

Fr. O'Connor's Homily on 4 May 2025
Third Sunday of Easter-C

Acts of the Apostles 5: 27-32, 40b-41
Revelation 5: 11-14
John 21: 1-19

Although I am not by nature “a numbers kind of guy” – as perhaps some of you are – I thought I would chart our course this Sunday – this Third Sunday of Easter, when the Risen Jesus appeared to His disciples for the third time – by looking at some numbers in today's Gospel according to John, from its 21st and last chapter

For, you see, in John's Gospel, every detail has significance.

The disciples had been fishing all night and had caught nothing. In the morning from shore the Risen Jesus told them to cast their nets on the right side of the boat and that they would catch something. And they did so – and caught 153 large fish.

Why is this number so precise – 153 large fish? Some might say that the fish were counted so that they could be shared equally among the fishing partners.

But in John's Gospel, there are often hidden meanings that lie beneath the surface for those who have eyes to see.

I will give you three rather ingenious explanations – from the writings of three saints who all died in the early 400s. [This same Gospel came up for our Saint Joseph School Mass on Friday, 25 April, and the students really got into these explanations, so I thought that I would share them with you today.]

Saint Cyril of Alexandria [d. 444] said that the number 153 is made up of three things. First, there is the 100 – and that represents “the fullness of the Gentiles.” 100, he says, is the fullest number. The shepherd's full flock is 100. The seed's full harvest is 100-fold. So the 100 stands for the fullness of the Gentiles who will be gathered into Christ.

Second, there is the 50. The 50 – one-half of the 100-fold – stands for the remnant of Israel – the Jewish people – who will be gathered into Christ.

Third, there is the 3. And the 3 stands for the 3 divine persons of the Blessed Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – to whose glory all things are done.

Saint Augustine [d. 430] has another explanation. He says that 10 is the number of the law, since there are 10 commandments. 7 is the number of grace, for the gifts of the Holy Spirit are 7: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and reverence of the Lord.

Now $10+7=17$. And 153 is the sum of the figures $1+2+3+4\ldots$ all the way up to +17. Thus 153 stands for all those who either by law or by grace have been drawn to Jesus Christ.

The simplest explanation is given by Saint Jerome [d. 420]. He said that in the sea there are 153 different species of fish. And this catch includes one of every kind of fish. Therefore, the number 153 symbolizes God's dream that someday all people of every time and place will be gathered together in Jesus Christ.

And the net – which is unbroken – stands for the Church. There is room enough for all who wish to enter. And note that it was Simon Peter – upon whom Jesus founded His Church – who dragged the net ashore to Jesus.

The number 3 also had special significance to ancient peoples. Saying or writing something three times was thought to give the message a certain serious tone.

So when Simon Peter denied knowing Jesus on His way to be crucified, he did this three times. And this triple denial signified that Peter was seriously rejecting his relationship with Jesus.

And then in today's Gospel, when Jesus serves the apostles "breakfast on the beach" after this tremendous catch of 153 large fish, Jesus asks Simon Peter three times, "Do you love me?"

Jesus gives Peter the chance to make up for his triple denial by his triple affirmation of his loyalty to Jesus: "I love you. I love you. Lord, you know that I love you – seriously!"

And then Jesus gives Peter a triple, serious responsibility: "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep."

And so there are lots of numbers in today's Gospel. What do these three explanations of the number of 153 large fish by Saint Cyril of Alexandria, Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome have in common? This: the embrace, the welcome of the Church, is to be as wide as the love of God for us in Jesus Christ. For Christ is the Church and the Church is Christ. And where Peter is, there is the Church.

And the lesson for you and me? We are not just “a number” in Jesus’ eyes. We are His beloved disciples, and He knows us and loves us – each of us and all of us. Every single one of us!