

Homily. 1 Advent C. 11.28.21
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THE PRESENCE OF JESUS IN THE CHURCH

Today, we are kicking off the Christmas season, celebrating the coming of Jesus.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus came to earth, was tortured, crucified, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven.

So He's gone, right? At least until His second coming, which is described in today's Gospel.

The answer is, "He's not gone." He is still here, just as much as when He walked on this earth over 2,000 years ago.

How could this be? How is that true?

What Jesus said, and what He did, when He walked this earth, are just as much with us right now as they were 2,000 years ago.

What Jesus said, and what He did are available to each and every one of us through the Catholic Church established by Jesus.

Jesus said to His disciples before He was arrested, "I will not leave you orphans." You and I are not victims of history. We are not penalized because we weren't with Jesus in the Holy Land when He lived there.

Just as Jesus forgave the sins of many during His time in Israel, He forgives our sins now through the words of His Catholic priests in Confession.

Just as Jesus told the disciples He would send them the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, we receive the same Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Confirmation.

Just as Jesus healed the sick, He heals the sick now through the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick.

Just as Jesus gave the apostles His Body and Blood on the night before He died, He gives us His Body and Blood in the Holy Eucharist.

And just as Jesus taught His followers when He walked the earth, His teachings have been passed down to us in the Bible and the other authoritative teachings of the Church.

As Saint Paul wrote in his Letter to the Ephesians, "God put all things beneath the feet of Jesus and gave Him as head over all things to the Church, which is His body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way."

The Catholic Church is not just another Christian denomination. It's not just an organization with its beliefs and practices. It is the living Body of Christ on earth and in heaven. It has all the power, all the truth, that Jesus manifested in His time on earth.

It's hugely important that all of us understand the true identity, mission and power of the Catholic Church.

And it's equally important that we do nothing to obstruct the role that Jesus wants the Church to play throughout its history.

The one characteristic of the Church that I want to focus on this evening is its unity. Jesus prayed to His Father in very dramatic, powerful words about how much He valued the unity of the Church He founded.

So in the Gospel of John, Chapter 17, Jesus said to His Father:

“I pray not only for those You gave me, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me.”

Jesus prayed for the unity of His Church so that the credibility of the Church would not be impaired by divisions among His followers. Why would people believe His followers if they were divided, if they did not agree among themselves what Jesus wanted them to do?

Saint Paul well understood the importance of unity in the Church. He wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians:

“10 I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose. 11 For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by Chloe's people, that there are rivalries among you.”

What is the biggest threat to the unity of the Church?

It's this attitude many in the Church have that the Church says this, but I think [fill in the blanks]. There's the temptation to disagree with the long-standing teachings of the Church passed down over centuries. This temptation has become very popular, very widespread in the Catholic Church since the 1960's.

Many Catholics today reject the Church's teachings on marriage, family and sexuality, including what the Church says about contraception, sex outside marriage, homosexuality and abortion.

Jesus told His apostles in Luke 10:16, “Whoever listens to you listens to me. Whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me.”

So whoever listens to the Church is listening to Jesus. Whoever rejects the Church rejects Jesus, and the One who sent Him.

We are not to receive the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity, if we have rejected the Church.

As Saint Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12: “Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord...and eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying.”

Like many of you, I have struggled to accept all that the Church has taught. I first applied to be a deacon in 1989. That was put on hold when my wife and I had our 6th child. I delayed my training to be a deacon until 1997.

During that time from 1989 to 1997, I studied many of the teaching documents of the Church, what the Church taught and why. I realized that it was a good thing that my preparation to be a deacon had been delayed, as I really had not been humble enough to fully accept the teachings of the Church. I had too much pride in my own opinions. By 1997, I had realized how wrong I had been on some issues and how the Church had so much more wisdom than I did on these questions.

It is time to put an end to disagreeing with the teachings of the Church, regardless of who or how many agree with us.

During this season when we celebrate the coming of Jesus, let us celebrate and honor how He is present with us now through the Church which He founded. Let's use this time to better understand and accept any positions that we have been struggling with. Do some homework. Seek good counsel.

I'll close with this passage from 1 Peter 5:10:

“The God of all grace who called you to His eternal glory through Christ will Himself restore, confirm, strengthen and establish you after you have suffered a little. To Him be dominion. Amen.”