

**SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER (YEAR C)
SUNDAY OF DIVINE MERCY**

April 24, 2022

Acts 5:12–16 • Revelation 1:9–11a, 12–13, 17–19 • John 20:19–31

I.

I was on an adventure this past week,
visiting parishes on Native American reservations in New Mexico and Arizona.

I received an invitation for this trip from Catholic Extension,
the papal society that raises funds to support the work of the Catholic Church
in rural parts of the United States.

Until several years ago,
the Diocese of Richmond qualified as a missionary diocese
and received assistance from Catholic Extension.

In 2020, to commemorate the bicentennial of the Richmond Diocese,
Catholic Extension published a commemorative calendar
that was distributed throughout the diocese.

My trip was a mission immersion that included stops at four churches,
which serve the Navajo, Zuni Pueblo, and Hopi tribes.

The first stop was St. Mary's Mission,
located on the Navajo reservation near Gallup, New Mexico.

(Interestingly, the reservation is sovereign country within the United States.)

After a meal of Navajo burgers—
hamburgers on traditional fried bread—
our group heard from parishioners about what it is like to be a Navajo Catholic.

The people from Catholic Extension were amazed at how open the parishioners
were in narrating their experiences.

Usually, Navajo are reluctant to talk.

The reason they were so open was the presence of two religious sisters.

One of the sisters is herself a Navajo.

The sisters have been there a long time,
and during that period, trust has developed.

It was clear to our group that only when the Church has been in a place for a long time will Native Americans open up to them.

For this reason,
the Navajo at St. Mary's revere the Franciscan friars,
who served them for 30 years.

And parishioners smile when recalling the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament,
who ran a boarding school on the reservation for decades.

The second day of the trip included a visit to St. Anthony's Mission and School
on the Zuni Pueblo reservation in New Mexico.

The priest said that he's been there for seven years now,
and that it was only around year four that the people began to open up to him.

It takes time to forge a relationship, to develop trust, and to understand a culture,
all of which are essential ingredients of evangelization.

II.

The theme of witness—evangelization—
runs throughout the readings and prayers of the 50-day Easter season.

Witness means proclaiming the forgiveness of sins
that flows from the resurrection of Christ.

Witness means showing, by word and example,
how the death and resurrection of Christ changes a person's life.

Christ's resurrection is not limited to the Son of God;
believers share in Jesus' victory.

In the Gospel,
the risen Christ commissions the apostles to continue his work.

He shares with them his power and authority to forgive sins,
so that this forgiveness can be bestowed on all people for all time.

Twice, Christ greets the apostles with the greeting,
“Peace be with you.”

Here, “peace” refers to the gift of salvation,
which is intended not only for the apostles, but for everyone:

“Peace be with you.
As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’
And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them,
‘Receive the Holy Spirit.
Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them,
and whose sins you retain are retained.’”

The apostles are the first people to evangelize,
to spread the good news of Christ’s resurrection for the forgiveness of sins.

Their work, although it comes from God,
does not yield automatic results.

There are difficulties.

The Second Reading,
from the Book of Revelation,
testifies to the difficulties and sufferings associated with evangelization.

The author, who is traditionally identified with the Apostle John,
gives his own witness in this regard:

“I, John, your brother, who share with you
the distress, the kingdom, and the endurance we have in Jesus,
found myself on the island called Patmos
because I proclaimed God’s word and gave testimony to Jesus.”

Evangelization is the work of the whole Church;
it's the privilege and responsibility of each baptized person.

This task is becoming more urgent
because we live in a culture that is not only indifferent
but increasingly hostile to any religious faith.

More and more,
people are being raised without an understanding of who Christ is,
of what Christianity is about,
or what is unique about the Catholic Church.

The pandemic has accelerated that process.

Many people have still not returned to Mass.

I believe that the way forward is not an institutional, top-down campaign
of bringing people back.

On the contrary,
evangelization must be personal.

People want to be respected as persons;
each of us wants to be listened to, to be understood.

You, the lay faithful,
are the “tip” of the Church’s missionary “spear.”

You are the ones who can bring people back,
people within your own family and social circle.

You can do that by giving witness to Christ’s resurrection in your life,
by developing trust with other people,
and by inviting them—with fervor, patience, and kindness—
to practice the Catholic faith.

III.

Numbers can be humbling,
and they don’t always convey the whole truth of something.

Based on my experience this past week,
my sense is that the Church's mission to Native Americans
has yielded modest gains—but nothing blockbuster.

That's OK.

There are significant cultural obstacles that keep Native Americans
from becoming Christians and practicing that faith.

To me, that reality makes the witness of the Church there all the more remarkable.

Anyone can do something that's easy,
that brings instant affirmation and quick results.

It's much harder to be faithful when things aren't easy.

Christ declares in the Second Reading,

“Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. ...
Write down, therefore, what you have seen,
and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards.”

That's what the Church has done among Native Americans,
and what it continues to do.

The last stop on my trip was St. Jude Mission in Tuba City, Arizona,
which serves the Navajo and Hopi tribes.

There, I asked one of the Daughters of Charity,
who's been there many years,
how she goes about evangelization.

She said that the Navajo have a deep, pre-Christian belief in a Creator.

She builds on that belief by reminding them that this Creator
is also personal and loving God, which changes everything.

She said that during meetings,
her mention of this belief often brings tears to people's faces.

There is a hunger to know God—
the God of Jesus Christ—
in all places and for all times.

We have an important role to play in making Christ known.

We bear witness, by our lives, that Christ has been raised,
and that the love of God has forgiven our sins.