

29th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (2009)

Fr. Kopacek

My remarks today are going to be a bit of a hodgepodge. I do want to speak about this very interesting gospel passage, but there are a few other things I need to address; I guess you could say it is in the form of somewhat extended announcements.

First, I want to give you an update on the subject of a priest presence at Covenant Hospital. You know that Fr. McManus retired this summer and that, because the archdiocese has no priests to spare, Covenant had to look elsewhere for a priest chaplain. They hired a Fr. Peter, a Nigerian priest and recently living in Canada. He was supposed to start on October 1, but we learned this past week that there are further delays. Apparently his father in Nigeria became ill, and so he went there to be with him. Thus, it is unknown when he will in fact start at Covenant. I mention this for your information, but also as an opportunity to remind you once again: if you know you are going to the hospital (Covenant, Allen, Sartori or anywhere else) and you would like to receive the sacrament of anointing of the sick, please contact me and I will be glad to do so before you go to the hospital. Sometimes I hear people say: “oh, I don’t want to bother Father—he’s so busy.” Yes, I’m busy, so are you, and so is everyone else. In all sincerity: do not hesitate to call me if you would like to receive the sacrament of anointing. That (among other things) what I’m here for!

Second (and also on the medical front): we all know that the flu season is upon us, and the presence of the H1N1 virus is especially on our minds these days. Many are raising questions and concerns about how this may or should affect the things we do at Mass: receiving the Precious Blood from the common cup, shaking hands at the sign of peace, and so on. As yet, we have not received any directives from Archbishop Hanus, although individual pastors or parishes may implement their own decisions. If and when Dubuque says something, we will certainly let you know and will follow along. In the meantime, I would just ask you to please use your own discretion, prudence, and best judgment.

--If you are at all skittish about receiving from the cup, you need not do so (and if you have a cold or flu bug yourself, it would be wise for you not to receive from the cup. We receive the whole of Christ when we receive Communion either by the Host or by the Cup—there is no ‘less amount of grace’ by receiving under only one form as opposed to both forms.

--If you would rather not shake hands at the sign of peace, you need not do so. A wish for peace to your neighbor can be given by words and a friendly smile just as meaningfully as by a handshake.

--The same goes for holding hands at the Our Father. That is something that is actually not called for in our liturgical books; rather, it is something that has developed as a custom in some areas (though not all). It is certainly not prohibited to hold hands at that time; however, again, you need not do so. If you like to hold hands at that time and your neighbor does as well, then go ahead and do so. If your neighbor does not or seems reluctant to do so, please respect his/her wishes—besides, your neighbor may not want to take a chance of handing on a cold bug to you!

Third: I want to draw your attention to this blue sheet [show...], copies of which are available at the church entrances. As you know, there is huge controversy about proposals for health care reform these days. Many issues are involved, about which people can disagree in good faith. But when it comes to some fundamental issues, the Catholic Church continues to take a firm stand, and rightfully so. This handout is a recent statement from the U.S. Catholic bishops restating the Church’s unalterable stand on: 1) excluding mandated abortion coverage and incorporating longstanding policies against abortion funding and in favor of conscience rights; 2) adopting measures to protect and improve health care, and 3) including measures to ensure that legal immigrants and their family members have access to health care.

Again, these issues are certainly in the limelight. Regarding abortion in particular, the president has recently stated that he does not intend to include funding for abortions and that statement was welcomed by the bishops. However, the concern remains very real, especially since there have been attempts by some in Congress to explicitly prohibit abortion coverage in these proposals...and those attempts have been defeated. So we must remain vigilant, and the bishops encourage us to take our rightful place in these public debates. Again, these handouts are at the church entrances—help yourself as you leave Mass today.

As I said before, we have a fascinating gospel today, involving Jesus and his twelve apostles and their interrelationships. We might think that these apostles must have been some special folks for Jesus to have chosen them for his inner circle—filled, perhaps, with special wisdom and holiness. The truth of the matter is: in and of themselves, they were no great shakes, and today's gospel makes that very clear. Listen again to James' and John's first words to Jesus: "we want you to do whatever we ask of you." And if that wasn't bold and pushy enough, how about their wish to be seated on either side of Jesus when he comes in his glory? Talk about chutzpah! And to top it all off, the other ten apostles got mad at those two brothers. Self-interest and conniving, or pettiness and jealousy—hardly what we would consider to be models and examples of holiness and virtue, are they?

In other words, the apostles themselves—specially chosen by Jesus—still were all too human; in other words, just like us. But Jesus did not give up on them. I suspect he may have become more than a little exasperated with them at their slowness to understand once in a while; in fact, that is made clear elsewhere in the gospels. But he did not give up on them: he continued to teach them and explain things over and over to them. In this passage, he taught them that true greatness shows itself in a willingness and desire to serve others. And you know what? Jesus does not give up on us either. That, I submit to you, is very good news indeed. We may make our bold demands of Jesus and then complain if our prayers are not answered precisely and immediately as we want. But Jesus still loves us—even in our little temper tantrums. We may still fall into our same old sins over and over again and think "what's the use of confession; why even bother trying to change?" But Jesus still loves us—and challenges us to continue to grow in conversion and holiness because he knows we can...if we seek his grace.

The apostles may not have been the cream of the first-century crop, but Jesus loved them, taught them, challenged them and ultimately filled them with the Holy Spirit—and they went on to become the heroes and saints that we honor and venerate today. The apostles' story is ours as well. May we allow that same Holy Spirit to lead us out of our self-centeredness, pettiness and stubbornness so that we too can become the saints that Jesus is surely calling us to be.