

Homily: Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany
(February 20, 2011)

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Corinthian congregation had entered a difficult period in its life. If you sit down and read St. Paul's first letter to them (and I would strongly recommend you do so, preferably in one sitting) you will discover a parish whose life mildly resembles the angst of teenage-hood.

The congregation was experiencing some growing pains as their collective identity was still being worked out into something tangible. Questions such as, "Who are we?" and "Why are we here?" were demanding answers that were not completely ready to be offered yet.

And Paul, their spiritual father himself was fraught with worry as he attempted to address these issues; to help guide them from spiritual childhood to adulthood; from the milk of their first hearing of the Gospel to the solid food of a sure and mature faith.

His letters therefore persistently address issues of ecclesiology, that is, the theology of the Church, for example the nature of Christian community, the relationship between individuals and the body, the structure of the church and its leadership.

One of his greatest concerns is defining what is expected and acceptable behaviour in the community of faith – those identifying marks of the Spirit that reveal one to be a Christian versus the marks of the world.

In this vein, Paul's opening chapters remind a community of self-satisfied and fractious converts that they are chosen in the first place for their weakness and that their calling is to an ever greater identification with the weakness and hiddenness of God's

action in Christ. For Paul, the Church is the place where selfless service is learned, in the daily rub of communal life and in our weakness, we conform ourselves to the example of Jesus.

St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in the second century highlights the reason for doing so. He says in a letter: “Try to conform yourselves to God’s ways by showing reverence to one another....For God has served and ‘reverenced’ his creatures, and Christ is the prototype.”

But the Corinthian congregation was having trouble grasping this calling. As Archbishop Rowan Williams comments, “They believe themselves to have entered securely upon an inheritance; and Paul expends some of his heaviest sarcasm upon this confidence. They are confident of their spiritual riches, they measure their growth in terms of tangible spiritual acquisition; but God marks out his servants by their constant humiliations, ‘as the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things’” as Paul says in chapter four.

You heard him. St. Paul is telling us that as Christians we are called to be the rubbish of the world and the dregs of society. Why? Because it means we are not then of the world but rather just reside within it. If we were adored and desired by the world then we would truly belong to it and not to him who emptied himself of his glory to become rubbish for our sake.

For St. Paul, growth is not a thing to be achieved or acquired. Growth is the living out of and through the pain of life. It is a conscious choice to endure the helplessness brought about by the undeniable fact and reality of Jesus death; of *his* choice to plunge

into the depths of human despair and abandonment. As Paul reminds his people elsewhere, “though he was rich, yet for your sake...became poor, so that by his poverty, you might become rich.”

In Jesus Christ resides a single, great act of obedience and self-emptying. And this is the example set for his followers, both in our spiritual journeys as individuals and in the way we approach the life of faith in community.

Unless we are willing to be stripped and laid bare as Christ allowed himself to be, there will never be space within us into which God and neighbour can enter and dwell. Thus, there will never be an opportunity for authentic community and growth.

Again as Rowan Williams reminds us, if we believe we can experience our healing without deepening our hurt we have understood nothing of the roots of our faith. It is, paradoxically, the effort to plunge into the depths of our hurt, wherein the road to peace and compassion lies. Are we truly able show compassion and thus be in communion with another human being if we ourselves have not entered these waters?

Now the good news in all of this is that our hope lies in the reality that Jesus Christ is the model for discipleship in community. He has gone before us into the dark places of doubt, fear and weakness and endured unto death. And so we are encouraged to endure our doubt, fear and weakness by the knowledge that our salvation is won by the doubt, fear and weakness of Christ.

This is a journey in community and it is one every Christian community must walk together. Our fulfillment of the Gospel mandate of being sacraments of Christ to the world through our proclamation of the Gospel in word and deed, our service of

compassion to all seeking purpose and our open invitation to those seeking welcome can only be accomplished as a body.

No one person can fulfill the entire mission of the Church. Neither can a minority accomplish the immensity of the task God has laid before us. It takes every single person. The clergy alone, the corporation or advisory board alone or the laity alone will never succeed in fulfilling the purpose of this community. Only all of us invested together can hope to live up to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who is at work here.

St. Paul is quite clear about this when he says, "I laid a foundation and someone else is building on it." It took all sorts of people to begin the Corinthian congregation Paul, Apollos, Cephas and so on and it will take all of them together with the people to carry out the continuing mission of Christ.

If heartily engaged in, this mission of selfless service will produce growth. The type of growth we are talking about is growth in spirit and in community, not necessarily in temporal categories of acquisition. Though I suspect, these will take care of themselves in the process.

But growth in Christ and spirit and mission must come first. And that growth is a deepening movement of each person to live out the obedient sacrifice of Christ. A working out of and through the life of suffering and pain that is part and parcel of Christian faith lived out in a broken world from Monday to Saturday, not just on Sunday morning.

This is what makes the difference between the Church and a country club. If church is merely a Sunday by Sunday thing; if there is no connection between work, play,

the daily activities of the week and liturgy, prayer, fellowship and evangelism then the community will fade.

So how do we take a step towards growth? Well we can begin by sharing our individual and parish stories. And we will have an opportunity to do just this on April 3 and 10. Those days we will be joined by Br. Reginald who will participate in the liturgy then facilitate a story-telling and reflection session afterwards over lunch. We will share. We will celebrate. We will discover and learn as we begin to recognise in others all that is life-giving in this parish.

And you don't have to be a long-time member of Holy Family to attend by the way. Each and every one here is beloved by God and has something to offer this community. Each has a story of faith to share that enriches this congregation.

I trust that out of this sharing the Spirit of God will be unleashed in this place and we will begin to build relationships of trust and friendship one with another. Now isn't that the basis of the Christian life, for if we cannot sit and share our story with another Christian, if we cannot trust them to listen, then how can we serve the world around us together in Christ's name?