

Father O'Connor's Homily for 25 August 2024
Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time-B

Joshua 24: 1-2a, 15-17, 18b
Ephesians 5: 21-32
John 6: 60-69

Billy Graham's weekly radio show was entitled, "The Hour of Decision." And that is a great title for the Scripture readings we heard today: "The Hour of Decision."

In the first reading, Joshua asks the people of Israel whom they intend to serve: the pagan gods of their neighbors or the Lord? And the people answer: "We will serve the Lord, for He is our God."

Something like that is happening in today's Gospel. For five weeks now – and concluding this weekend – we have been reading from Saint John's Gospel, chapter six. Jesus had multiplied the loaves and fish, and He was teaching that He is the Bread of Life, that "whoever eats this Bread will live forever" [John 6: 51], and that He would give us His own Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

That day many of His disciples left Him and did not come back. They found His teaching to be too much for them to accept. And so Jesus looks at the Twelve and asks them: "Do you also want to leave?"

And Simon Peter – God bless Simon Peter – answers: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

It was "The Hour of Decision."

Saint Bruno died in 1101. He founded the religious community known as the Carthusians – and they are still with us today. It was a very strict monastic community of men who were devoted to prayer and penance and silence.

Very early each morning Bruno would rise to say his prayers. But he would first sit on the edge of his bed and place his bare feet on the cold stone floor of his monastery cell and ask himself out loud: "Bruno, Bruno, why have you come here?" And every morning he would make himself answer that question. Bruno had made a lifelong vowed commitment to serve the Lord, but he would renew that commitment every morning.

It was "The Hour of Decision."

For many years, Saint Joseph Parish and School in Avon Lake – where I was the pastor for 18 years – had a partnership with Saint Francis Xavier Cathedral in Nassau, the Bahamas and with Saint Bede Elementary School, the poorest and the

smallest Catholic school on the island. And it was an enriching and grace-filled experience for us and for our Bahamian brothers and sisters.

There are 32 parishes in the Catholic Archdiocese of Nassau, spread out over the many islands of the Bahamas, and today there are 18 priests – 16 diocesan and 2 religious order priests – under the leadership of my friend, Archbishop Patrick Pinder, available to serve all of these parishes over all of those miles. So many of the parishes would go several weeks before they could have a priest to celebrate Mass. And that is still the case today.

So when I visited Nassau, I would make myself available to go and celebrate Mass where I was needed.

One weekend, in a small commuter prop-plane, I went to Andros which is the largest island in size in the Bahamas, but with a population of less than 8,000. The people of Andros had not had a priest for Mass in 7 weeks. So on Saturday evening I celebrated Mass at a US military base where they tested submarines and trained people how to operate them.

On Sunday, I celebrated Mass at two parishes – that were 45 minutes apart by van. May I tell you a bit about that second parish on that Sunday morning?

Mass was going to start late because a van that was transporting people who did not have cars got a flat tire. While I was waiting for them to arrive, I remember sitting in a pew and talking with some children, one of whom was an eight-year-old boy named Richard, and who seemed very interested in our conversation.

I finally said to him, “Richard, I was about your age when God called me to be a priest. I was at Mass on Sunday and I was looking at the altar and the cross behind the altar and the priest, and I thought to myself, ‘I could do that.’ And that thought never left me. Maybe God is calling you to be a priest one day too.”

They have a beautiful custom in the Bahamas that everyone – men, women and children – sings at Mass, and with energy and volume. And no one leaves Mass until the “Amen” of the last verse of the final hymn is finished – even if there are five verses and the priest moved out at the end of verse one!

Well, after that “Amen,” Richard was the first one down the aisle to where I was standing at the back of the church. He reached up and took hold of my hands, so I stooped down to be more at his level. And he said to me: “Father Tim, will you be our priest here next Sunday?” And his question broke my heart. I explained that I had to go back home that week. But then I said to him: “Richard, maybe God is calling you to be His priest so that someday the people here could have Mass every Sunday.”

That was 18 years ago, so today Richard would be about 26 years old. I don’t know what happened to him, but I still pray for Richard, hoping that our brief

encounter at Mass that day may have been God's planting the seed of a priestly vocation in his life. It is "The Hour of Decision."

Right here in Saint Joseph and Nativity Parishes, it is not a question of "will there be Mass this weekend?" For us it is more "will I be here, and which one of our 5 Sunday Masses will I attend?" It is a commitment that we renew **every** weekend. It is "The Hour of Decision."

Let's keep our seminarian, Nathan Frankart – and others in our parishes, like Richard, whom the Lord may be calling to the priesthood or the religious life – in our prayers.

It is "The Hour of Decision."

The people answered Joshua: "We will serve the Lord, for He is our God."

And Simon Peter answered Jesus: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."

"Bruno, Bruno, why have you come here?" Like Saint Bruno, we need to renew our commitments to the Lord every day.

For us it is always "The Hour of Decision."