

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Archbishop José Gómez, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, congratulated President-elect Joe Biden and Vice-president elect Sen. Kamala Harris in a statement that includes these words for us: “At this moment in American history, Catholics have a special duty to be peacemakers, to promote fraternity and mutual trust, and to pray for a renewed spirit of true patriotism in our country. Democracy... requires that we respect the free expression of opinions and that we treat one another with charity and civility.”

A divisive campaign amid a pandemic and racial tensions challenged our country, while individuals still endured personal and family losses of employment, health and death. Every autumn we witness dying in plant life, so we think of dying in human life as our church year nears its end. We begin November with twin commemorations of all saints in heaven and of all souls of the departed who await the eternal embrace of God. This month our readings turn us toward the end of our lives and the end of time. They caution us even amid newsworthy national events to be personally prepared at all times for the coming of Christ.

Today we hear an encouraging though sobering passage from Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians. He had visited their city and taught them about Christ, convincing them that the Second Coming was imminent. Everyone would soon meet Christ, as Paul had on the road to Damascus.

But Paul had moved on from Thessaloniki. Christ had not yet come, and some of the new converts had died. The Thessalonians had written Paul from their grief, wondering, “Are our deceased family and friends lost forever? When Christ comes, will they be excluded?” The Thessalonians feared once you were dead, you were dead, and you could not reconnect with the living. Even today, when someone we love dies, we question why this happened, and if their eternal life will be disadvantaged because they could not devote more time in this life.

Paul explained that death doesn’t matter. He writes, “if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep.” Paul got this information directly from the Lord: “we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely not precede those who have fallen asleep.” Those who are alive will join those who have died to meet the Lord together and to remain with him forever. Paul describes the coming of Christ in words that recall the appearance of God on Mount Sinai: Christ will come “with a word of command,” recalling the giving of the commandments; “with the voice of an archangel,” as Moses had heard the voice of God; and “with the trumpet of God,” as the people awaiting Moses witnessed thunder, lightning, and the blast of a ram’s horn. The coming of Christ will have that kind of impact on human history.

Even as our country faces important issues that we must help, Saint Paul consoles us in times of personal loss. He offers hope for our departed loved ones, and he turns us toward a moment of history more significant than any presidential election when Christ will come again. Paul knew what we experience personally, and where we are headed ultimately. As he says at the end today, “We shall always be with the Lord. Therefore, console one another with these words.”

Sunday, November 8, 2020