

Second Sunday after Trinity
June 14, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 4:26-34

When we took St. Thomas More as the patron of our community more than ten years ago, we had in mind his faithfulness to the Catholic Church in an era when the King of England was taking his subjects out of the fold. St. Thomas More was true to the Faith when many of his contemporaries were cooperating with the wicked designs of King Henry VIII; so as we sought to be reunited to the fullness of truth, we thought that a martyr who had sacrificed so much for the truth would be a good saint to have praying for us.

We have benefitted from those prayers now for more than a decade, and now I can see other ways that we have in a sense followed in our patron's footsteps. Today's Gospel brings to mind one of those ways as it relates to St. Thomas More's importance to the Church as a witness against the overweening power of the state. This is not the reason St. Thomas More began his work, but the Lord had other plans.

Jesus speaks today about the Kingdom of God, which, remember, Blessed John Henry Newman said we should always read, "the Church," and how it grows like a seed that is sown. That is, just as a farmer only plants the seed and then watches God do the work until harvest time, so we help plant the seed of our faith in our brothers and sisters, and God gives the growth. Just as the farmer can't take credit for the sprouting of the full grain in the ear, neither can we anticipate God's designs when the seed of Faith is planted in our brothers and sisters.

St. Thomas More did not set out to become the patron saint for lawyers and politicians, much less a martyr for marriage. When he accepted the appointment in 1529 as Lord Chancellor, Henry VIII had already taken up with Ann Boleyn. Queen Catherine of Aragon had already been snubbed by King Henry. Yet St. Thomas More thought he could positively influence decisions the king was making with regard to the Catholic Church.

He soon found out that he could not, and when it became clear that the King's intention was to remove his realm from communion with the Catholic Church, St. Thomas More resigned as Lord Chancellor. Still, our patron imagined he could remain in the good graces of the King if he simply kept his mouth shut about Henry's declaration that he was head of the Church in England. But this did not work out either. As we shall see portrayed in the movie, "A Man for All Seasons," which we'll show here Friday night, Henry VIII demanded compliance with his decrees. Silence was not enough. Henry wanted affirmation and decided to kill those who would not give it to him. Thus, St. Thomas More was executed on the basis of perjured testimony on July 6, 1535, mostly because he had refused to say that the King was what he was not. He would not say Henry was the pope because Henry was not the pope, and for this insistence on objective reality he paid with his life.

God used this witness to show us, particularly lawyers and politicians, that there is a law to which we are beholden that is higher than the law of any particular land. The state is not the final arbiter in matters of authority, religion, marriage, and how best we are all called to serve God and country. Rather, that role belongs to God, and we ought to be able to stand up for the truth when the state attempts to assume God's role. St. Thomas More began just hoping to keep Henry in communion with the Church,

and God used that intention to make St. Thomas More the standard bearer for resistance against state lies and state tyranny. The farmer planted, but God gave the growth.

The growth of our parish has followed a similar pattern. When we started out at the end of 2004, our intention was small and simple: we wanted to be reconciled to Holy Mother Church, but at the same time keep those good things that had nurtured our faith in Jesus since we were young. We hoped that I might receive permission to be ordained and we would make the transition from Protestantism to Catholicism with me serving as the pastor as we moved together from one communion to the other. We wanted other people to know that this was possible, so even before it was a sure thing for us, we began promoting the process so other Protestants might take advantage of it. But really we were mostly glad the Church was being so generous.

The Church, it turned out, was more generous than we had even imagined in those early days. Our entry into the Church helped us to see how the process we had been through could have been improved. We had ideas of what changes needed to be made if lots of other people were going to do the same thing that we had done. So we went on pilgrimage to Rome with converts from all over the country. Many, if not most, of the people on the pilgrimage didn't know precisely why the pilgrimage had been organized, but they were happy to go to St. Peter's Basilica and see Pope Benedict XVI in the flesh.

It turns out that Pope Benedict noticed we were there. This is a photograph of him waving to us. We met with his representatives while we were in Rome, and every one of the changes we recommended to make the process better was incorporated into the document that established our Ordinariate and the others in England and Australia. The seed was planted, but God gave the growth. That growth has seen forty communities like ours established and sixty-three men ordained in just the last three years.

Our hope this year is that another seed like that is being planted and that God will give it growth we know not how. Last Friday we met with the lawyers for our parish to establish the Project Providence Foundation. The immediate purpose of this foundation will be to oversee a Catholic gift store and coffee shop at the Guild building downtown, but proceeds from which will benefit our parish and the school we will open next year. We think we'll have those shops up and running by September.

But as the name of this new non-profit indicates, we know that everything we receive comes from God. While we hope that the foundation will be an aid in the rehabilitation of the Providence section of Scranton, we don't really know what or how much fruit it will bear. We know that God wants us to start a school, and He's giving us the means to do it; and our parish and school may just be the means for the transformation of this neighborhood. Like St. Thomas More, we have to wait and see what God's intentions are for us. But in the meantime, we can take comfort in the fact that we have a patron who allowed himself to be used for God's purposes, and he will continue to teach us how best to follow God's lead.