

3rd Sunday Easter Year "C"

April 30- May 1, 2022

Readings: Acts 5:27-32,40-41; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

"We gave you strict orders, did we not, to stop teaching in that name?" I recall a court case, now more than a decade ago, in which a woman broke down on the witness stand when she described how a coworker sought comfort from her after losing her two-year-old child. The two hid behind a closet door to pray, for fear they would be seen and held in contempt of a court order from Santa Rosa County FL. They were schoolteachers.

She testified that the order compelled her to tell parents she may not even respond to an email if it contains a Scripture verse, or "God bless you" or "otherwise calling upon a deity to offer guidance, assistance or a blessing." After a countersuit, an amended order read: "Accordingly, 'Prayer' does not include customary, polite expressions and greetings, e.g., 'God Bless You' or 'Thank Heavens,' or a student's religious expression responsive to a legitimate academic assignment." Still, the order was chilling.

Unquestionably, there are challenges in our public schools, where it is clearly not appropriate to proselytize in the classroom- with that I agree 100%. But where do you draw the line? Last week, the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a case involving a public-school football coach in suburban Seattle who offered an optional prayer on the 50-yard line after games and was dismissed for doing so.

Did his actions violate the establishment clause? We shall see. These issues are not going away anytime soon, and today's first reading reminds us that neither are they new questions. There are many interpretations of the First amendment's clause stating: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." But the prohibition by the Sanhedrin was on an entirely different level. Christianity was shunned and forbidden. It was a classic power play to keep people quiet. The Jewish leaders were threatened.

But there is no question that these controversies highlight just how precarious one's religious beliefs can be. If we do not engage in the debate but choose to stand on the sidelines, our freedoms will continue to be placed in jeopardy. There are no simplistic answers—I am not that naïve.

While religious belief is intensely personal, that is different than saying it must be private. Personal and private are not exactly the same. While waiting for a flight recently, a sizable group of Orthodox Jews were at the adjoining gate. They proceeded to put on prayer shawls (tallits) and tefillin, a set of small black leather boxes with long straps, and commenced their morning prayers, facing the direction of Jerusalem.

Their actions did not annoy me in the least. Personally, I simply take out my phone and pull up the iBreviary app and pray quietly. But some are bothered by any public religious expression. It strikes a nerve, and makes people pull back, retreating into a very privatized life of faith. We must guard against this. Three times, Jesus asked Peter, “Do you love me?” He needed to be assured that his faith was strong enough to withstand the opposition he would soon face. By now, the apostles were coming to grips with the reality that they now were entrusted with proclaiming to the world the saving message of Jesus Christ.

The Catholic Church in America is gearing up for a Eucharistic Congress in July of 2024. There will be many initiatives leading to it. On this year's Solemnity of Corpus Christi in June, we will be holding a Eucharistic Procession in conjunction with our 10:00 Mass. We had an initial planning meeting. Processions are a vital part of our Catholic tradition, not done for show, but as a witness of the communal aspect of our faith.

Our expression of faith is not limited to within these four walls. Do not fall into the trap of concluding that our Constitution requires a strictly privatized faith. Do not let societal pressure affect your decisions. Today marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rosary Procession. I encourage you to participate. Jesus asked, “Do you love me?” Let's show him our answer.

[1<sup>st</sup> Communicants- I now address you!]

Today, you give public witness by the way you dress that something very special is happening in your lives. We are proud of you today and we want you to be proud that now you have been prepared well enough to understand the beauty and power of the Eucharist.

Well guess what? We too want to be as proud as you are today. Every Mass is special. Today is personally very special for you. And it takes place, not in your own homes, but right here in the family of the Church. We are all in this together. We all rejoice with you.