

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 21, 2014
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Matthew 20:1-16

Almost five years ago Pope Benedict XVI wrote the Apostolic Constitution that allowed for the erection of our jurisdiction. The document envisioned dioceses that were national in scope made up of parishes of converts to Catholicism. Unlike most Catholic parishes, which consist primarily of people baptized in the Catholic Church as infants, these parishes would be made up of people baptized in Protestant communities and then come into the Church later in life.

When we founded the St. Thomas More Society nearly ten years ago, Bishop Martino was strict on this point. He told me that only converts and their relatives could be members of our parish. The Apostolic Constitution made this rule universal for all parishes like ours, with the exception that those cradle Catholics already here could stay in the parish. After 2012, going forward, our parishes could only accept as members those who were converts to the Catholic Faith and those related to converts.

Here we are a little over two years later and we're about to baptize three boys whose mother was herself baptized in the Catholic Church as a child. What happened? How is this possible? Well, last year Pope Francis expanded the reach of our ministry. He amended the Apostolic Constitution and said parishes like ours may receive back into the Church those who were baptized Catholic but then never received the Sacraments of First Holy Communion or Confirmation. The baptisms today are the fruit of Pope Francis' expansion of our work: Jasmine Ponce is receiving catechism, preparing to receive her Confirmation and First Communion at the Easter Vigil in April. She asked that her boys be baptized as soon as possible, and naturally I agreed.

So what do converts to Catholicism and people like Jasmine have in common? We all came late to the work party. Our Gospel describes people working from the break of day, bearing the burden of twelve hours of labor and the scorching heat. These all-day workers are the cradle Catholics who were raised in the Faith and never left the Church, who have worked the vineyard since day one. But our Gospel also describes those who began to work at the third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh hours. This number includes both those of us baptized as Protestants and those who, though baptized Catholic, came back as adults to complete their initiation into the Faith.

The fact that we came late to the work party means we receive more attention sometimes than those who have been working all day. This past February Fr. Rojas and I went on pilgrimage to Rome with a number of our parishioners and about a hundred others from across the Ordinariate. While we were there, we were invited to a party by Cardinal Mueller, the Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. We ate in the courtyard of the C.D.F. and drank German beer specially brewed for the occasion. Later in the week we had our picture taken with Pope Francis, and while we milled about, he blessed my daughter Monica, while my wife Kristina held her and thanked him.

A person I love and respect once said to me that such treatment is unfair, that the exceptions made for us are hard for a lot of people to accept. I told him that it wasn't fair that I was born Protestant,

that for more than thirty-three years of my life I did not have recourse to the Sacraments, to the grace that makes possible living a holy life. While he was working longer and harder than I, he had the entire time access to this treasury. His work was more valuable than mine because it had a higher purpose, and I felt ashamed for all the years I had stood idle. Whatever special attention I received could not begin to make up for the years I had lost, years during which I would have loved to have had access to the graces he now seemed to take for granted.

The Church in her wisdom acts as the generous householder in today's parable. She promises to those who came late to the work party the same benefit as she does to those who have labored in the vineyard all their lives. Our destiny is heaven, whether we began at the break of day or didn't get to work until an hour before closing time. There is no special, higher heaven for those who bore the burden of the day and the scorching heat. If the Church lavishes special attention upon us who came late, it is only as a sign to those who are still standing idle, to show them that they too are welcome to join the work party and receive the inheritance of all those who put their hand to the plow, whether for twelve hours or one. Pope Francis knows that if a photo with him will show that converts are welcome in the Church, he'll have a photo taken with converts every day.

But what is it that Pope Francis wants to give us? Why is he so concerned to see more Protestants reconciled to Holy Mother Church and more lapsed Catholics brought home where they belong? He wants to give what the Church has always offered: the promise of eternal life with God through the forgiveness of sins. Those who came early and those who came late all receive the same forgiveness. Some of us may have a greater penance to fulfill, but in the end, as I said before, the blood of Jesus cleanses us all from our unrighteousness and we receive the reward of all those who die in the fullness of the Faith. This is what will be imparted to the boys this morning, and it doesn't matter that they came to work at the third hour because their mom only started at the sixth.

This forgiveness of our sins is why we should not delay entry into the vineyard, into the Church, any longer once we know we are called. The freedom that comes with forgiveness is a benefit in this life, a foretaste of the joys we will experience for all eternity before the throne of grace. I can remember the time before I had come into the Church but when I knew I was supposed to be Catholic. I worried about dying because I knew I had not yet been absolved of the sins I had committed since my baptism. I knew I was not in a state of grace, so to a certain degree I lived in fear.

When reconciliation finally came, I was relieved, a relief I know Jasmine is going to feel for her boys in just a few minutes. But that relief was soon followed by elation, the elation that comes in knowing I had nothing to fear, the elation that proceeds from the knowledge that God loves me and He had been desiring me for Himself from the moment of my conception. And all those years I stood idle in the marketplace, the Lord was patiently waiting, waiting to throw the party He'll throw again today for Ezra, Evan, and Elijah. May their baptism today be the beginning of their work to bring into the vineyard those still standing idle.