heard last Sunday gives us quite a contrast. Jesus arrives home at Nazareth and we hear that *he was amazed at their lack of faith.*

Last Sunday I spoke a bit about environmental ecology and observed how the well intentioned, but ignorant alteration of one element of an ecosystem can have destructive effects on the whole system. I also spoke about human ecology, the ecology of culture, the heart of which is marriage and family life. I spoke at length about how the introduction and widespread acceptance of the contraceptive pill has had devastating effects on the human ecology of marriage and family life. Today, I will turn my attention to the supernatural ecology of faith.

We could well ask where we are today, individually and as a community. We could ask about the general character of life in the Church today. Would Jesus commend our faith? Would he exhort us to believe, as he exhorted Jairus? Or would he be amazed at our lack of faith?

I am afraid he might be amazed at our lack of faith.

Blessed Pope Paul VI during a homily on June 29, 1972, the 9<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his coronation spoke of how the 'smoke of Satan' had entered the temple of God as through some fissure. It seemed that the ecology of the supernatural order of faith had been compromised.

The Pope said that we no longer seem alert to the fact that, through the Catholic faith, we are already the owners and masters of the formula of true life. Instead doubt has entered our consciousness, and it entered by windows that should have been open to the light. Within the Church there is now doubt, incertitude, dissatisfaction, and confrontation. People no longer trust the Church, but instead they trust the first profane prophet who speaks in some journal or social movement and run after him and ask him if he has the formula of true life.

This lack of faith was already evident in the widespread rejection of Pope Paul VI's reaffirmation of the traditional condemnation of contraception, which I spoke about last week. His teaching was received by bishops, priests, and laity rather as the people of Nazareth received Jesus.

The rejection of the teaching on contraception, perhaps, marked the beginning of what has been called 'Cafeteria Catholicism': picking and choosing those teachings and practices one likes, while leaving aside everything else. Picking and choosing which doctrines to believe and which to reject is practically the definition of heresy, which derives from a Greek word that means 'picking out' or 'choosing'. It is not the Catholic faith: Catholic faith receives from God, through his Church, everything he has revealed because he has revealed it, not because we like it. The moment we begin picking and choosing, we stop believing; that is, we stop receiving the truth on divine authority, but instead we fashion an idol of our own making, cobbled out of the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church, with other things mixed in according to our fancy.

This collapse of faith, has been accompanied by a collapse of Catholic institutions, the loss of Catholic identity, and a decline in religious practice which is most evident in the lack of attendance at Sunday Mass. It has also been accompanied by scandalous corruption among the clergy, exemplified in the sex abuse crisis, which contradicts everything the Catholic priesthood is about. It has not just been a matter of the harm done to innocent children, but it is a question of horrific sacrilege and blasphemy. How could a priest do such things if he truly believed that he had been chosen from among men to offer to God the sacrifice of Christ's Body and Blood and to represent Jesus Christ to his Church?

Yet, the very fact that this whole scandal has been addressed by Church leaders almost purely in terms of harm to children, bureaucratic apologies, and safe environment procedures, without any reference to sacrilege and blasphemy, without any reference to the offense against God, is itself a sign of the crisis of faith.

In 2005 while St. John Paul II was dying Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger led the Good Friday Stations of the Cross in the Coliseum. As part of his meditation on the 9<sup>th</sup> station of the Cross he said, "*How much filth there is in the Church*, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him!"

Still, if all of this reflects a crisis of faith, we have to get to the heart of our Catholic faith if we want to get to the heart of the matter. The Mass is the heart of the matter. The Mass is the heart of the whole life of the Church; the failure to recognize that is itself evidence of a lack of faith.

We have heard so much about 'the preferential option for the poor', but if we remain with a purely utilitarian focus on 'helping the poor', while neglecting the Mass, or instrumentalizing the Mass, turning it into a propaganda tool in service of the poor,

then pretty soon, there will not really be anyone left in the world who really cares about the poor. Indeed, in the secular world we see an increasing coldness and brutality that reflects the diminishing influence of faith.

The Second Vatican Council put it this way: “The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows.” (SC 10) This is the heart of the whole ecology of the supernatural; if something is wrong here, it will have devastating effects on the life of the Church.

That is why at center the whole work of the Second Vatican Council was the desire for full, conscious, and active participation in the sacred liturgy, above all the Mass.

