

The Sixth Sunday of Easter May 22, 2022

If some asked us, "How does Jesus save us?", most of us would answer, "Through the cross." Now, while that is certainly true, it isn't the full answer. There are other actions by which Jesus also accomplishes our salvation. For example, Jesus also saves us through His Resurrection. By rising from the dead, Jesus saved us from the power of death and gave us the hope of immortality. In a few days, we will celebrate another saving event in the life of Jesus - His Ascension into Heaven, which opened up Paradise to us.

Now, there is one other way that Jesus saves us that we often don't give much thought to. That is, that Jesus saves us by establishing His Church. It is part of God's saving plan to draw us all into the Church. When we talk about the Church, we're not just talking about the buildings in which we worship or the Vatican, but all the people who have been baptized into Jesus Christ.

The Church which Jesus established is primarily a people who are gathered by Christ to be the flock which He shepherds.

This is very important for us to understand. Jesus established His Church so that His saving work could continue down through the ages. It is through the Church that Jesus continues to be present in the world. It is through the Church that we continue to encounter our Risen Lord. No one can be a Christian by themselves. None of us can claim to be followers of Christ and at the same time not be members of the Church. That is just not possible, and it is certainly not what Jesus intended.

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How do we know that? Because He told us so. In the Gospel of St Matthew, He tells us, "Where two or more are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst" (Mt 18:20). That means that Jesus is here among us now. He is not just here symbolically or just here in our memory. No. He is truly here. Jesus also tells us in today's gospel, "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him." That means that Jesus has made His home in each one of us who believe and strive to keep His word.

Jesus identifies so strongly with His Church that He tells the apostles, "Whoever hears you, hears me" (Lk 10:16). When St Paul was persecuting the Church, Jesus appeared to Him on the way to Damascus and said to Him, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." (Acts 9:5). He didn't say, "You are persecuting my people", or "You are persecuting my followers," but "You are persecuting ME." Whatever we do to the Church, then, we are doing to Christ.

St Joan of Arc put it this way, "About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they're just one thing, and we shouldn't complicate the matter."

So, we cannot be Christians without the Church. We cannot follow Jesus without also following the Church. And we cannot be saved without the Church. That is what Jesus intended.

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Sometimes people try to make the distinction between the Church's ceremonies and the Church's teachings. They say that we can go to Mass but don't have to believe all the doctrines and dogmas. They even claim that we can go to communion without following the rules. But that is not what Jesus taught us.

In today's gospel, Jesus gives this promise to the apostles, "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you." The Holy Spirit continues to be with the Church so that everything that Jesus taught will be preserved down through the ages. We take that promise of Jesus so seriously that we believe that, when speaking definitively about matters of faith or morals, the Church cannot make a mistake. So, to reject the teaching of the Church in these matters is to reject the teaching of Jesus.

This is a truth that all of us should take to heart and reflect on seriously. In today's world, there are many teachings of the Church that people find hard to accept and believe. Sometimes, in the face of so much doubt, it can be hard for us to accept and believe those teachings ourselves. This is what is asked of us. If there is a teaching, we find hard to accept, it is not enough for us to say that we don't believe it. We have to make an effort to try to understand it. Perhaps we can ask someone to explain it to us, or we can look it up in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. We have to be humble enough to say that we don't know everything and make a good faith effort to learn. We have to be humble enough to admit that, if Jesus speaks to us through the Church, then I have to take seriously all that the Church teaches.

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Sometimes we can find it difficult to believe because there are so many sinners in the Church. That is understandable. So many of us fail to live up to our calling to be like Jesus. But we believe in the Church not because of the sinful men and women who make it up. Rather, we believe in the Church because of Jesus' promise that He will be with us until the end of the world. We believe in the Church because Jesus promises that we will encounter Him even in flawed and broken people like ourselves. So, we believe in the Church because we believe in Jesus.

The Catholic spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen put it this way: "The Church is an object of faith. In the Apostles' Creed we pray, 'I believe in God, the Father...in Jesus Christ, his only son...in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church...'. We must believe in the Church! [W]e are called to believe in the Church with the same faith we believe in God....[W]henever we separate our belief in God from our belief in the Church, we become unbelievers." (*Bread for the Journey*)

If we want to be saved, then, we have to accept the Church. If we want to be Jesus' disciples, we have to follow Him in the Church. If we want to know what Jesus taught, we have to listen to the Church. And if we want to have a real encounter with the Risen Lord, we can have it in Church - by listening to Jesus speak through the Bible, by encountering Him in the sacraments, and by recognizing Him in each person gathered around the table of His Body and Blood.