

You may have heard the expression, “the more things change, the more they stay the same.” It means that while the details of our lives may change, our income, our standard of living, our technological achievements, the deeper reality of our lives remains constant. Humanity is motivated by the same dreams, desires, and love that it has had for thousands of years.

I often think that being a Christian in the 21st century, is much like being a Christian in the first century. Our beliefs are ridiculed, our faith is mocked, and we are accused of being out of step with the rest of the world. But in spite of these things, over the last two thousand years, Christianity has spread throughout the world.

Our first reading today gives us a glimpse of parish life in first century Jerusalem and we can see many parallels to the parish of today.

First of all the community is growing. You may hear from time to time that this or that non-Christian community is the fastest growing religion in the world. And while the story may be true, it is somewhat misleading. An obscure branch of a heretical church may grow from one member to two members and be considered the fastest growing religion because it has doubled its numbers.

Christians form the largest religious group in the world, and we are still growing. In a normal year we receive new members into the church every Easter, not just in this parish, but in parishes all over the world.

The Church is made up of living members of the Body of Christ, the Body of Christ is a living thing, and living things must grow. We grow because that is our mission as Christians. Jesus gave His apostles two commands before He ascended into Heaven, to preach the Gospel to all nations, and to Baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We are a mission Church, and our mission is to grow until the faith is spread to every corner of the world in every age.

The second thing we can tell about the early Church is that there is a clear hierarchal structure, a structure of authority. The twelve apostles lead the church as Jesus intended, seeing to the spiritual needs of the people. When the material needs of the community grew too great, the apostles solved the problem by ordaining the first deacons.

Today we share in the same structure. The Pope, the vicar of Christ, heir to St. Peter, leads the Church through his bishops, the successors to the apostles. The bishops appoint priests as pastors to represent them within a specific area. And we still have deacons. The bishops ordain deacons today by the laying on of hands, just as the apostles did with the first seven.

Priests are configured to show us Christ the High Priest. But deacons are configured to show us Christ the servant. The word deacon comes from a Greek word meaning servant. Deacons serve the needs of the people through works of charity, preaching of the Word, and assisting at the liturgies which are the public prayer of the community.

None of these three orders of clergy, bishop, priest or deacon, function by their own authority. Rather they receive their authority from Christ in the sacrament of Holy Orders. By obeying that authority in matters of faith and morals, Christians are obeying Christ Himself.

Finally at the very beginning of the Church we are told of disagreements that arise among the faithful. The Greek speaking members, the converts, feel they being slighted and treated as second class citizens.

Our faith in Christ does not make us perfect right away. Even the members of the early Church, many of whom would have seen Christ in the flesh, were far from perfect Christians. We are still human, subject to the temptations of our fallen nature. The first Christians had to work through conflicts and selfish tendencies, as we all continue to do today. Spiritual growth is a life long process that includes trouble and failures as well as victories and successes.

Our spiritual growth is much like the growth of the artist.

In his early seventies, the great Japanese painter Hokusai Katsushika said: "From the age of 6 I had a mania for drawing the shapes of things. When I was 50 I had published a universe of designs. But all I have done before the the age of 70 is not worth bothering with. At 75 I'll have learned something of the pattern of nature, of animals, of plants, of trees, birds, fish and insects. When I am 80 you will see real progress. At 90 I shall have cut my way deeply into the mystery of life itself. At

100, I shall be a marvelous artist. At 110, everything I create; a dot, a line, will jump to life as never before.”

God gives artists the gift of artistic talent. But the artist has to take the responsibility to develop that gift. It is hard, painstaking work. The vocation of the artist is to create works of Beauty. But Beauty can never be exhausted and so the artist spends his life developing his gifts in pursuit of his vocation.

We are all called to develop our gifts unto our last breath, to continually seek a deeper understanding of God, to make of our lives a work of art.

As Beauty cannot be exhausted neither can God who is the source of all that is beautiful. Christ is infinite in wisdom, goodness and courage. We are fallen and finite. There will always be more we can learn, more we can do in our effort to be more Christlike. But it is important to continue to grow and improve all of our lives.

To do this requires patience. Our spiritual growth is not a sprint, it is a marathon. It is the work of our lives. This is true not only for us as individuals but for our community as well. If we persevere, if we are on guard against making our lives dull routine, if we truly strive to grow in our faith, then we will continue to grow steadily in wisdom, courage, joy, and holiness. This is the vocation God has placed on our hearts.

Patience is the key to helping us achieve this. Patience has fallen out of favor these days. We live in a world that demands immediate results,

immediate gratification. How many of you stand in front of your k-cup coffee maker thinking “this is taking too long?” High speed internet gives us virtually any piece of information in a matter of seconds. We want our lives to be like that. One minute for a cup of coffee seems like forever when you are standing in front of it, we want it now.

But spiritual life is not like that. It is hard, painstaking work. Becoming a mature Christian and becoming a mature Christian community takes constant effort over time, that is the virtue of patience.

If we need a model for patience we need only look to our mothers. God's grace is shown to us in the love our mothers have for us. The patience of a mother allows her to be there for her children every day, in moments of joy and in moments of sorrow. Mothers laugh with us, celebrate with us, tend our wounds, both physically and emotionally, and share in our problems. And they never give up.

Imagine the great loss if Saint Monica had given up on her son Augustine. He rejected the faith he was brought up in. He was well in to his thirties before the prayers of his mother brought him around. The Church honors Augustine for his wisdom and knowledge which he has passed on to us.

All of which would have been lost if his mother had not been patient, how foolish that would have been.

And how foolish are we, when we give up on ourselves or other people, saying it is too late to change. While we draw breath, each day, it is

never too late. Greet the Lord every morning with a prayer of praise for the opportunity that each new day brings you.

God does not give up on us. Our mothers do not give up on us. How can we give up on ourselves or on our brothers and sisters? Strive to imitate Christ, spend the whole of your life growing in the faith and helping others to grow as well.

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote a five volume work on our faith and he left it unfinished. Before he died he had a vision in which Jesus told him, "Thomas, you have written well of me."

May we be so blessed at the end of our lives, to have pleased God by what we have written of Him in the way we have lived.