

27th Ordinary Time Year “A”

Have no anxiety at all

October 4-5, 2020

Readings: Isaiah 5:1-7; Phil 4:6-9; Matthew 21:33-43

There is a great story told about an abbot who was asked by Pope St. Gregory the Great to become a missionary in England. He agreed and led a group of about 40 monks from Rome to this missionary journey to England, then a very pagan land. When he reached the English Channel, the abbot became frightened of the dangerous waters, not to mention the stories he had heard about the Anglo-Saxon tribes.

He hurried back to Rome where he conferred with the Holy Father. Pope Gregory then encouraged the worried abbot in a letter in which, “He who would climb a lofty height must go by steps, not by leaps.” That monk went on to become a saint himself, St. Augustine of Canterbury, whose feast day (May 27) is also my anniversary ordination. We go by steps, not leaps, little by little in trust.

“Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God.” These words from our second reading come at the right time. The emotions I most often encounter these days are that of anxiety and fear. The phrases “Have no fear!” or “Do not be afraid!” appear 94 times, while “Fear of God” or “Fear of the Lord” occur 104 times in Scripture. This tells us that there is really nothing new under the sun.

We must confront fear and anxiety in faith and trust. People today are anxious about the state of our cities, about an election in a month, about how the pandemic has impacted their families personally, emotionally or financially. In short, people are anxious– it is obvious and palpable. The question then becomes– how do we deal with it? How do we prevent fear and anxiety from overtaking our peace of mind?

This year the Church celebrates the 25th anniversary of the landmark pro-life encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*). I urge you to read it.

October is Respect Life Month and the attention of many faithful Catholics is turned towards the battle for the protection of innocent human life in the womb and the honoring of human life in all stages, from conception through natural death. We know so much is at stake, for a divided nation is especially divided on key issues—abortion is certainly one of those, especially with a Supreme Court opening. End of life issues take on increased relevance.

The problems enter in when our anxiety about issues that are important to us begins to impact our normal day-to-day interactions. We appear anxious, we do not sleep well, we may turn to unhealthy behaviors such as overeating, seeking comfort in momentary pleasures that cannot last and in which in some cases are against God's laws.

The great writer of last century, C. S. Lewis, pointed out “Some people feel guilty about their anxieties and regard them as a defect of faith. I don't agree at all. They are afflictions, not sins. Like all afflictions, they are, if we can so take them, our share in the Passion of Christ”¹ What is our response? It is our fundamental conviction that Jesus remains at the helm of the ship of the Church, that anxiety is often due to our mistaken sense that we have to fix every problem. We feel helpless and unmoored.

This summer, I saw and heard many helicopters hovering over our city, especially at the State Capitol. It was eerie. At the same time, I imagined that the city looks quite different from that perspective. Too often, we can only see what is in front of our faces. We need perspective. Try to see the bigger picture, as if you were seeing the world from several thousand feet in the air.

When you do this, we better understand the conviction that we are still in God's hands, and that His plan continues to unfold replaces the anxiety that unwittingly is trusting too much in ourselves.

¹ C.S. Lewis, Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer

Some people are never relaxed, as there is always something that makes them anxious. The witness of Scripture is clear, as we hear in St. Matthew's Gospel: "Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ... your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."