

6th Sunday of Easter

In the last two months I have learned a lot about my priorities. For example, I have often said, “The most important thing any Catholic can do is to participate at mass every Sunday.” Now I’ve learned that’s not the most important thing. More important is love for one’s neighbor, which we have all expressed by staying home to contain the spread of a virus and to preserve our own health. Even without a pandemic, you have probably learned the supremacy of love when you stayed home on a Sunday to care for a sick member of your family. Sometimes we do not know our priorities until some crisis puts them to the test.

I commend you all for sustaining your faith and charity throughout this time. You have sacrificed for the sake of others; you have contributed to the support of your church; you have given our environment a rest from fossil fuels; you have connected more deeply with those who live with you. Some of you became ill; some of you suffered the death of one you love. All of this happened because of an unseen enemy disrupting life, worship, school, entertainments, crowds and just good company. Doing without these pleasures has uncovered your true priorities: your life, your love, your health, and your faith.

The first Christians suffered similar disruptions, not from an unseen virus but from a very visible enemy. The First Letter of Peter is but one of the New Testament books that confronted the persecution of Christians. Today’s second reading includes one of its most often quoted verses. In the first century of Christianity, people wondered what they should do when put to the test: when enemies who did not share their faith treated them with suspicion and sought their destruction. What should their priorities be in this time of crisis?

They could weigh three possibilities. Should they remain faithful to Christ, but flee for their lives? Or should they deny their faith, save their lives and stay at home? Or should they remain faithful to Christ and stay home, which could cost their lives? What should their priorities be? Peter predictably guided them toward this last possibility, dangerous though it was. He gave them this memorable piece of advice for what to do when facing someone’s threat: “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.” The only explanation for their hope was their faith in the resurrection, which helped them overcome the fear of their own martyrdom. Peter knew the consequences, but he courageously viewed persecution as a time to evangelize the enemy.

The attacker we now face is not a human but a virus. Peter preached faithfulness when an enemy threatened to kill; he would surely advise us the same. No matter the threat to our lives, one priority rules the rest: faith in Christ. That is the criterion for our decisions and the source of our hope.

This pandemic is uncovering our real priorities. We are learning what we are willing to sacrifice, and for what cause. We will also learn what message we tend to communicate. When you suffer, what message do you tell others? Peter did not say, “Always be ready to give a reason for your gripes.” No, “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope.” Our hope should be so obvious that it makes other people curious. If faith is truly your priority, everyone will know it by your hope.

Sunday, May 17, 2020