

Homily for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

You may have heard that the week before last all the priests of the Diocese of Harrisburg had our annual priest workshop. Well, one night after dinner, some of us went out for a little bit of ice cream, and wound up at Coldstone. When we walked in, I noticed a riddle they had on display, which if you got right won you a free waffle-cone. The riddle was: “I have rivers without water, forests without trees, mountains without rocks, and towns without houses.” Now, it’s not that I really wanted the waffle-cone, but I did really want to know the answer. Do you know what it is? It’s a map!

You know sometimes in the Scriptures, it seems like Jesus styles His answers to questions in the form of a riddle. If you look, He rarely gives a yes-or-no answer – I think, because He wants to invite the questioner more deeply into the divine mystery, not just merely satisfy their curiosity. So often, Jesus answers in a way that really makes you think. Well, enter our Gospel passage today, where Jesus answers those who were trying to trap Him. He says in reference to whether or not they had to pay the census tax to Caesar, “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” By His answer, Jesus makes clear to pay the taxes due to Caesar. But, it’s the second half of that statement that really would have stung those trying to trap Him – because what belongs to God, as our Creator and Redeemer, is our hearts and our entire beings, and therefore, our true and sincere worship – not just merely going through the motions, as so often the Pharisees would do.

Worship. As Catholics, the highest form of worship we give to God is the praise we offer Him at Mass. Why at Mass? Because at Mass, the one sacrifice of Jesus on the cross at Calvary, which even though it happened once, nearly 2,000 years ago, is again made present each time we offer up that very Paschal meal, the Last Supper, when Jesus first commanded His Disciples: “Do this in memory of me.” And, in obedience to Christ, we do that at every Mass. We don’t crucify Jesus again and again when we celebrate the Eucharist. Rather, we enter into that one moment in history, and the God who lives and reigns outside of history, makes present again that one, unique sacrifice, so that we can continue to receive His gift of salvation.

For us Catholics, worship is more about what God has done for us, than it is what we can give to God in return. In fact, we really have nothing to offer God – because everything that is good comes from Him. And the “goodest” good the Father has given to us is His Son’s sacrifice on the cross. And at Mass, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we offer up the sacred Body and Blood of Jesus, joining to it the sacrifice of our very own hearts and lives and beings. Now, that’s what we call worship!

But, for as truly awe-some as Mass is, is your experience of Mass ever more like awesome than AWESOME! ? Has Mass ever lost the “magic” for you? Or maybe you’ve never even knew that Mass could be so much more. But it can!

If you were to go to a concert by your favorite singer, would you just stand there with your hands in your pockets, thinking about what you've got to get at the grocery store on your way home? Are you just going to be bored out of your mind? No way. You're going to be singing at the top of your lungs, swaying back and forth, and maybe even jumping up and down. Well, then why do we find ourselves so bored at Mass sometimes? I mean, Jesus is way more important than any singer. And the depth of what He did for us on the cross and gives us at Mass is deeper than all the songs ever written combined.

“Well, if Mass were just more interesting, I wouldn't get bored.” Ever hear that one before? The thing is if we're looking for Mass to entertain us, make us laugh, give us foot tapping music, all in one hour or less, then we might just find ourselves disappointed, and even bored. But really, Mass shouldn't be any of that stuff. We can find it all elsewhere. Rather, Mass makes present what Jesus did for us, which is unlike *anything* else ever done. What we need, then, in worship is what is unlike the other stuff. We need what we aren't always looking for, which is exactly what Mass provides: an opportunity to slow down and explore, not the newest experience or the next trend, but to focus on that which matters the most.

The repetition of Mass is not meant to bore us. Rather, it's meant to offer us a familiar rhythm that is essential for really connecting with God in prayer. The Mass opens us up to that quiet interior space within each of us where we are truly “alone with God whose voice echoes in our depths.”

If I could make a suggestion that I have personally found very enriching in my own experience of Mass – don't just say the words; pray the words of the Mass. If you really focus on what you're saying, it becomes a true conversation between you and God – one that we are all having together! And if you happen to find yourself in one of those “boring” moments anyway, just let God speak to your heart. You don't have to fill the silence with any thoughts or some activity. Just be. With Him.

That's all. God bless you.