29ᵗʰ Sunday in Ordinary Time – B   **20 October 2024**

- As part of my duties as Vicar of Education for Catholic Schools, this past week I was privileged to offer Mass at Immaculata Catholic School in Hendersonville on the first day the students were back after Hurricane Helene.
- What was different is that the students at Immaculata were joined by the student body of Asheville Catholic School, who are not yet able to use their school building because of the damage done by the hurricane.
- So, until Asheville Catholic is ready to be used again, the two schools are combined on the campus of Immaculata in Hendersonville. It was absolutely beautiful to see these two school communities come together like this.
- As so many of these students' families have been terribly impacted by Hurricane Helene, we wanted to make sure we could get them back to school as quickly as possible to provide them with some stability and emotional support.
- While it may be many months before life is "normal" again for these kids and their families, at least they know they're not alone in their suffering.
- And that these kids will now make a whole new group of friends out of the hardships caused by Helene is a testament of how good can be brought out of evil.
- The prediction I made to the students was that, when they think back on Hurricane Helene in the future, they'll think first about the good things that came out of the suffering, and not the suffering itself.
- Our readings today take on the issue of redemptive suffering. In the first reading, we hear Isaiah prophesying about a servant of the Lord who will be both priest and victim: one who offers a sacrifice, while also being the sacrificial offering itself.
- Though Isaiah's language is a bit confusing, the gist of this passage is that the Lord wills to crush this servant, and yet that the servant chooses this crushing, this suffering, out of his own free will so that good may be brought out of it.
- In Semitic culture, this is what priests did: they made sacrifices to atone for the sins of the people, and at times the priests would eat the sacrificed animal as a symbol of taking on themselves the guilt and sins of their people.
- By being both priest and victim: the one who offers the sacrifice and the sacrifice that is offered, this servant, of course, foreshadows Christ. And by this sacrifice, He justifies "the many" – which was an idiom used in that time to refer to the entire Jewish people.
- This foreshadowing of Christ prophesied by Isaiah in our first reading is made explicit in our second reading from the Letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews tells of how Jesus the High Priest has suffered and offered His own blood, being "tested in every way."
- In this we find something unique about our Christian faith, viz., that Christianity is the only religion that professes a Lord who suffered for the sake of His creation.
- Only Christianity has a God who experientially understands our human condition, a God Who has Himself undergone suffering, and thereby is able "to sympathize with our weakness." This is precisely why we can approach Him, confident in His grace and mercy.
- This is why the psalmist can say today: "Lord, let your mercy be upon us as we place our trust in You."
- Our Lord knows what it is to suffer as a man, and His experience of suffering has made His heart all the more open to us.

- As we move into the Gospel, we're given a lesson on servant leadership. In short, those aspiring to greatness must learn to serve others in their need.
- In this Gospel passage Jesus teaches us that we shouldn't seek positions of leadership and authority in order to please or serve ourselves. Leaders are meant to serve, and Jesus is our example in this by dying by a means reserved to slaves: crucifixion.
- In Jesus' day Roman citizens condemned to death were executed by beheading – which is how St. Paul died. But slaves and low-class persons were subjected to crucifixion. Thus, in history's greatest irony, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords died as the most abject of men.
- Yet, in dying as a slave, Jesus has redeemed us from the slavery of sin and made our salvation possible.
- What does this Gospel mean for us here and now? It means that, as Christians, we must be willing to put aside our own needs and wants to serve those in need. We've got to do what we can to ease the sufferings of others.
- Hurricane Helene offers us a wonderful opportunity to do just that.
- To this end, Bishop Martin has asked those parishes not affected by Hurricane Helene to be of service to those who are. In a letter we pastors received this past week, we were asked to consider being a sister parish to one of our mountain parishes affected by Helene.
- Specifically, we're being asked to have a 2nd collection every month for the next 6 months to help offset some of the revenue depletion that the affected parishes will experience.
- Additionally, we are to offer a monthly Holy Hour to pray for the needs of the sister parish, provide volunteers to help with anything the parish needs, and so forth. Any creative ideas are welcome.
- I have already signed up St. Ann's to be a sister parish, but we don't yet know what parish we will be paired with, but that information will be forthcoming. Once we know that, we'll begin planning how best to serve our sister parish out in the mountains.
- So, please keep an eye on the bulletin and the Friday 5 for more information about this.
- In the meantime, let us look with faith upon whatever sufferings God allows in our lives, recognizing that sufferings endured with faith and hope always yield a greater blessing.
- Truly, God allows suffering in our lives *only* to bring about a greater good.
- As for Hurricane Helene and the suffering it has caused to our fellow Catholics in this diocese, we are being given an opportunity to put aside our own needs for a while so we can serve others in greater need.
- If we can do this well, with generosity and true charity, it will not only help our sister parish, but it will enable us to grow in greater virtue.
- May our Lord's mercy be upon us as we place our trust in Him, and as we serve those in need. Amen.