

Who Do You Say that I Am?

When I was at St. Francis de Sales Parish in Utica, we were responsible for the pastoral care of the Mohawk Valley Psychiatric Center, which was a deeply enriching experience for all of us on Wednesday afternoons we would celebrate mass at the center and I can remember a day when today's gospel was proclaimed I posed this question to the folks if someone were to come up to you and say who do you say Jesus is what would you say what would be your response

There was a pause and then a patient named Steve raised his hand and said:

"I'd tell him to go ask Father!" Well brothers and sisters, I'll give it a try... !

There is a story about the days of communist rule in Poland. One day a visiting dignitary from the West was on a mission to Warsaw. A chief of protocol was assigned to accompany the official on his visit which – because the visiting official was Catholic – included a mass at the Cathedral.

The visitor asked the Polish functionary: "Tell me, are you Catholic?"

"Believing, sir, but not practicing."

"Of course," the diplomat said, "in that case, you must be a member of the Communist Party."

The Polish official responded: "Practicing, sir, but not believing!"

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Sisters and brothers, it seems that when all is said and done, there are two requirements necessary to be a follower of Christ, ... to be a disciple:

- 1) Like Peter, to believe – to have faith – that Jesus is the Messiah... God become human.
And:
- 2) We need to struggle to attempt to live our lives in a way in which Christ is really the dynamic and demanding center of our lives; ... which is a process. As Meg reminded us last week, Jesus "...grew in wisdom and stature with God and the people."

And like it was for Peter, it's an up-and-down journey. Sometimes we get it – like Peter did in today's Gospel; and sometimes we don't – like Peter on the day of Christ's crucifixion: denying him three times. It's interesting, we're most likely to discover Jesus in a deep way, in the midst of our struggles and in the midst of the world's struggles and rather than in the times when everything seems to be moving along smoothly in life.

Here's an example: remember actor Martin Sheen? He played the tormented Capt. Willard in the Vietnam war epic Apocalypse Now; the prophetic President Bartlett in NBC's Emmy Award-winning drama: The West Wing. Martin Sheen has created a body of work few American performers have equaled. Martin Sheen has very publicly shared this spiritual journey: his personal life as a person who has truly struggled with Jesus' question: "Who do you say that I am?"

Despite his fame, having a lot of money, a wife and family that adored him — Sheen's life, as a young man, fell into crisis: "I was drinking heavily, I was confused about who I was and why I was here. I was in the midst of doing a humongous film and had so much riding on it. ... I had gotten very low, I didn't feel any sense of control or personal worth — it was a period of despair I got very ill, but couldn't separate my physical problems from the spiritual."

In the midst of the crisis, a movie director friend gave him a book on spirituality to read.

"At the end of the book, I realized that I was in need of faith, of a grounding. I realized that I was still really a Catholic and that I must return."

While shooting the film in Paris, he found his way to the only English-speaking Catholic Church and returned ... "*home*." "I was really like a new convert." On his return to the faith, Sheen says: "These past years have been the most difficult of my life, but by far, the happiest! I came back to the church of Mother Teresa, Daniel Berrigan and Dorothy Day and began to get involved with social justice issues."

"I learned that I had to stand for something, so that I could stand to be me! I learned that to keep your life from becoming self-contained and useless, you have to feel other people's pain and act to help them."

Brothers and sisters, like Martin Sheen, if being a Catholic – being a Christian – is more than just being a label among many that describe who I am, we need to face the question:

"Who is Jesus for me today?"

"Who is Jesus for me today?"

and, like Martin Sheen, we are most likely to discover Jesus in the midst of our personal pain and struggle and in the midst of our world's pain and struggle.

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Perhaps this week we could reflect a bit on who Jesus is in our lives; ... what does Jesus really mean to us:

- is it more than having a Baptismal Certificate?
- is it more than being a card-carrying Christian?
- is it more than being a silent respectable churchgoer?
- is our religion more than simply a private personal affair ... with few social ramifications?

“Who do you say that I am?”

Dr. Martin Luther King once said:

“Religion – if it is real – can’t be just a Sunday thing. The Church is the place to go forth from We’ve got to take what we believe into the streets; if our faith has any moral value we must live it and lead!”

Amen!