

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)

October 6, 2019

Habakkuk 1:2–3; 2:2–4 • 2 Timothy 1:6–8, 13–14 • Luke 17:5–10

I.

Next Saturday, the Diocese of Richmond will conduct a pilgrimage to the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC, in preparation for the diocesan bicentennial in 2020.

I'll be there, along with several hundred pilgrims from around the diocese, including some cathedral parishioners and students from VCU.

If you're interested in going, it's not too late; you can still register online.

An interesting bit of history:

Cardinal James Gibbons laid the cornerstone of the Shrine in 1920.

Forty years earlier, Gibbons had been the fourth bishop of Richmond, from 1872 to 1877.

He was then made the archbishop of Baltimore, where he became America's second cardinal.

The National Shrine is the largest church in North America, and one of the ten largest churches in the world.

Walking into the Great Upper Church, like walking into this cathedral church, makes you feel small.

By contrast, God, and the Church are humungous.

This is not a reason to feel underappreciated, but rather that we belong—to something bigger than ourselves.

II.

This is the point of the Gospel reading:
to give us the correct perspective about our relationship with God:

“We are unprofitable servants;
we have done what we were obliged to do.”

Jesus’ teaching is a direct response to the disciples’ earnest request:
“Increase our faith.”

Faith is one of those vague words that we use all the time,
but which no one really knows what it means.

Some people think it’s intuition, a gut feeling, or blind trust in God.

No. This is not faith.

Let’s return to our old friend from a few weeks ago
—the First Vatican Council, which met from 1869 to 1870—
for a technical but still helpful definition.

(By the way, James Gibbons, whom I mentioned,
attended the First Vatican Council when he was the vicar apostolic
or missionary bishop of North Carolina, even before his tenure in Richmond.)

Vatican I taught that faith is the human response to divine Revelation—
the words and actions of God in the history of salvation.

According to the council,

“The obedience of faith is to be given to God who reveals,
an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God,
offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals”
(Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*).

So, faith is the commitment of the entire person to God,
which involves both our understanding and our decision-making capacity.

In other words, to God belongs every part of us.

Vatican I then repeated an ancient teaching of the Church:
faith is a gift from God.

God himself moves us to embrace his words and actions.

Faith is a gift, which the prospective believer receives.

(For this reason, faith is a gift that can also be rejected.)

So, even our response to God—our faith—requires divine assistance.

This is what the Apostles are doing in the Gospel—asking Christ for help:
“Increase our faith.”

Jesus makes the point that if we seek stronger faith,
then changing our expectations is key.

The first change is the sobering realization that we haven’t earned
—we cannot earn—
and we do not deserve anything from God.

God has given us everything gratuitously—as a gift.

Faith is a gift, and it finds a home in a heart that is open.

A heart that is open to looking at life differently,
a heart that is open to leading a different kind of life.

God doesn’t owe us anything, yet he gives us everything.

He created us in his image, he sent his Son to die for our sins,
and his constant love sustains us our life.

We exist because God wanted us to,
because he wanted to express his goodness through us.

God wants us to freely love him, by imitating his Son.

So, an encouragement:
find a concrete way to respond to God.

St. Paul exhorts his disciple, Timothy, in the Second Reading:
 “Stir into flame the gift of God you received through the imposition of my hands.”

II.

A closing thought, which involves another bit of diocesan history.

Saturday was the feast of Blessed Francis Xavier Seelos,
 who lived during the 1800s.

He was a priest of the Redemptorist order,
 who came to America as a missionary from what is today Germany.

Father Seelos ministered to Union soldiers at Fort Monroe
 for a brief period beginning in December 1862.

When the Civil War began, John McGill, the third bishop of Richmond,
 was unable to visit or even govern parts of our diocese.

Consequently, the archbishop of Baltimore arranged for Redemptorists
 from Annapolis, Maryland to travel down the Chesapeake Bay to Fort Monroe.

Father Seelos described his experience in Virginia in a letter to his brother:

I got a call to go to Fortress Monroe—
 you have probably often read about it in the papers during this unholy war—
 to give spiritual help to the unfortunate soldiers in the hospital there. ...
 All were moved to tears, and often the words were repeated that the
 appreciative soldiers addressed to me in gratitude: “God bless you!” ...
 I was richly repaid by the fine attitude of the soldiers,
 most of whom had not been to confession for three or four years.
 For many it was even longer...
 And so you see... that my stay there was very much needed.

This is a moving example of faith: to give one’s whole life to God.

Christian disciples, beginning with the apostles, have entreated Christ:
 “Increase our faith.”

We have the answer before us:
 to realize that everything comes from God, and to give everything back to him.