

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Easer
May 10, 2009 “B” (St. John, Annual Catholic Appeal)

In 2000, I did a Sabbatical in Rome. My Parents came to visit me while I was there. It was wonderful to be able to give them a personal tour of the great Basilicas.

The walls in St. Peters are decorated with gigantic mosaics that are as finely detailed as paintings. They feature various scenes from the lives of the great men and women of the Church.

One particular scene caught my Dad’s eye. It was a large illustration of Pope Gregory the Great being interrupted during the celebration of the Mass. He is holding a white cloth, which he has just punctured with a sharp dagger. From the cloth, blood is gushing forth, to the amazement of a richly dressed on-looker. “What is that all about?” My dad asked.

In the 9th Century a wealthy Roman converted to Christianity. He gave a generous gift to support the Church and its works. Pope Gregory the Great wanted to show appreciation to this wealthy man so he sent him a piece of cloth he had laid on the tomb of the deacons Lawrence and Stephen. The wealthy man was insulted because he considered it a measly gesture of gratitude from the Pope. He stormed into the Church of St. John Lateran while the Pope was saying Mass.

At the foot of the altar, the man demanded that the Pope account for this flimsy gift. He said, “After all that I have given to the Church, this is how I am repaid, by this strip of filthy rag?” At that, the Pope turned toward the man, took the cloth and also the dagger that the man carried

in his belt, and pierced the cloth. Immediately blood began to gush forth, at which the Pope said, “It is clear where your gift comes from. It is not a gift from the heart and not a gift given to God, because as I have just seen, the blood of the Martyrs is not even enough for you.”

From the beginning the Church has been supported by the gifts of its people. And from the beginning it has been a struggle for people to understand that the real receiver of the gift is God. Our giving is a response to the generous gifts God has already given to us. The martyrs did not have money to give, so they gave all they had in response to their trust in God’s goodness, they gave their lives without counting the cost. They were aware that the gift of their own lives was only a small sacrifice for the forgiveness, love and redemption that God had already given them.

The story of the wealthy Roman is enshrined in St. Peter’s because it illustrates that Christ has chosen to build his Kingdom with human hands. Whether we are martyrs or patrons, or ministers, we are invited to make a personal investment in the building and proclamation of God’s Kingdom. The brick and mortar of Christ’s Church are the sacrifices we make for the good of the Church and its work.

To respond to God in gratitude takes sacrifice. First we are giving back a part of what He has first given us, and secondly it is only when our gift is a sacrifice, that we that we proclaim from our heart the value we place on the work and mission of Christ. Our monetary gift should reflect the same grateful confidence and trust that the martyrs had in laying their lives at the feet of Christ.

Our giving should be made in faith. It should be a statement of where we place our values. It should proclaim

our confidence in God's love.

The life of the Parish should be first and foremost about promoting the Gospel and extending the influence of the Kingdom of God in our society.

In the first reading, we hear these words from Acts: **“The Church throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria was at peace. It was being built up and walked in fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers”**.

That growth continued through the centuries, though the Church's peace would be sorely tested, and many Martyrs would spill their blood for its continued growth. And countless other Christians supported that growth with their works and their gifts. Being a member of Christ's household was and always will be a call to make sacrifices for the good of Christ's mission.

That is why St. John, in the second reading exhorts the members of the church to hold fast to the tenets of the faith and not to be discouraged especially during persecution.

John, reminds the members to love not just in words and in speech, but in deed and in truth. Today, we'd say “Vote with your feet” or “Put your money where your mouth is”. He tells the members, **“We have confidence in God and receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.”**

God has pledged his steadfast love and continues to stand by us, giving us all that we need to live well, and be filled with joy.

The Gospel, today, builds a frame for understanding our membership in the Church. Jesus tells us, “I am the vine and you are the branches. Just as a branch cannot bear

fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me.”

There are many institutions, which do good work in our society, and many of these groups ask for our support, that is why the sacrificial giving model encourages us to support these organizations. But our first priority is to feed the branches and the vine, which connects us to Jesus and the mission of the Church. Jesus’ words in the Gospel express earnest concern for the upkeep and support not just of one church but the entire Body of Christ.

The Church does the work of Christ. It is the agent on Earth of God’s Kingdom. It pleases God when we willingly and generously give of ourselves to continue laying the foundations of faith for the next generation. We are asked to build upon the foundation laid by the martyrs and the Holy men and Women who have gone before us.

As has been the case through out the ages, it is sometimes frustrating to try to understand why the church needs our monetary support, and we naturally would like to be acknowledged in particular ways for our gift, but we do not give to a Pope or a Bishop or a Priest, we are asked to give to Christ, and trust that his Spirit continues to guide our Shepherds and work toward his purposes despite the weakness of shortcomings or a Pope, Bishop or a Priest.

That is why we should support the Annual Catholic Appeal and our Archbishop, Alexander Brunett. He is our shepherd, and he has been chosen by Christ to keep us connected to the vine. It is his duty to do all he can to build up God’s Kingdom in Western Washington. It is his God given duty to see that the Gospel is proclaimed not just in words and in speech, but in deeds and in truth.

In our support of the Annual Catholic Appeal we give him the means to carry out the onerous task that Christ has appointed him to, and it is one way we fulfill Jesus words of the Gospel, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”