

Fifth Sunday of Easter, A – May 7, 2023 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 7:15, 8:30, and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 975 words

It's a dogmatic truth of our Catholic faith that the Lord Jesus personally instituted each of the seven sacraments. But what we see in the first reading today would seem to contradict that – or so might someone of different beliefs object. For here we see the apostles deciding that they needed helpers that were unequal to them; that is, that did not do the same sorts of things as they did, but in fact freed them up to do the things that were more important to their rank. It did not take long for these men to be called deacons, and we read about deacons in other New Testament letters. What we do not find, however, is Jesus Christ ever speaking of deacons.

Are deacons, then, the Church's invention? Well, if we asked that question, we should ask the same about priests, for Christ seems only to have instituted apostles – that is, what we now call bishops. We see this at the Last Supper in all four gospels; that of John, in particular, where he washes their feet before celebrating that final meal with them, is very instructive, for it harkens back to Old Testament rituals for priestly service. And then the other three gospels tell us more about what happened at that supper, how he took the bread and the wine and pronounced that these were his very body and blood – and that they should repeat this ritual too.

In recalling these details, however, not much clarity has surfaced. Again, we are left with the idea that all Jesus did was institute a sacrament that made some men into apostles or bishops, if you will. But here, I would argue, is where that reference that St. John gave is so important. For our Lord did nothing casually; so if he chose to recall the pre-condition for offering sacrifice in the Temple – namely, a ritual cleansing before ascending the altar – then he was drawing a connection between what he was establishing then and what existed before. And within the Jewish concept of priesthood, in fact, there were three levels: high priests, priests, and levites.

It does not surprise, then, that as the apostles went out in the early Church and began exercising the ministry and charism the Lord had given them, while reflecting continually on all that he did and said – which they had witnessed with their own eyes and heard with their own ears –, that they eventually arrived at a deeper realization of the power he had bestowed. Jesus had drawn a connection between what he was doing in his Church with what had existed before, and so they came to realize that within the power he had accorded them, they could designate lesser ranks of service also within the one sacrament of Holy Orders that he instituted.

Indeed, an attentive reading of the scriptures shows us that there was only a brief time between the Lord's Ascension and this unfolding of what he had established. This, in fact, is a key difference between what Jesus did and what men have done down through the centuries since: some have believed that the Church had become corrupted in this or that way, so they started something new that departed in significant ways from what was there before. Christ surely started something new, but its starting point was not rupture but fulfillment; his Church is the fulfillment and continuation of the Old Testament hierarchical vision of the people of God.

Now this is our weekly “fly over”, and surely there is much more that could be said about these important topics. Nonetheless, even this brief “fly over” shows us the importance of the proper sense of the Lord's own words in today's gospel: “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me.” “What is truth?”, Pontius Pilate asked. How can we be sure that we know the truth? How can we be sure, therefore, that we are really following Christ and that we will thus arrive at the place he has prepared for us in the Father's house? All kinds of people disagree about who he is, what he taught, and even about what truth is!

Yes, this is why we need the Church: we can know what the truth is and distinguish it from all sorts of subtle and not-so-subtle falsehood, because the Lord established a Church to lead us surely along his path. Is it not the case that sometimes, when we discuss Scripture with our non-

Catholic friends, we end up in a sort of circle from which there is no exit? In the end, the question is: But who is right? And how can we know?... Because there is a higher authority that God has established to tell me! He did not leave us orphans. He did not give us such a high calling and then abandon us to ourselves to figure out how to achieve it. He gave us his Church.

“You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” In both fulfillment of and continuity with the Old Testament, Christ established his Church as the authoritative guide for us to be able to follow him, “the way, the truth, and the life”, the one way to our place in heaven. The Church always sheds light on the true sense of revelation, guiding us, through her divinely-instituted hierarchy, toward the Father’s house. One of the best prayers we could ever make is that we might be better Catholics each day! If that were our prayer, we should all advance far along the way that is Christ.