

27th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (October 3, 2010)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

First I want to give a quick reminder that next Sunday, October 10, is our annual Fall Festival in which we “Celebrate Community”—10-10 in 2010 (we will even start at 10 a.m.!). We are grateful to all of you who have given your own time, talents and treasure to making this festival a success once again. With only a week to go, we are getting closer but still a bit short of meeting our goal of \$30,000 in raffle ticket sales. Every year the proceeds from those sales help support our parish’s programs and services as well as our buildings and grounds, so we really depend on those sales. Remember also that our Fall Festival Committee has increased your chances of winning by increasing the number of prizes. If you have misplaced your tickets or would like to buy more, please contact the parish office. Once again I thank you on behalf of the Committee for your support, and I look forward to seeing you here next Sunday at the Festival. By the way, you may want to offer a prayer or two for good weather....

Among the letters from St. Paul that we find in our New Testament, we find two that he wrote to his friend and fellow disciple Timothy. We have recently heard from his first letter to Timothy; today we begin a series of readings from the second letter. Both these letters are quite personal in tone and challenge and encourage Timothy to be faithful to the work God gave him. Today’s excerpt from 2d Timothy has some very good and especially relevant advice for us in our own time. Paul reminds him that “God did not give us a spirit of cowardice but rather of power and love...So do not be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord...but bear your share of hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God.” And Paul himself certainly practiced what he preached. He was no coward; he was filled with the Holy Spirit’s gift of courage and fortitude in spreading the good news about the risen Jesus—even if it led to his being beaten, jailed, ridiculed and mocked, and ultimately killed (he was beheaded on orders from the emperor Nero). St. Paul certainly bore his share of hardship for the gospel of Christ.

We were given two examples of that kind of Christian courage in action in connection with Pope Benedict’s recent visit to Great Britain—the first time a pope went to England since John Paul II did so in 1982. The main purpose of Pope Benedict’s visit was to beatify John Henry Newman (the last step before canonization to sainthood). Newman’s story is a most interesting one and illustrates very well the courage mentioned by St. Paul. He was born in England in 1801 and grew up in the Anglican Church that has its origin in King Henry VIII’s split from Rome during the Reformation. At the age of 15 Newman experienced a genuine religious conversion and had a deepened and more personal relationship with Christ, living that life in the more evangelical wing of the Church. He went to Oxford University where he developed his strong intellectual gifts even more deeply; he was also ordained as an Anglican priest. The more he studied Christian history and especially the writings of the early Church Fathers and saints, however, the more he realized he was drawing closer to the Catholic Church. He discovered that the faith proclaimed and written about by those important figures from the first few centuries after Christ was indeed the same as what the Catholic Church was proclaiming and teaching in his own time. His search for truth and his dedication to that truth finally led him to be received into full communion with the Catholic Church in 1845.

This might not seem at first glance like an especially courageous path for Newman. But we need to remember that the position of the Catholic Church in England at that time was very poor indeed. English Catholics for centuries (since the time of Henry VIII) had lived with very little religious freedom; only a very few years earlier did some of those limitations begin to be lifted. Also, the Church of England was the official state church at the time, supported by the crown in many ways. So, for Newman to leave his position of relative ease and privilege in order to enter the Catholic Church that still lived a rather marginalized existence was indeed an act of courage. He was rejected as a traitor by the Anglican Church, and was not met with immediate acceptance by the relatively few Catholics in England who were

suspicious about this new convert. In any event, Newman was eventually ordained as a Catholic priest and resumed his studies as well. His spiritual and intellectual gifts and the sincerity of his Catholic faith were ultimately recognized by the Catholic Church; in fact, Pope Leo XIII named Newman a cardinal in 1879. His concern for education is noted even today—the Newman Catholic student centers that exist on non-Catholic college and university campuses and the Newman Catholic School system in Mason City (in our own archdiocese) are named in honor of Bl. John Henry Newman.

The other and related act of spiritual courage was Pope Benedict traveling to England in the first place. Before his arrival there had been predictions of massive demonstrations against him and the Church in general to protest everything from the priest abuse scandal to the teachings of the Church on such hot-button topics as abortion and homosexuality. Some in the Church were even suggesting that the pope change his plans and not go. Pope Benedict did not back down; he followed through with his plans—and his trip was a great success. The pope’s gentleness and his genuine spirit of joy and humility were evident, but so was his forthrightness in dealing with important issues of the day. He acknowledged once again his deep sorrow and shame over the sins of abusive priests and the Church’s failures to respond adequately. He also spoke about the challenge and necessity of bringing our Catholic faith out into the open and not being afraid to bring our faith into the great public discussions and debates of our time. At the Mass of John Henry Newman’s beatification, Pope Benedict referred to Newman’s great respect for the Catholic laity but also his challenge to them. The pope quoted Newman’s vision of a Catholic laity that is “not arrogant, not rash in speech...but [are instead those] who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand.”

That is a great characterization of what we as Catholic Christians and especially you folks as the Catholic laity are called to be, and it hearkens back precisely to what St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy in that second reading today. God did not give any of us a spirit of cowardice, but rather one of power and love. So we must not be ashamed of our testimony to the Lord; we must not be ashamed or afraid of what we believe as Catholics and what we hold to be true, good, and worthy. Blessed Newman was not afraid; he followed where the Spirit led him—even to the point of leaving the spiritual home of his youth in order to embrace the Catholic faith in its fullness. Pope Benedict is not afraid; he continues to teach and preach what it means to follow Christ and what our faith is all about—even if our world rejects the very idea that there is a truth that we do not create but is rather revealed to us by a loving God who challenges us to holiness.

So what do we do when we find our faith challenged or marginalized or ridiculed? Do we stand up for it and witness to that faith with conviction and love (not arrogance), or do we keep quiet because we are afraid or we don’t want to be thought of as backward or stupid by the more culturally accepted or politically correct voices? Face it: standing up for Jesus as the one Savior of the world, defending the right to life of the unborn or the disabled or the terminally ill, defending marriage as the institution God gave to us in the first place, or upholding the dignity of the immigrant will not always lead us to win any popularity contests. But it will help us grow in our dedication to Christ and to the gospel he preached. Blessed John Henry Newman, pray for us that we imitate your courage and bear our share of the hardship for the gospel with the strength that comes from God.