

Second Sunday of Easter A/2008

An old English proverb says that “Birds of a feather flock together”. The wisdom lying behind this proverb expresses the truth that people with similar interests or values tend to socialize and stand together. This has been true for all the peoples of all the times, as it was for the disciples at the dawn of the early Church. The reality of living together and the effort to make the Christian community stand for its values is the main concern of today’s readings.

The book of the Acts describes how the first disciples were united with one another in a communal life and how they devoted their life to the teachings of the Apostles, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.

The teaching of the apostles, which is the continuation of Jesus’ teaching, the Eucharist and prayer, are the pillars on which the life of the Church is founded. That was the case in the time of the Apostles as it is today. Whenever the Church forgets to put the Gospel at the center of its life, it will end up by telling its members tales rather than to nourish them with the word of life. Whenever the Eucharist is not the center of the life of the community, the Church will starve its members and deprive them of the food that lasts for ever, and which the Son of man gives. Whenever the Church stops praying, it loses its strength and its members go directly to their perdition. That is why, the listening of the word of Jesus, the reception of the Eucharist and the permanent contact with the Lord through prayer are also a duty we have to perform in order to keep our faith alive.

The word of Jesus, the Eucharist and prayer, give to the Church its full meaning as a community of believers. Where they are not taken seriously, the Church becomes like any other gathering, or an association of friends. For that, the Holy Spirit plays a big role in the life of the Church. He inspires within the Church different charismas so that its members may put them at the service of their brothers and sisters, and for the growth of the word. He sustains the Church in its prayer so that it may be done in the spirit of Jesus. And it is the Holy Spirit who guides the Church in the celebration of the Eucharist and any activity offered in the name of Jesus.

All that helps us understand why the first gift the risen Christ gives to his disciple is the Holy Spirit. Where the Holy Spirit reigns, there reigns peace. Jesus wants peace to reign in the midst of his disciples through the power of his Spirit. Then, he can say, “Peace be with you”. What Jesus wishes for his disciples is not just social peace, but especially the peace of heart that nobody can have if he is not reconciled with his brothers and sisters, and with oneself.

In fact, we live in a world in which all kinds of violence threatens our unity of mind and heart. Our effort to live together as disciples of Jesus beyond racial and cultural background is often dominated by unspoken discriminatory feelings and sentiments. Our desire for peace often fails because of hatred and the spirit of vengeance we maintain. We continually feel that we need the peace of heart; we

need to reconcile and to forgive one another as well we want to be forgiven for things we have done, and for which we are not proud of.

It is in that sense we have to understand the importance of the sacrament of the reconciliation Jesus gives to his apostles in today's Gospel. First of all, by giving an order to his disciples to forgive sins, Jesus institutes the sacrament of confession.. He gives to the apostles a ministry to be exercised in his name for the good of the whole Church. Furthermore, by giving this sacrament, Jesus comes to the rescue of our sinfulness so that we count on God's mercy. Without God's forgiveness in the sacrament of confession, we are lost. That is the reason Jesus gives this sacrament so that we reconcile with our God, with one another and with ourselves.

The deep understanding of the sacrament of confession requires that we turn in faith to Jesus who is behind any action happening in the Church through the power of the Holy Spirit. Without faith we cannot adequately approach Jesus and how he operates in this sacrament. Then, the words of St Peter become clear: "Although you have not seen him you love him; even though you do not see him now yet believe in him, you rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, as you attain the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls".

Faith is not believing without proof, but trusting without reservation. Proof deals with material things; while trust belongs to the order of confidence. Trust is justified only on the basis of conviction that I am not wrong by trusting the word of the testimony given to me.

That is what lacks in Thomas in today's Gospel. He wants to see before believing. He does not trust the testimony of his friends who told him they have seen the risen Lord. For Thomas faith should be proven by facts in order to be credible. The testimony given by his friends does not have the value of truth unless he experiences the truth himself. And yet, the resurrection of Jesus, which is the foundation of our faith, does not belong to the realm of proof, as people do with scientific facts. It has to be approached and accepted in faith and trust that God, who is faithful to himself, could not leave Jesus in the tomb forever.

That is why the reproach of Jesus to Thomas, "do not be unbelieving, but believe", is an indication that faith is, first of all, a matter of trust in God's word and in the witness of those who have been his followers from the beginning. Faith can never be based on what one sees, but in the acceptance of the testimony of the first eyewitnesses of his life, death and resurrection. We need that faith today more than ever. Let us open our hearts to the gift of faith. Let us come before the Lord with trust and ask him to forgive us our sins in the sacrament of confession.

Acts 2, 42-47; 1 Peter 1, 3-9; John 20, 19-31



Homily Date: March 30, 2008

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Document Name: 20080330homily.pdf