

Homily for the Third Sunday of Easter, April 9, 2016

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THE MIRACULOUS CATCH OF FISH (John 21:1-14) marks the third of the Resurrection appearances. Throughout the forty days of Easter, we join the Apostles, the Blessed Mother, and the other chosen witnesses whose faith is confirmed, whose hope is strengthened, and, above all, whose love now finds its form in God. We also share their astonishment at seeing the Risen Christ. Forty days of Lent prepared us to focus on spiritual things. Forty days of Easter instills in us, as today's Collect says, a "renewed joyfulness of spirit." The Gregorian chants used at Easter communicate this joyfulness with subdued, not excited, tones. The ancient practice signals something of what Easter joy produces in the Christian soul: recollection, not exuberance. Spiritual joy comes from pondering the mysteries of faith, not enthusing about them.

Why does the exultant Church, awash in Easter joy, maintain recollection? The answer lies in the words that the Risen Christ addresses to Peter. Once breakfast by the Sea of Tiberius is over, Peter receives the charge that inaugurates pastoral care in the Church: "Feed my lambs"; "Tend my sheep"; "Feed my sheep." Then, immediately, Peter learns of his own death by crucifixion. In other words, Peter learns that the Resurrection, in one sense, marks only a beginning. He glimpses the "much more" (John 16:12) of which Jesus spoke at the Last Supper, much more to ponder before the Resurrection of the dead when Christ's rising will attain its incorruptible manifestation.

Priests and seminarians must take to heart this pondering, this beholding in faith. They, as it were, must take charge of the "much

more” that comes from the “Spirit of truth” (John 26:13). Why? Everything depends on their ministry. Our Lord’s putting in juxtaposition pastoral charity and martyrdom teaches the sacred pastors of the Church (and those who aspire to become one) what to expect. Note well that Jesus never tells his apostles that everyone will love them. On the contrary, the apostles rejoice when they are found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name. What name is this? It is the Holy Name of Jesus.

Last week, the Holy Father gave the Church *Amoris Laetitia: The Joy of Love*. While the exhortation addresses spouses and families, it also instructs priests, the Church’s shepherds, about what to expect. “Feed my lambs” now exhibits new dimensions. “Tend my sheep” requires more of us. “Feed my sheep” translates into accompaniment. Whom must they accompany? They must accompany spouses, members of families, young people, the weak, the sinful, the confused, in a word, everybody. Yes, we live in an Enlightenment world: “Here comes everybody,” to cite James Joyce.¹ What must priests do for “Everybody”? They must feed and tend them, lead them to the Risen Christ, to the Name of Jesus, and to the Church and her Sacraments. After *Amoris Laetitia*, this obligation weighs more heavily on the shoulders of priests than it did before. Why? The Pope’s exhortation gives priests specific instructions about how to care for the lambs and the sheep. *Amoris Laetitia* does not shy away from treating particulars. The more it escapes generalization, this more pastoral instruction descends into the particulars of life. So we need help from holy women and men to penetrate the Pope’s words. Only saints can instruct about how properly to handle particulars.

Three saints of Carmel show the way. First, John of the Cross († 1591), the mystical author and ascetic, reminds priests of all kinds that bourgeois self-satisfaction wars against a heightened union with God. The least acquaintance with the Doctor of Carmel reveals that he eschewed ecclesiastical bureaucracy. In fact, “they” put him in jail. The Catholic parish is not a well-run supermarket, and the priest is not a manager. No secular models exist for feeding Christ’s sheep. The only qualification that enables a man to tend Christ’s sheep is love. John of the Cross rhapsodizes over this divine love come down to man: “O living flame of love / that tenderly wounds my soul /

¹ “HCE” is a character in James Joyce’s 1939 poem, “Finnegans Wake.”

in its deepest center!”² He means that “form” of love that only the theological virtue of charity brings to the soul.

Then comes the “Little Flower,” Thérèse of Lisieux († 1897). Her “Little Way” gives priests confidence in the power of the Holy Name. One does not need to be a big soul in order to accomplish great tasks. As Thérèse’s efficacy for the missions shows, the priest who stays united with Christ—who practices, if you will, his *in persona Christi*—can overcome the greatest barriers. Little evidence suggests that priests will continue to enjoy large-scale institutions to support their accompaniment. The priests of the new evangelization need to become familiar with “Littleness,” and Thérèse can help. She likes priests. Concretely, this means that priests must give good example of Christian hoping. No obstacle, of whatever kind, can block the power of Christ’s Resurrection. Once the Holy Women saw the “stone removed from the tomb” (John 20:1), all sinful obstruction to God’s reign had disappeared.

Finally, Elizabeth of the Trinity († 1906), the French cloistered nun of Carmel, teaches the most important lesson. Priests cannot rest with the banal, the platitudinous, the vacuous. If the Catholic priest is to fulfill the charge that Pope Francis gives him, he must first learn those mysteries of Christ that he will teach others. Knowledge can come through contemplation, as it did for the poet-nun, Elizabeth of the Trinity, who received knowledge as a gift. Knowledge also comes from study. The Church requires that seminarians and priests study to learn the mysteries of faith; if God grants them a higher form of knowledge, then *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. The Pope is not instructing priests to become trained marriage counselors. He charges us to explain to troubled people the power of Christ’s Resurrection. He wants us to comfort people not with excuses for their sins, but with knowledge of the truth. In one of her retreat notes, Elizabeth of the Trinity comments on the title of Our Lady that adorns our Marian altar: “‘Virgo Fidelis,’ that is Faithful Virgin, ‘who kept all these things in her heart.’ She remained so little, so recollected in God’s presence . . . that she drew down upon herself the delight of the Holy Trinity.”³ There is no better model for the priest who wants to implement *Amoris Laetitia*, the joy of love, than this advice from a cloistered Carmelite nun whom Pope Francis canonized October 16, 2016. N&V

² “The Living Flame of Love,” First Stanza.

³ “Heaven in Faith,” Tenth Day (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1984), 110.