What does that mean? Here is what the Council itself said: “The Church, therefore, earnestly desires that Christ's faithful, when present at this *mystery of faith*, should not be there as strangers or silent spectators; on the contrary, through a good understanding of the rites and prayers they should take part in the sacred action conscious of what they are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. They should be instructed by God's word and be nourished at the table of the Lord's body; they should give thanks to God; *by offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn also to offer themselves*; through Christ the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and with each other, so that finally God may be all in all.” (SC 48)

Is that our experience of the Mass? Is that how we conduct ourselves at the Mass? Do we show this faith by the way we dress, by our reverence, by our silence, by an attitude of attentive prayer?

There is a great deal that is contained here, but I would like to call your attention especially to these words: *by offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn also to offer themselves.*

The heart of the matter is this: the Mass is a sacrifice; it is the sacrifice of Christ's Body and Blood, first offered on the Cross and now offered in unbloody fashion beneath the appearances of bread and wine. Full, conscious, and active participation in the Mass means nothing if the faithful do not learn to offer the Immaculate Victim, the Lamb of God, through the hands of the priest, offering themselves in union with the sacrifice. The Mass is a sacrifice and the heart of the Christian life, the heart of the life of faith is the offering of oneself as a sacrifice, through, with, and in Jesus Christ, our high priest, offered in the Mass, through his minister, the priest.

This is what has been lost. What I have just said is something that should be deeply ingrained in every single one of the Catholic faithful, but which is heard today as something new and strange.

We might think we know what communion is about: it is about receiving Jesus. In truth that is only half the story. Before communion the priest says, "Behold, the Lamb of God! Behold him who takes away the sins of the world! Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb!" We do not just receive Jesus, we receive Jesus precisely as the Lamb of Sacrifice.

When we receive communion, we should always be conscious of receiving the fruit of Jesus' sacrifice; we should always be conscious of sharing in Jesus' sacrifice. Otherwise we are not fully participating in the Mass; nor are we consciously participating in the sacrifice itself, which is what the Mass is all about; consequently, all our other activity at Mass, sitting, standing, kneeling, making responses, singing, is nothing but a sounding gong or clashing cymbal (1 Cor 13:1), sound and fury signifying nothing (Shakespeare, King Lear).

But what on earth is sacrifice? Scarcely anyone even knows the meaning of the word any more. In truth sacrifice is the supreme act of religion, the supreme act of worship. Yet when people hear the word they normally think of nothing but renunciation, giving something up, something painful. Well, yes, that can be part of sacrifice, but only if that something is given up precisely in order to give due honor and worship to God. Yes, that can be part of it, but only part, like it is only part of ourselves.

On the Cross Jesus offered his whole self, not under compulsion, not as a burden or obligation, but freely and dare I say gladly, out of love. Likewise, we are to offer our whole selves, our entire lives to God, freely, gladly, without reservation, through, with, and in Jesus Christ, our High Priest. He is the only one capable of giving to God anything that is pleasing to Him and through him we too are able to become a sacrifice holy and pleasing to God.

Everyone who says they are 'spiritual, but not religious', that they do not need the Church to go to God, have missed this precise point; in their pride and presumption they think that they can be pleasing to God without offering themselves to God, through, with, and in Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, offered at the Mass.

Let me sum all this up, what has been lost, and what needs to be regained by reference to the altar itself. Let me make clear that I am only talking here about what is symbolized by the altar, not about my practical intentions as pastor of this parish. I am speaking only about symbolism because this is something much bigger than this parish; the whole Church is involved.

The word 'altar' refers precisely to the place where the sacrifice is offered to God. The Christian altar is also a 'table' because from it we receive, as the fruit of the sacrifice, the Bread of Life, the Body of Lord. It is, however, an altar before it is a table and only a table because it is first an altar.

Now contrary to common opinion the Church never mandated Mass to be celebrated facing the people, but it has allowed it and it has become what is expected; perhaps that allowance has opened a fissure of ambiguity. Mass facing the people puts a focus on the altar not as altar, but as table. Mass facing God puts the focus on the altar precisely as the place of sacrifice. Mass facing the people shows the priest as presiding at a banquet; Mass facing God shows the priest as offering sacrifice to God.

It seems that what we have done to the supernatural ecosystem of faith is turn the altar around, make the priest into the emcee at a banquet, and forget about the centrality of sacrifice.

Pope Paul VI concluded his 'smoke of Satan' homily by calling us to a strong faith. We are to say, "Lord, I believe in Your word, I believe in Your revelation, I believe in the one You have given me as witness and guarantor of Your revelation, so that I might sense and taste, with the strength of faith, the anticipation of the blessedness of the life that is promised to us who have faith."

When we truly learn to offer our lives as a sacrifice of faith, holy and pleasing to God, through, with, and in Jesus Christ, our High Priest, then we will be able to experience the taste and anticipation of true blessedness.