

5th Sunday of Easter

Over a year ago, out of a concern for our health, Bishop Johnston suspended the obligation to participate at Sunday Mass throughout the diocese. You'll soon receive a letter from him with his plans to restore it next month. Meanwhile, we all rejoice that, as people feel safer, the number of those coming to Mass is increasing. This shows the centrality of the eucharist in the lives of Catholics, and their desire to connect like branches to the vine of Christ.

Today's gospel comes from the Last Supper, when Jesus delivered his final speech to the disciples. In this same chapter, he begs them to love one another, not be irritated with one another, but first he recalls their connecting point. If each of them remains in him, he will remain in each of them. They will then bear fruit. The Old Testament has several passages that compare God's sinful people to a false vine that bears no fruit. Jesus is the true vine, the one that does bear fruit.

The fruit we bear in life results from saying yes to our connecting points. It takes focus to develop a skill, a body of knowledge, or a relationship. Focus comes more easily when we like what we're doing, which is often a clue that we are doing God's will. St. Catherine of Siena famously declared, "Be who God meant you to be, and you will set the world on fire."

The fruit we bear in life results from saying yes, but it also comes from saying no. We prune away things that obstruct faithfulness. By contrast, our culture prizes adding activities and commitments, even shallow ones. Life teems with possibility and tempts us to pursue all its pleasures. But when these take us away from our main connecting points, they ultimately dissatisfy. Jesus says that the Father "takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and everyone that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit." Our life produces deep satisfaction if we remove shallow distractions.

Participating in the eucharist is the best way to remain in Christ. We also remain in him through daily prayer, especially meditating on his words in the gospels. We may think we know all that Jesus said and did, but studying and restudying the bible always brings new insights. Saying yes to daily prayer requires saying no to some other activities, but it usually proves worthwhile. Prayerful people sense that they remain in Christ throughout the day, not just at the times they set aside to pray.

Pruning is part of discipleship. If we open our hearts to Christ, he snips away what is bad for us in order to provide more growth. He told his disciples that they were already pruned "because of the word" that he spoke to them. His word is still among us, as accessible as our bibles at home or on the web. The very electronic devices we sometimes use for ill purposes can become a means to encounter the word of God. When we remain in Christ, the Father is glorified. Our satisfaction derives not from pleasing ourselves, but from pleasing him.

We are branches on the vine of Christ; he is our central point of connection. When we focus on his word, especially through daily prayer, he will prune away false pleasures and the pointless irritations we sometimes harbor over other branches occupying the same true vine. We all have the same connecting point: Jesus Christ.