

## **Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time, B Cycle**

In our Gospel today, Jesus tells the Apostles that he is the vine and they are the branches. He makes the point that a good vintner regularly prunes the branches of a vine that are not producing, and his point is that his disciples are to be fruitful in their Christian lives of living in the grace of God and bringing that grace to others.

In our first reading, we read of Saint Paul returning to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and they plead with the Apostles to authorize Paul to preach to the Gentiles. This episode is paired with our Gospel because it was Paul who destroyed the early Jerusalem community of Christians. In his persecution of them, many were imprisoned, a few were killed, and the rest fled into Asia Minor. After his conversion, Paul saw the divine light and heard the voice of God, and I think this filled Paul with remorse. Paul returned to Jerusalem and repeatedly pleaded with the Apostles to allow him to preach, and they finally relented.

Paul had ambitions to preach to more than a few people who were close by. He certainly wanted to bring the Gospel to Asia Minor and to the Greeks, but he made it clear that he wished to go to Rome, and from there bring the Gospel to the western European continent.

I bring up this topic of pruning the branches of the Church because we who live in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council are in that position. Few people realize or understand the difficult position the Church was in at the beginning of the twentieth century. What lifted the church out of the morass of the nineteenth century was the long string of exceptional popes in the twentieth century: Benedict XV, Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II.

Pope Pius IX became what he called “a prisoner of the Vatican” because the new Italian state in 1870 claimed the entire territory surrounding the Vatican and the Pope was not on friendly terms with the Italian liberals. He never left the Vatican after that for fear of arrest. Pope Benedict XV saw the coming storm of the First World War and he warned the European states to avoid the war because it would be “the suicide of Europe”. And rather than going to war, he urged them to create a union of European nations. No one listened to him, and when the war began, the Vatican did not have a friend in Europe. None of the European nations offered any help or assistance to the Vatican. As a symbol of the isolation of the Vatican, Teddy Roosevelt refused to speak with the Pope during the entire war.

The isolation continued. In 1937, Pope Pius XI penned his famous encyclical *Mit Brennenden Sorge* which criticized the Nazi violence,

but hardly anyone paid attention to it. His successor, Pope Pius XII had been the papal nuncio to Germany before being chosen to be Pope and he understood Hitler well. As had Benedict XV in the First World War, the Pius XII communicated millions of messages to soldiers on the front for all of the armies from all the nations and hardly any notice was made of it. Pius ordered the protection of thousands of Jews in Roman Churches and the Vatican during the war and was later given the title "Righteous Gentile" by the Israelis. It is striking that Pius spoke against the killing of the Jews by the Nazis in the Netherlands, but he hardly said anything against the killing of the Catholics. Hitler's response was to round up even more Jews and send them to the concentration camps and after that Pius was silent about the issue. With the end of the war the importance of the Vatican was established. In Germany 80% of the Jews were arrested. But because Pius convinced Mussolini to "go easy" on the Jews, 80% of the Italian Jews did not go to the camps. Pius was aware that not only were Catholics being persecuted during the war but many Protestants were as well. Along with calls to reinvigorate the hundreds-of-years-old Latin mass, he also called for improving relations with the Protestants.

Pius urged changes in the liturgy to emphasize the richness and diversity of Christian belief, and he was succeeded by John XXIII. Working in Eastern Europe he also sheltered many Jews and for this he was also given the title "Righteous Gentile" by the Jews. More than Pius, he wished to give even greater unity to the various Christian denominations and he summoned the Second Vatican Council very shortly after Pius passed away. One of his primary goals was to restore relations with the Protestants and he invited leading Protestants to address the Council. He also invited leaders of the various orthodox Eastern Churches to attend. And the central theme of the council was "aggiornamento", updating the church for the modern world. John conceived the role of the Church in the world to be that of a "peacemaker" and he showed how serious he was by helping to negotiate peace between Kennedy and Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile crisis in 1961.

John was succeeded by Pope Paul VI who put into action most of the liturgical and pastoral reforms of John and his predecessor. His papacy was marked by an extended period of experimentation and confusion which is understandable given the nature of the reforms sought for the Church.

But the Pope who truly transformed the Church was John Paul II. He sought to unify the Christian Churches. He visited and prayed in a Lutheran Church, a Muslim Mosque, and at the wailing wall in Jerusalem. He visited the central Basilica of the Byzantine Church for the first time in

more than 1200 years. He visited the Coptic church in Egypt for the first time in history.

To demonstrate that the new Catholic Church sought peace, he visited 129 countries. He began each visit by kneeling and kissing the earth and wished peace for the nation. His support of the “Solidarity” movement sparked wide ranging protests in eastern Europe against the Communists and it eventually brought the end of the Soviet Union. He was probably the most popular pope in history. He sponsored “World Youth Day” celebrations around the world and he presided over a World Youth Day mass in Manila in the Philippines where 6,000,000 people attended, the largest religious gathering in history. When he died in 2005 more heads of state attended his funeral than any other in history.

The new mission of the Catholic Church is seen in its liturgical reforms that reveal its desire to unite the Christian Churches. Prior to the Vatican Council, there was only one Eucharistic prayer allowed, the first prayer, and its sole theme was that the Eucharist was the sacrifice of Christ. The Second Vatican council gathered the Eucharistic prayers of the all the Eastern churches and combined their different themes in the four prayers we now have and more than 80 Prefaces. Elements of these prayers are now used not only by the Catholic and Orthodox churches, but also by Protestant Churches who have the Eucharist: the Anglicans, Methodists, Presbyterians and Lutherans. For these Christians, the Eucharist truly is a source of unity.

In his ministry, saint Paul headed for Rome with the goal of bring the European continent to Christianity. It was after the most destructive war in history, the second world war, that Christian missionaries came to Africa in great numbers. And to everyone’s surprise, the majority of sub-Saharan Africa turned to the Christian faith. In 1950 the Christians were very small in number there, but at the present time there are 713 million Christians in Europe. This was the most successful missionary venture in history and it was an ecumenical venture where all of the missionaries collaborated.

This is one of the remarkable features of Vatican II because for centuries the Christians tried to make headway in Africa. But in a few short years progress beyond imagination was made. There is another remarkable feature about the renewal of the Church at Vatican II. The renewal of the Church came about during the most remarkable string of popes in the twentieth century in history. Is it possible that all of this was the work of God?

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