

Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time

IS 55:1-3

ROM 8:35,37-39

MT 14:13-21

Six years ago, on this Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time, a power grid went out in the neighborhood just before the 5:00 PM Mass. It was a hundred degrees outside. The church was dark and full of people. In that moment, I was faced with a question—is it possible to celebrate Mass without electricity? And then, in an instant, it occurred to me that before the invention of electricity Catholics celebrated Mass for more than 1,800 years. So, we lit a few more candles and we spoke a little louder. And, it turned out to be a wonderful experience. For anyone who was there that night it was a Mass we will never forget. There was this feeling that we were in it together—it took us by surprise, it was nobody's "fault," we made it work and it turned out to be something special.

In a similar way, this pandemic caught all of us off guard, none of us caused it, we are in it together, and we have the opportunity to make it work and hopefully, something good will come from it.

Something else happened during that Mass that stayed with me. I purposely chose Eucharistic Prayer II (because it is the shortest). Without air conditioning the church was starting to heat up. Towards the end of the prayer, when I said these words, "Remember also our brothers and sisters who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection, and all who have died in your mercy: welcome them into the **light** of your face" the power came back on. The coincidence of saying the words "light of your face" and the lights of the church coming back on took my breath away and I had to step back to collect myself because for us Christians our whole life and everything we experience on this earth points us to that moment when we will see the light of God's face in heaven.

The following day, at the 8:30 and 11:00 AM Masses I told them what happened and I said these words:

"I didn't preach the homily I'd written but instead referenced the second reading that 'nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.' So often the externals of this world distract us and we forget that all we need is Jesus Christ everything else around us should lead us to him. Quite unexpectedly we were given a lesson in this at that moment and we were experiencing it together."

These words could have been written today. St. Paul asks the question, "What can separate us from the love of Christ?" but he already knows the answer. Nothing. In fact, we conquer overwhelming through him who loved us. It is true that nothing can separate us from the love of God. He IS love and it would be against his nature not to love, but we can and do have the power to separate ourselves from him. We sustain our connection to

him by our desire to do his will, by choosing him over everything else and by being intentional disciples.

I'm becoming increasingly concerned that the longer this pandemic continues and the longer people are separated from the Church the more they will develop new habits or drift away from the Church and the practice of their faith. I wish I could blame the pandemic for this situation but this has been happening way before COVID-19 came on the scene. Many Catholics before the pandemic depended solely on the Church to meet all their spiritual needs. They operated only out of an obligation. They came to Mass and received communion every Sunday and then went right back into the world and never stopped to think about God again until the next weekend. This behavior was "passable" when attending Mass and receiving the sacraments was not a high-risk activity, but it was never the Lord's intent.

Perhaps this pandemic will and has made some of them aware that they can't just understand faith as a one-way street, but I fear that many more, now that they have to rely on themselves for spiritual nourishment than solely on the Church, are starving to death.

We are in this moment together and though we did not cause it we do have the power to allow something good to come from it. It has never been acceptable for disciples to be passive participants in the Paschal Mystery. We must learn to feed ourselves. Isn't this what Jesus tells the disciples in the gospel? "Give them some food yourselves." The disciples were perplexed by this because they only had five loaves and two fish but they gave him what THEY had and all ate and were satisfied. We must take what we have received and use it for our benefit and the benefit of those entrusted to our care and in the work of evangelization. Our faith is a two-way street. We need the Church—it provides grace in the sacraments, it unites us to one another and, most importantly, it connects us to Christ in the Eucharist.

Christ is always connected to us—nothing can separate us from his love—but we need to do our part to remain connected to him.

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