

Fr. John's Homily for January 22, 2023, The 3rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

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This is *Sunday of The Word of God*. Let's call it *Word of God Sunday*. Just a few years ago, Pope Francis wrote an *Apostolic Letter* in which he designated this third Sunday of Ordinary Time as a day where we focus on and promote the study and dissemination of the sacred scriptures – the Holy Bible. The guidebook for our lives, provided by God himself and authoritatively assembled for us by His Church. So let's start by offering a quote from the Bible as it speaks about itself. This is from Paul's letter to Timothy: "*All Scripture is breathed by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in all righteousness.*" Keyword, *profitable*. The Bible is not the be-all and end-all of our Christian faith as some would have you believe, and the Bible says so itself. It also came from Paul's letter to Timothy where it says that the *Church, which is the household of God, is the pillar and foundation of the truth*. Yes, remember that it was the Church that gave us the Bible. This in no way, diminishes the Bible. Remember that St. Jerome once said, "Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ." So, read and study your Bible!

In addition to this Bible Sunday, we are also in the midst of *A Week of Prayer for Christian Unity* and so I should really say something about that as well. I wonder if I can find a way to combine the two?

Well, you know... we Catholic/Christians leave the Church and sometimes even lose our faith for many different reasons. On a very basic level, the busyness of life, the many distractions, laziness, complacency or slowly getting out of the weekly habit and just drifting away. And pandemics certainly don't help.

But more seriously, how about the question of suffering, and maybe some frustration with the Bible itself and the many ways it is translated, presented and interpreted by some teachers and some denominations.

Personally, I think that the main reason people leave is the problem of unanswered prayer. Scripture invites us to pray always and everywhere. Make your desires known by prayer and supplication. Be persistent in prayer. And Scripture tells us that God wants to bless and to heal us. But you pray for something and you don't get it. It might be a small thing, or it might be big. Last week, Deacon Jerry spoke about people who were surely praying to win the big lottery. What if every one of those prayers was answered? This scenario was once played out in a movie. Jim Carrey played God in *Bruce Almighty*. Bruce was, for a time, given the powers of God and was trying to answer everyone's prayers. When all the people of Buffalo, NY who prayed for the winning lottery numbers had their prayers answered, and won, each received a check from the state of New York for \$1.27. Their response for having won the lottery was to riot in the streets of Buffalo. Each felt they had been cheated. Remember that when you pray for clear skies for your parish picnic, the farmer down the road is praying for rain.

But for some people, this problem of unanswered prayer is just too hard to take. Their faith gets challenged, and sometimes they even lose it. I think we can all relate. But when I counsel people about this, I always like to point out that some pretty important people have not had their prayers answered. Take for instance, St. Paul. Three times he prayed that "*a thorn of Satan*" be removed

from his side. And three times the answer was, “No”. Jesus’ final reply to Paul was, “*my grace is enough for you*”.

And then there was, of course, the prayer of Jesus himself in the *Garden of Gethsemane* on the night before he died. “*Father, if it’s possible, then let this cup pass from me.*” Well, we know how that one turned out.

And early on in this third season of *The Chosen*, we had that fictional encounter where Jesus talks to “Little James” about his crippled leg and why he has not been healed. I’ve heard testimonies that that scene was a consolation to a lot of people who have not been healed and have been carrying a heavy cross for a long time.

There is yet another prayer that was prayed by Jesus that was not answered and it has to do with this week’s theme of *Prayer for Christian Unity*. At the Last Supper with his Disciples, Jesus, in his long, emotional, final discourse said, “*I pray, Father, that they may be one as You and I are one.*” And like Paul in his letter to Timothy, Jesus repeated it three times. This is that unity that we’re talking about this week.

But we know, almost from the outset, that unity was always something that was difficult to achieve. Human nature (fallen human nature), being what it is, would have made it difficult, even for the Disciples, to get along. They did, however, have the mandate and the encouragement, and the grace, to advance in unity. But again, they were human.

