

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT (2022 - C)

Almost two years ago, at the end of March in 2020, nearly everything in our country closed down because of Covid. That included the public celebration of Mass. I will remember 2020 as the year in which I did not celebrate Easter Sunday Mass with you here in church.

This suspension of public Masses continued for two months until the end of May when we were able to celebrate public Masses again, but with all sorts of protocols. Gradually, most of these were relaxed, but it wasn't until July of 2021, almost a year and a half from the time when Masses were suspended that the obligation to attend holy Mass was reinstated.

However, the damage was done. Life-long Sunday habits were broken, and many of our people, nearly one in five, have not returned. In fact, the absence of that many people is very noticeable, and more than a few of you have asked me, "Where is everybody?"

Now I know some people are still staying home out of fear or concern for catching Covid (which I can understand), but the larger group are not here because they have found other things to do with their Sunday mornings, and this is not good.

It means they have joined the very the large group of people who were baptized Catholic but who no longer go to Mass each week to worship God and to be nourished by Holy Communion. Instead, they have been swallowed up by the pagan culture which surrounds us. While I still hope that some of them return to us, I suspect that most will not.

Now I mention all of this because I want to use today and the rest of the Sundays of Lent to talk about something positive and that is our holy Catholic faith, and I also want to talk about something practical, and that is how we can live out our Catholic faith and grow in God's love while at the same time living in a society which is non-Christian and for the most part hostile to religion in general and Catholicism in particular. What I propose is to begin building a parish ark. I will say more about this later, but first, let me explain why I think this is necessary.

It's a fact that there are moments in time, moments in history, perhaps once every 500 years or so when everything changes. There are times when what was ends and when what will later come to be has yet to be revealed. One example is the fall of the Roman Empire. When that happened, the stability and order it had provided for centuries ended for nearly all of western Europe. Another example is the black death, a plague which killed about 30% of the population and ushered in a new economic era. Still another example is the Protestant Reformation which divided the western world along religious lines and ended the unity of faith which had existed up until that time.

We are now experiencing a time similar to those I've just mentioned, a once in a 500 year event. Our time is a time of rapid and significant change, and this change is only partly based on the new technologies that have altered how we live and how we interact with each other, and for the record, we are only at the beginning of these changes.

As just one example, in the past, when I came back from a trip outside of the U.S., I had to go through customs and show the agent my passport. This time, when I returned from my vacation in Mexico, the agent took a picture of me and in less than three few seconds, using facial recognition technology, he knew my name and presumable everything about me.

We are living in time of monumental change, but technology is only partly responsible for this change. More important are two other factors.

One is the idea that modern man has outgrown God, that we can live without God in our lives and that everything is going to be just fine. The other flows from the first, and it's the idea that we can define who we are without reference to how God has created us. So, we have redefined the idea of marriage. We have redefined the idea of family. We have even decided that we can redefine who we are without reference to our physical bodies or to nature itself.

These last ideas are huge because they have rewritten all the ways in which nearly the entire human race sees itself. As just one example, the rejection of the life-giving end of marriage, the rejection of children, has led us to change how we see marriage and family and even life itself. Here it needs to be said that none of these changes has led to stronger relationships and happier people.

This idea, the rejection of the life-giving end of marriage, was taken to an extreme in China and led to the one-child policy, and because of that policy, most people in China do not have brothers or sisters. However, it doesn't stop there. They also don't have uncles or aunts. Nor do they have cousins. Nor do they have brothers-in-law or sisters-in-law. Nor nieces or nephews. Just stop for a moment and think of how many people would be missing in your life, people who are very important to you and who have made your life richer, had you grown up in China.

The fact is that marriage has always been the building block upon which every society is based. When marriage is strong and families are intact, the society is strong, but when marriage is weak, so too is the society. It's a fact that in our country (and most of the western world for that matter), true marriage as it was always understood is no longer the cultural norm. The belief that new families begin with marriage between a man and a woman has been rejected.

Just as with the fall of the Roman Empire or the Black Death or the Reformation everything changed, that is now true for us. Furthermore, just as there was a void or an absence after the fall of the Roman Empire or the Black Death or the Reformation, a void where order and continuity no longer existed and an extended period of chaos ensued, so too our world is now experiencing something similar. Having abandoned God and even nature itself, we are now entering into a period of chaos and disorder.

Let me put it to you in a different way. A man with amnesia doesn't know who he is or where he came from. Furthermore, it's precisely because he doesn't know his past that he doesn't know who he is.

In a similar way, the western world which was formed and shaped by the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church, is suffering from a kind of societal amnesia. Having rejected our religious and cultural heritage, we no longer know who we are. All we know is that we have rejected Christianity, but in so doing, we have also rejected our cultural heritage and all our ancestors and all of our heroes both religious and secular. As evidence of this, consider that among the statutes torn down last year were those of Fr. Junipero Serra, Christopher Columbus and George Washington.

Our society is now rapidly collapsing around us. It's like a sinking ship that's too far under water to be saved. When highly educated people are prepared to defend the right of a man who thinks he is a woman to compete in collegiate woman's swimming meets, there is not much you can say. These folks are not open to the truth. Their minds are closed.

So, what can we do? Well, we already have an answer; some have called it the "Benedict Option." Saint Benedict lived from 480 to 547 about the same time the Roman Empire was collapsing. Saint Benedict was also the founder of Christian monasticism, and during that chaotic time, it was in the monasteries that truth and goodness and beauty were preserved. It was in the monasteries where worship of the one true God continued. It was in these places that learning was preserved and order was maintained.

In effect, the monasteries became islands of light in an otherwise dark world. They were beacons of hope, and they were strong enough to endure until better times came, until people became weary of living lies and were ready to hear the truth once more. The monasteries were like arks where there was shelter from the storm that raged around them.

We need something similar today. If we are going to save our Catholic faith and pass it on to our children and grandchildren, we need to step away from our dying culture. It's time for all of us, myself included, to be more intentional about living our Catholic faith. If we don't do that, it's only a matter of time before we are swallowed up by the chaos of the pagan culture that surrounds us, a culture that is toxic to our faith.

So here's the thing. We aren't going to be saved by getting into lifeboats. Those are only temporary places of safety. What we need is an ark. A place where we can live and be safe and find shelter from the elements, a place where we can wait out the storm until better times arrive.

That is why I think it's time for us to build a parish ark where we can support each other in the faith and where goodness and beauty and truth and love of God are lived out. We need a place that will sustain us and nourish us in our Catholic faith. Half measures will no longer do. If we want to grow in our relationship with God, and if we want to pass our Catholic faith on to our children, then we are going to have to do more than we have been doing.

We are reminded in our reading from Deuteronomy that the Jews lived as aliens in Egypt where they were mistreated and oppressed. We are like the Jews in that we are now aliens in our own land. However, remember that God heard the cries of His people. He saw their affliction and he delivered them. He will do the same for us if we trust in Him.

Our Psalm today reminds us that, “The Lord is our refuge and fortress” and that when we are with Him, no evil will befall us because God’s angels will guard us. So then let us enter into this spiritual fortress. Let us go to this spiritual refuge. Let us build for ourselves a parish ark where we can be safe and where we can live out our faith and do good while we wait for better times. I will say more about my thoughts on how we can build a parish ark in the next few weeks. Amen.