

5<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER – B - May 10, 2009  
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

First, I want to speak briefly about current concerns about the swine flu and how it may impact our parish's liturgical life—especially when it comes to things like receiving the Precious Blood from the common cup at communion time. We've all heard many reports about this flu, and they haven't been all that consistent—one day we hear it's a pandemic, next day it is said to be not that critical. It is important for you to know that the Archdiocese of Dubuque has a plan in place if there ever is a true pandemic flu outbreak. This plan covers issues like school closings, parish Mass schedules and other such events in the regular life of the Church. You may have heard that in Mexico City (where the situation was much more serious) the local Church canceled all Masses in all the local parishes for at least a brief time.

Our own archdiocesan office in Dubuque has been advised that the need for such major changes is not evident at this time; therefore, Archbishop Hanus has not issued such directives. A few individual bishops elsewhere in the US did act to stop giving Communion from the cup in their own dioceses. Again, that is not the case here, at least not at this time. If the situation worsens, Dubuque will take the necessary steps and we will do so here as well. In the meantime, I simply remind you that you need not receive from the cup if you do not want to. And if you are not feeling well yourself (even if not from the flu), it would be prudent for you to refrain from the cup. Along the same lines: some people may be reluctant to shake hands at the sign of peace or hold hands at the Our Father out of concern for the possible spread of flu or other germs. It is important to be sensitive and respectful of your neighbor's wishes and concerns in this area—the sign of peace can surely be exchanged with a smile and a brief verbal greeting (“Peace be with you”).

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In last week's gospel we heard Jesus remind us of the basic truth that he is to be the one shepherd of the one flock of God's people; this helped form the basis on which St. Peter later preached that there is no salvation in anyone other than Jesus. In today's gospel, also from John, Jesus gives us another important and practical lesson: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.” To the degree that we remain linked with Jesus, we can and will continue to grow in joy, peace, truth and love. If we decide to leave him, if we reject the call to follow, love and serve him, then we can do nothing good or worthwhile in any lasting, meaningful sense.

I would say that all of us here today have a basic desire as ‘branches’ to remain connected to the vine that is Jesus; if we didn't, we would not be here. Yes, we struggle with our human weakness and temptations, we fall into sin—but we know the importance of maintaining that connection to Jesus, to his sacraments and to his Church. But we also know that there are many people who have broken that connection or at least have let that connection become very weak. I don't know how many people I have talked to over the years who, for example, are saddened or concerned about one or more of their adult children who have left the Church and no longer practice their Catholic faith. Sometimes there may still be a belief in Jesus but they decide to go to a non-Catholic Christian church. For others, they may reject a belief in God entirely or they may just allow themselves to drift into a state of spiritual indifference or apathy.

Why/how does this happen? There are probably as many reasons as there are persons who have fallen or drifted away. Last month there was released a very interesting report on this very subject regarding the Church in this country. A few highlights from that study:

1. of those who were raised Catholic, 68% still consider themselves Catholic; 15% joined a Protestant church, while 14% are not connected with any church.

2. some of the reasons given by those who left the Catholic faith include: finding a church they like better, no longer believing what the Church teaches, being unhappy with the atmosphere at times of worship or thinking their spiritual needs were not being met, marrying someone of a different faith, or just gradually drifting away. Of those who left the Catholic Church and joined a Protestant church, 27% said that one reason for their decision was that they were unhappy with their pastor (who could possibly fathom such a thing??). On a much more serious note: of those who left the Catholic Church and now belong to no church, 27% gave as one reason the clergy sex abuse scandal. As I said before, the reasons for people leaving the Church are many and exist in a whole variety of combinations.

So how do we respond to such circumstances? Or if you have a loved one (spouse, child, parent, sibling, friend) who has left the Church, what do you do? The situation I hear most often is the parent who is saddened by their adult child or children who have left the faith: “I sent them through 12 years of Catholic schools” or “I always took them to church”—“what did I do wrong? It must be my fault!” If any of you have ever struggled with that, I urge you: don’t carry around that guilt any longer. Parents always want the best for their children, and they do their best to teach and lead by example. But those children grow up and the time comes when they will make their own decisions—and they won’t always be what you think is right. At that point, you can surely urge them to return, but you can’t force them. So what you do is rather simple: you continue to love them unconditionally (and let them know that!), and you continue to pray for them every day. Never, ever underestimate the power of a parent’s prayers for their children! God’s grace works so powerfully in connection with our prayers to accomplish miracles on a regular basis—including the return of people to their faith. Just this past week I was privileged to visit with a gentleman who I had never met before—because of a variety of circumstances, he had been away from the Church and the sacraments for many, many years. But the Holy Spirit was obviously working in him; he contacted me and came in for a visit, he made a good confession, and rejoiced to ‘come home’ to the Church and the faith he was raised in. It was a beautiful thing to see!

There are other things that we can do. One is: continue to learn more about your faith and your Church. Many people leave the Church because they disagree with what they think the Church teaches, but their perception may be off-base. You might be able to clear up their misunderstanding in such cases. Another easy thing you can do: if you are aware of someone who hasn’t been to Mass for a long time, simply invite them to come with you. You would be amazed at the power of the personal invitation; so many people have said they joined the Catholic Church or returned to that faith because someone cared enough about them to extend that invitation. In that study I mentioned earlier: of those former Catholics now belonging to a Protestant church, 30% said one reason for their decision was that someone from that church were invited to join. The power of the personal invitation... We are truly blessed and privileged as Catholic Christians to have the fullness of what Jesus revealed and gave his disciples and entrusted to the Church he founded on the rock of St. Peter. Do not the basic virtues of hospitality and generosity lead us to invite others to share in that fullness?

“I am the vine, you are the branches...without me you can do nothing.” Jesus’ words challenge us to strengthen our connection with him through prayer, the sacraments, and learning and living more deeply the way, truth and life that he is and to which he calls us. May the Holy Spirit also strengthen and encourage us to invite and help others to make or remake that connection with our risen Lord and Savior.