And Jesus did warn us on several different occasions about the times ahead. There will be false teachers that will cause great confusion which would lead to disunity. Paul said that there were people who would ‘worm’ their way into the communities and cause problems. On the one hand, much of this would be caused by people with big egos. But on the other hand, it is the influence of evil. The demons of division.

And then St. Paul, in his letter today, also speaks about his times, and times to come. He urged the Corinthians to agree in all they say, and that *there be no divisions among them but that they be united in the same mind and in the same purpose*. Wishful thinking? He then goes on to talk about reality, saying that *it has been reported to him that there are rivalries among them*. So what else is new?

Yes, there have been many rivalries all along the 2,000 year journey of Christianity up to the present. Around 1,000 AD, we had the schism separating east from west, the Roman Catholic from Orthodox. And then 500 years ago, we had The Protestant Reformation, which incidentally, continues to this very day. I have heard that there have been over 33,000 different sects and denominations since the time of Martin Luther. So, if you don’t like what you hear from one minister, go to another church. Or start your own church.

And yes, we even have this same mentality within our own Roman Catholic church. For many years, Catholics have had a kind of a “fortress mentality”. We lived in our own communities, many of which were ethnic. And Protestants were not really allowed in. And we were not encouraged to go out. But in time there was technology, and intermarriage, and who knows what else that made it easier for Christians of all denominations to interact. And so differences became more and more apparent.

And these differences get played out in many different ways. We have had Protestants knocking on Catholic doors and saying things that naïve and poorly trained Catholics receive, believe, and digest, and they leave their Church. They had both a negative effect and a positive effect. On the one hand, many Catholics did leave, but at the same time we began to regroup and to study our faith a lot more so that we might be better trained and thus more confident to stand our ground and at least try to persuade other Christians that maybe they don't really understand us Catholics.

I'll tell you of one experience I once had with two Protestant fellows. At my first assignment at St. Joseph in Howell, one of our parishioners made an appointment for me and the pastor to meet with these two guys to discuss matters of differences between our faith traditions. One guy was pretty reasonable and pleasant, but the other one was very combative and kept on telling us what we Catholics believe. And we kept telling him no, that's not what we believe or teach. To which he responded, "Yes it is". To which we responded, "No it isn't. Why don't you go to Barnes & Noble and buy yourself a *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and check it out for yourself." I have often wondered what happened to those two guys. Did we make any kind of an impression? I think the one guy might have been receptive, but the second guy, probably not. It would take a significant grace from God to get him to open his mind to the possibilities of us coming to a better understanding of each other.

The Catholic Church, and some denominations, have gotten into the occasional official discussions about our differences and we have made progress. We agree on far more things than we imagined.

This past week on Friday, many people marched in Washington to promote the right to life. That event has brought Catholics and Fr. Sands together for many years now and he served as a unifying force. That's great. But I'm curious about something. Will *The Chosen* also provide a means for bringing Catholics and Protestants closer together? I personally think that their portrayal of the Blessed Mother, at least up to this point, has helped a lot of our separated brothers and sisters to get to know her better. My new favorite character in the series is Veronica. She is not an official biblical character, but she does have a tradition in the Catholic Church. She is depicted in the Stations of the Cross as the one who wiped the face of Jesus. Will she be depicted as such in *The Chosen*?

And what about John Chapter 6, and those words, "He who eats my flesh, and drinks my blood,..." And what about the last supper, and those words, "Take and eat", and "do this, in memory of me".

I can't imagine those Bible passages not being included in *The Chosen*. But I can only express my hope that this Jesus TV Show will bring Catholics and Protestants closer together in an understanding of our combined Christian beliefs, and that we will, in turn, be able to share with the rest of the world. In the meantime, let's continue to do what we do at every Mass, and that is true to pray for the day when we will all be one.

~Fr. John