

**Homily**  
**5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter - B**

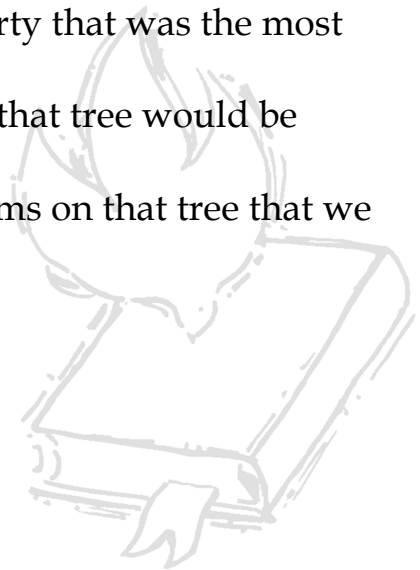
In English  
May 01-02, 2021

Acts 9: 26-31  
Ps 22: 26-27, 28, 30, 31-32  
1 Jn 3: 18-24  
Jn 15: 1-8

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How many of you like to eat plums? When I was younger, my family used to grow and eat plums, apples and all kinds of other fruits on a constant basis. In fact, my father became so passionate about growing fruit that on a three acre farm, we used to grow about 150 fruit trees so that each year, we would harvest apples, peaches, grapes, all kinds of berries, and the largest, sweetest plums that you could ever find. Each year at autumn time, we would can some of our fruits on our property while turning into jelly many other fruits we grew on the farm. If there was one thing our family did not lack, it was Vitamin C.

So there was this one plum tree on the property that was the most abundant fruit tree I had ever seen. Every year, that tree would be busting with fruit. There would be so many plums on that tree that we



would have to invite neighbors to come over and collect buckets of plums so that they would not rot and go to waste.

HOWEVER, my father was not responsible in his caretaking of the tree and he knew it. The plum tree was so abundant with plums that my father refused to trim any branches off it. As a result, the plum tree grew enormous and each year the plums on the tree were so bountiful, that the weight of all the fruit was taking its toll. As the years passed on, the branches would get heavier and heavier. And as with anything else in life, if you put too much strain on anything, that anything eventually starts to give.

One summer day during a horrible windstorm outside, through the pounding rain and the cracks of thunder, we heard a sound of splittling wood that was very obvious to recognize. The day we feared had come upon us – the plum tree, loaded with fruit, had split in half. We knew the fruit on the tree was not yet ripe, so we waited until the end of the season for the fruit to mature and then invited to entire neighborhood to congregate at the house to pick the fruit before it went bad.

After all the fruit had been picked, alas, my father had to cut down the tree and the fruit tree was gone.

The lesson that my father had to experience and learn is that in the world of horticulture, every tree needs to be pruned and formed. And even if there is a desire to allow a tree to grow for the sake of fruit, you take the risk of damaging the tree by not taking care of it.

In the world of faith, there is only one plant that is able to sustain the weight of all that fruit and the name of that plant... is *Jesus*. He is the vine and we are the branches. By taking on our human nature, but dying and rising for us, Jesus carries the weight of all humanity on this vine of life and gives the opportunity for growth for all those that cling to the vine. And like any plant in the world, the branches are cultivated in the way that they follow the example of the vine. When we follow the Lord's example, when we follow his commandments, when we follow God's laws of love, then this branch we call each of our human lives is allowed to grow and take fruit.

However, the moment we decide to cut ourselves off from the vine and wander off on our own, as sure as a branch cannot sustain life apart from the tree, so our faith dies as well apart from Christ. As Paul tells us in the 11<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Romans, we have the choice of living off the faith of Christ or separating ourselves from that same faith, but like a dying branch can be grafted onto an olive tree to sustain life, so we all have the invitation of finding life in Christ through the sacraments and through our faith.

A couple of weeks ago, I preached on this very subject, comparing how a well-formed conscience can be paralleled to a parent teaching their child the rules about crossing the street and the repercussions of the child that is not formed so well. Especially in light of recent news concerning issues about the HHS Mandate and same sex marriages, the faithful in our local communities turn to spiritual leaders like me and ask for my opinions on these subjects in an attempt to give them direction and formation of their own spiritual life. And this is our

responsibility as priests and religious – to form and develop the lives of those under whom we have been given spiritual care.

Whenever I receive a questions like the ones I just described, I think to myself that my opinion is not important to the spiritual questions that are posed to me. If you ask me what kind of breakfast cereal I like (“Total Cereal” for my health; “Lucky Charms” for the kid in me), then I suppose my opinion might have some value. If you ask my opinion about politics or other forms of human enterprise, I would often suggest that one look at the direction that most parallels the ways of our God and God’s Church to find the direction in which we should live.

However, if you ask me what my opinion might be concerning issues directly related to the human condition, then I respond that my views as a Christian should be those of God, as formed within me through the means of sacred scripture and sacred tradition as presented to us by the main teachers of the Church, the bishops, and the bishops who assemble and form the teaching body of the church, called “the magisterium” (from the Latin word “magister” or teacher).

If I am living my life correctly as a priest, then my words are supposed to be Christ's words; my actions are supposed to be Christ's actions. In the manner in which I am formed, I have an obligation to follow the direction which the Church teaches me to live and I made a promise at my ordination to be obedient to that direction. In its truest sense, every minister that aligns themselves to the Catholic Church, whether it be the pope, bishops, priests, deacons, religious or even the laity in the pews, all of us made a promise at the time of our sacraments and even make that promise during the creed we profess at Mass, to believe and uphold the teachings of the Church.

And in that sense, the answer I give to those who ask me about issues abortion or civil same-sex marriages, I tell them that the bible and sacred tradition (significantly in the Catechism of the Catholic Church) are fairly clear in the direction which we need to follow. The problem with these teachings, of course, is that public opinions in our society often favor those teachings contrary to those set forth in the gospel and the teachings of the Church, as taught to us by our bishop teachers that

form this “magisterium,” or teaching body. To me, this disagreement is most evident whenever I teach moral theology classes in our Christian initiation programs or university classes. In these situations, the students often disagree with the teachings of the Church, siding with the views of public opinion without understanding the reasons that Mother Church lays out the specific directions that all of us are called to follow.

In these instances, I tell my university students and I tell you... you cannot disagree with Church teachings until you first know what those teachings are. In order to do so, may I suggest that a well-formed Christian conscience in today’s age is obligated to read about the Church’s teachings through the official Catechism of the Church that you can find in any good Christian bookstore or even online. Within the Catechism, not only will you find the official teachings of God and God’s Church, but you also will find the scriptural and traditional passages that support the position stated. If you have a well-formed conscience armed with the correct teachings of the faith, then I contend

that this well-formed conscience has the ability to understand and ultimately conform to the teachings.

Without the foundation of this Christian knowledge, we are building our house on sand and our foundation is weak. We may think that the plums on our tree will be plentiful but sooner or later that tree will die. The well-formed tree is capable of producing fruit for the rest of its existence. That is why we celebrate this Mass together and share this faith with each other, so that we may learn, be formed and live this Christian life, protected and loved by God.

May we learn this lesson well; may we allow God to form us and mold us through the sacred scriptures and sacred tradition. This is our prayer.