

Sept. 23, 2018
Twenty-fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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In a few minutes – we will bless and commission our catechists. I have spent much time this week trying to connect the readings of today with the ministry of catechesis. I thought about the last two weeks and the powerful homilies given by Kathleen Owens and Fr. Fred. I asked myself how do I connect the pain and shame of our Catholic church, the dysfunction of our government with the call to be a catechist in our world today.

Today's readings certainly reflect our troubled world and even our church– our second reading from the letters of James states that where "there is ambition and jealousy there is disharmony and wickedness whereas the peace sown by peacemakers brings a harvest of justice." In the first reading the Book of Wisdom we hear, "Let us set a trap for the just who greatly annoy us by opposing what we do and rebuking us for breaking the law. ...Let us see how long they will hold out and learn how long their patience will last." In the Gospel even the Apostles are arguing to see who is the greatest! The description of life in today's readings sounds a little too familiar.

Well, Jesus used precisely that moment to instruct the apostles . "So he sat down, called the Twelve to him and said, 'If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all.'

At every Baptism we hear Fr. Fred say these words "You are called to be priest, prophet and servant leader." And that is exactly what we are to be – priest – one who mediates between God and humankind; Prophet – one who speaks God's will with authority even at a cost to themselves; Servant leader – "one whose identity and authority is not based on their status or position but on Christ." More than ever we need to embrace that call of our Baptism. We can no longer rely solely on the hierarchy to lead the way while we follow – we need to step up if this church and its message of God's presence in our world are to remain realizable.

Every year, the Vatican releases the statistics for the global Church. We all know that there is a shortage of priests which will greatly impact the way we pray and serve in community. But something is moving, changing, calling us –all of us. Back in 1978 there were only some 173,000 catechists globally and 436,000 priests. In 2015 only

35 years later - the statistics list over 3 million catechists and 415,000 priests. The Spirit is alive – and people are answering the call to make God’s Word heard and lived. I take hope in this trend in our Catholic church today and I have to believe that in the challenge presented by these statistics, the Spirit calls US as laity to step up and lead.

So what does all of this have to do with being a catechist? I think it has much to do with not just being a catechist, but with being a Catholic in a sinfully human church. If we struggle with answering the question put forth by so many coworkers, friends and family “How can you be part of this church which has caused so much pain?” How much more difficult is it to answer “How can you teach children about this church?”

I think Kathleen Owens answered that question two weeks ago – we stay not because of the institution of the Catholic church, but because of Jesus and the gospel life he calls us to live – because of our personal relationship with this Incarnate loving God. Father Raniero, a preacher of the Pontifical Household of the Church said it well. “...people will not accept Jesus based on the word of the Church, but they will accept the Church based on the word of Jesus.” We must begin with the “who” of Jesus rather than the “what” of the church. And that is the ministry of the catechist – to present the “who” of Jesus to children, youth and adults.

The word Catechist comes from the root of the Greek word meaning “to echo”. God speaks to us all the time – in nature, in family, in community, in prayer, even in tragedy.

The ministry of the catechist is to echo God’s word – to remind us of the message of the Gospel and to call us to live that Gospel as Jesus proclaimed it. To remind us of the personal love God has for each of us and for all creation. The catechist echoes the word of God which was present in all of history – the word of God as it has manifested itself in our world today. The echo of the Word of God is sometimes to be gentle and comforting – and sometimes to be loud and challenging – Jesus was both and so is the Word we echo today.

A catechist must be familiar with the story of God’s interaction with humankind; they should be familiar with our beliefs about God – but they do not have to be a theologian. Most of all they must be someone who has a personal relationship with

God – someone who knows the importance of prayer– someone who knows the importance of living out our faith in community. Pope Francis beautifully describes the catechist in his address to catechists during the Year of Faith in 2013: what attracts is our witness. Being a catechist means witnessing to the faith, being consistent in our personal life. This is not easy! We help, we lead others to Jesus with our words and our lives, with our witness. I like to recall what Saint Francis of Assisi used to say to his friars: “Preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words”. Words come... but witness comes first: people should see the Gospel, read the Gospel, in our lives.

Catechists are to echo God’s word...

Our world is so full of noise and distraction. We are plugged in and constantly bombarded with commercialism, materialism, individualism... Echoing the message of Jesus through the din is no easy job. And that is why the catechist cannot do it alone. We all know the saying “It takes a village to raise a child.” Well it takes a whole community of faith-filled people to bring the message of the Gospel to life. And key in that community are the parents – who are the primary teachers of their children. Just as a catechist preaches the Gospel by living it – so parents teach the Gospel by their actions and words.

Now I don’t know about you – but I feel a little daunted by this call to echo God’s word – perhaps you feel that I am not a theologian, and I don’t know all there is to know about church history and law. I’m not always comfortable with this call to be catechist – couldn’t God find someone better? We all know that throughout history God has called those who weren’t perfect or seemingly qualified. Moses was a stutterer; Peter was an uneducated fisherman; St. Therese of Lisieux was a quiet ordinary nun declared a Doctor of the Church because of her writings; Pope John the XXIII was an old man they thought would just be a placeholder until they could elect someone else; Dorothy Day, who walked the talk and founded the Catholic Worker Movement. Yes, somewhere out there are people who have all the right qualifications – but the reality is that sometimes God and the Church are left with those who are called to do things they feel they are not good at – but they are willing to give it a try trusting that grace can fill the gaps. So when I stand up here today and ask for your help –remember that the perfect person probably doesn’t exist – or may

never show up. But YOU ARE HERE and if you are willing, available, and feel called, His grace will supply whatever else is needed.

We have reflected on why we stay – We know in whom we have believed – more than ever it is imperative that we witness the “who” of Jesus to our children.

Within our own parish there are opportunities to be this witness – to be this catechist (catalyst). We need a team of persons to step up to teach our 8th and 9th grade students who will begin the process of preparing for Confirmation; a team of persons to work with and mentor our 40+ post Confirmation youth; persons to plan Children’s liturgies; persons to proclaim the Gospel to the children during the Mass at the Children’s liturgy of the Word; persons to assist as door and floor monitors. If you feel the call – there are sheets to sign up in the back of church

So as Fr. Fred says – Let the Church say AMEN!!

And now – knowing the importance of being a catechist – we will commission those who have answered the call to echo God’s presence...