**Homily for the Second Sunday of Easter, Year A**

**April 19, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Acts of the Apostles 2:42-47 (The life of the early Christian community.)*

*Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 118 (Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his love is everlasting.)*

*Second Reading: 1 Peter 1:3-9 (Although you have not seen him, you love him.)*

*Gospel: John 20:19-31 (Doubting Thomas.)*

Every year it’s the same old thing. The Sunday after Easter, poor Thomas gets his one humiliating moment in the spotlight. The other disciples all have the privilege of seeing the Risen Jesus on that very first evening after his resurrection from the dead. But Thomas, for some reason, is not with them. They report what they have seen and heard, but Thomas is either unwilling or unable to believe their incredible story. He has to see Jesus for himself to believe that a man could really rise from the dead. And that means waiting *an entire week* to have his doubts put to rest. Just imagine how awkward that week must have been. The other disciples were deliriously happy, while Thomas remained grief-stricken. Could it possibly be true, or were his friends just in denial about Jesus’ death? Had they really seen the Lord, or were they just going mad because of their dashed hopes and bitter disappointment?

When Jesus returns the following Sunday evening, Thomas is quick to profess his belief *not only* in Jesus’ resurrection, but also in his *divinity*. “My Lord and my God!” he declares. Yet, Jesus does not seem impressed by this outpouring of faith. Instead, he scolds Thomas for needing to see him in order to believe. Then, as if to rub salt in the open wound, he tells Thomas that there will be many people who *never* get to see him in the flesh, and still they will come to believe.

Those final words must have stung Thomas, but they also gave him something to think about as he prepared to go forth and proclaim Christ to the world. Jesus reminded Thomas that eyewitness testimony from his fellow disciples was not enough to convince him about the truth of the Resurrection. So, how was *his* eyewitness testimony going to convince others who had not seen the Risen Lord? How would *he* respond to a person who says, “I will not believe until I put my finger into the nail marks in his hands and my hand into the wound in his side”? For starters, Thomas could say, “I understand exactly how you feel; I said the very same thing to my friends when they told me that Jesus was alive.” Thomas’ lingering doubt actually gave him greater credibility as an evangelizer. He could assure other doubters that he did not arrive at his faith easily. Like them, he had to struggle to overcome his skepticism. And, as a result of that struggle, his faith, once confirmed, became unshakeable.

One key aspect of evangelization that must not be overlooked is the need to understand the *obstacles to belief* that others face. To achieve success as evangelizers, we must *accept others* where they are, *express empathy* for them in their struggles to believe, and clearly *articulate our faith* in a way that makes sense to them. Maybe Jesus was not just chiding Thomas, but encouraging him to rise to the challenge that he and his fellow Apostles would face, using that unsettling week of doubt to his advantage. When he encountered a skeptical audience, Thomas could truly understand and respect them, and perhaps win them over with his sincerity and his empathy.

All of us who bear the name of Christian are called to be evangelizers, no less than the Apostles. However, the obstacles to faith are different in our time. If our message is to resonate with people today, we must be aware of those obstacles and know how to overcome them.

One of the most common obstacles is a tendency toward secularism, which simply removes God from ordinary discourse and tries to confine “religious talk” to the church. Actually, the whole concept of the “lay apostolate,” as articulated by the Second Vatican Council, is that lay people can *bring the sacred into the secular realm*, where Christ most needs to be proclaimed. Yet, we must be sensitive to that secularist point-of-view, lest we come across as preachy or self-righteous. We need to listen to how people experience God’s presence, *and God’s absence*, in order to connect our faith with their experience.

In recent years, scandal in the Church has become a huge obstacle, even for previously devout Catholics. Once they have lost faith in the Church’s leaders, it is a small step to reject the rest of the Church, as well. There is ample evidence to show that God can work through flawed human beings and flawed human institutions. But, before daring to make that argument, we really need to listen attentively to the pain and disillusionment that people are feeling. That is *their greatest truth*, and it must be acknowledged and honored before they can accept the truth of God’s love, manifested through the Church.

Another common obstacle to faith is simply a lack of any experience of intimacy with God. This is where *our own fidelity to prayer* becomes so vital. When people don’t have the faintest idea how to develop a personal relationship with God, they need us to offer them a road map to follow, with some simple suggestions for how to pray daily. And it certainly helps if we have followed that road map ourselves and can attest that daily prayer leads *us* closer to God. Whenever I make suggestions like that to people, I always ask them, “Is this something that you would like to try?” I also caution them about the difficulties that they will encounter, and reassure them that all of us struggle in the same way.

In order to overcome obstacles to faith, we must understand what they are and be able to name them. When people can see that we know where they are coming from, they are much more likely to follow us to a better place – a place of faith and hope and love. Pastoral leaders and ordinary people of faith need to be especially attentive to that dynamic now, as we all try to navigate our way through this COVID-19 crisis. We cannot just stand above the fray and offer pious thoughts from on high, without first empathizing with the very real problems that people are facing. For many, the struggles are not just physical, emotional and economic. There is also a faith component that must be dealt with honestly. When the whole world suddenly appears to be in chaos and in grave danger, many people are going to ask, “Where is God, and why isn’t He doing anything?” A sanguine response which does not acknowledge the distress of the questioner is not likely to offer much comfort. In fact, it can make matters worse, by making spirituality seem disconnected from their lived reality, right when they most need to see how *the two are intimately connected*. A genuinely helpful response must begin with acknowledging the pain, suffering, confusion and doubt that so many of us feel. That is the context in which we need to discuss our faith, because that is the context in which we are presently *living our faith*.