Homily for the Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

**August 9, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

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

*First Reading: 1 Kings 19:9a, 11-13a (Elijah goes out to meet the Lord.)*

*Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 85 (Lord, let us see your kindness, and grant us your salvation.)*

*Second Reading: Romans 9:1-5 (Paul’s anguish for his fellow Jews who do not accept Christ.)*

*Gospel: Matthew 14:22-33 (Peter walks on water, and sinks.)*

Everybody remembers that *Jesus* walked on water, but few remember that Peter replicated that feat, at least for a few steps. Then he began to sink, and Jesus had to reach out and save him. That Peter sank is not surprising. After all, he was just a human being, like us. What *is* surprising is that he did not sink *immediately*, the moment he stepped out of the boat. So, when Jesus asked Peter, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” he was *not* asking Peter why he doubted his own ability to walk on water, but rather, why he doubted the one who called him out of the boat. Jesus said, “Come,” and Peter went, and he *walked on the water*. He did not sink until the wind and the waves caused him to panic and reconsider his decision to leave the boat. He began to doubt whether the unseen power that enabled him to walk those first few steps would *continue* to support him the rest of the way. That’s why he faltered and sank. Peter’s failure shows us that answering the Lord’s call is one thing, but seeing our commitment through to the end is something else entirely.

The First Reading and the Gospel today touch on those two key aspects of vocation, namely, *discernment* of the call and *commitment* to the response. Elijah’s experience at Mount Horeb probably resonates with many of us who have professed marital vows or religious vows. Elijah had to filter out an awful lot of noise, and avoid many distractions, in order to hear the subtle whispering sound that announced the Lord’s presence. So it is for anyone who contemplates a lifelong commitment, which, by its very nature, precludes all other options that are incompatible with that vocation. The one who considers marriage, for example, can be plagued by thoughts of all the other potential partners out there and all the adventures that might be available to one who is single and free of attachments. Likewise, the one who considers a religious vocation can be tormented by dreams of a family and a career, all sacrificed in order to serve the Lord. To discern the true voice of God, one has to sift through a confusing mix of desires, and cut through the clutter of other people’s opinions. Only then does the tiny whispering sound become audible.

Then, once the call from God becomes clear, one has to *respond* to it and fully *commit* to it. Stepping out of a boat in the middle of a lake is a perfect metaphor for a lifetime commitment, from which there is no turning back. To others, who have not heard the same summons, our desire to renounce our freedom and give over our whole life may seem foolish. (Just imagine how the other disciples would have reacted to Peter jumping overboard if they had not heard Jesus call him.) But, to those who know in their heart that they *are* being called by God, it seems that there is no other option but to say, “Yes.” When Jesus says, “Come,” we *must go*. When an engaged couple stands before the altar to profess their vows, regardless of the misgivings that they may have had earlier in their relationship, there is no doubt in that moment. Likewise for those of us who have professed religious vows. Regardless of how long it may have taken to get to that moment, at the time of the profession, it seems like not just the *right* thing to do, but the only thing we *can* do.

That wonderful feeling of certainty lasts for a little while – the “honeymoon” phase, as we call it. Both newlyweds and newly vowed religious can hardly feel the surface of the water as they stroll confidently away from the boat that they have left behind. But, sooner or later, reality hits them like a strong gust of wind. They discover that their spouses or their religious communities are not as perfect as they once seemed. The challenges of their vocation become more apparent, and their dreamy visions of lifelong bliss start to fade. That’s when doubt can creep in. Like Peter, we can be confident that the Lord called us, yet still doubt whether it was wise to leave the security of our former life. When it appears that we have committed our entire selves to a way of life that might be more than we can handle, panic can set in. But, the Lord has an answer to our doubts. He says to our wavering hearts, “Trust in *me*, not in yourself.” “*I* called you, and I will also *sustain* you in your commitments, if you let me.”

Even with the Lord’s help, though, none of us should expect to live our vows *perfectly*. There will be times when the wind and the waves seem too strong for us, and we will find ourselves sinking – sometimes up to our ankles, and sometimes up to our *necks*. When married persons find themselves struggling with infidelity or other serious sin, they need to reach out to their spouses, the ones who stepped out of the boat *with them*, and both need to call out *together*, “Lord, save us and save our marriage!” When priests and consecrated religious find ourselves struggling to live our vocation with integrity, we need to reach out not only to God, but also to other people who have made and lived by their vows: spiritual directors, fellow religious, other priests, and married friends. In the vast majority of cases, our failures are not a sign that we have discerned our vocation incorrectly, but a sign that we can’t do it *alone*. Like Peter, we cannot walk on water *by our own power*. We depend on the Lord and on the support of other people.

Jesus was ready to catch Peter as soon as he began to sink, and he will be just as ready to reach out and catch us when we struggle. He knows that none of us is capable of walking on water, yet he stands out there in the middle of the lake and calls us anyway. He doesn’t promise us an easy path, free of wind and waves. But, he *does* promise to ease our fears, strengthen our resolve, and bring to fulfillment the good work that he has begun in us. It doesn’t matter that we lack the ability to walk on water. All we need is the ability to discern God’s call, the *faith* to put our lives in God’s hands, and the *courage* to step out of the boat.