

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time—Cycle “A”

(July 26, 2020 homily by Fr. Robert J. Schrader, Pastor of Peace of Christ Parish)

“We know that all things work for good for those who love God.” St. Paul assured the Romans of this 2,000 years ago, but don’t we all have need of receiving that same assurance today in 2020. By the fact that we are in church today at Mass speaks loudly that we love God, and I’m sure we each have a long list of things that we are praying that God will help “work for good”—

- An end to COVID-19;
- Health and safety for all our loved ones;
- Security in our jobs;
- A plan to successfully re-open our schools;
- A return to all the “normal” things and routines of the past that gave us comfort and peace.

What our readings ask us to examine within our hearts today is:

- If God were to say to us, “Ask something of me and I will give it to you,” for what would we ask? What has the utmost value in our life? And
- What is our buried treasure for which we would sell everything to obtain?
- What is our pearl for which, upon finding, we would trade everything?

I would suspect that, no matter how we answered those questions in the past, our answers would be different this year because of all we have lived through since this past March.

In March itself when everything shut down, I know I was continuing to look forward to Holy Week and Easter Baptisms when the shut-down would be over.

When April brought those feasts and we were still closed, I still looked forward to First Communions, Confirmations, Graduations, Ministerium and Weddings in May. (Seven of those First Communions take place this weekend.)

As reality set in about even those things not being able to occur as scheduled, I still had hope for the annual Priests’ Retreat I attend in June and a planned-for week of vacation in July. Neither of these have transpired.

It's only now that the handwashing, mask-wearing, and social-distancing have been shown to be successful here in New York, and that promising stories are beginning to appear in the news about vaccines becoming available perhaps even before the end of the year, that hope is reappearing on the horizon—sort of like Comet Neowise making a surprise display in our evening skies.

If God said to me today, “Ask something of me and I will give it to you,” I would probably request a safe path through to “post-COVID-19 days” ahead.

As to that buried treasure for which I would sell everything, someday it is as simple as a regular day off where I could get together (without super precautions) to gather with friends, go see a movie, attend an RPO concert at the Eastman, and be “burdened” with nothing more than the everyday “routines” which in the past were so taken for granted by us all.

And that “pearl of great price” has been for many of us in these months anything from a roll of toilet paper to a container of sanitizing wipes to just the news that we are moving up one Phase number in the progression to re-opening and the new “normal.”

If, indeed, like St. Paul, “We know that all things work for good for those who love God,” maybe we need look mostly at how truly we love God:

--Do we love God enough to spend, if not a Holy Hour, at least several minutes of dedicated time in conversation with God by way of prayer each day?

--Do we show our love of God by translating it into love of neighbor in how we are living these challenging days and helping others to do so as well?

--Have we taken time to put our affairs in order and say what needs saying and do what needs doing before it's too late to put, say, or do anything at all?

Looking outward,

--Are there others whose request of God we might be able to help answer?

--Is the buried treasure of our neighbor something we could help retrieve?

--Is the pearl of great price of a loved one something we can help deliver?

Indeed, when we prayed in today's Psalm 119, “Let your kindness comfort me....Let your compassion come to me,” may it cause us to reflect on how we may be the instruments of God's comfort & compassion coming to others in our lives.

As a parish, we have faced many challenges during these past four months:

- While closed, we had to find a way to stay connected through Facebook;
- We now have to keep connected, and have ordered a system to do so;
- We had to re-schedule so many people's sacraments—that goes on now;
- We had to face financial challenges—your faithfulness helped so much;
- We were called on to give last rites to individuals; may they rest in peace.
- We lost a tenant for our St. John's school property; pray we be successful.
- And now we have a new challenge with our own St. Ambrose Academy.

In mid-March before everything closed down, we were actually ahead of last year in getting new enrollment registrations for this coming school year. Then all that came to a halt. With everyone awaiting the Governor's August 7th ruling on school re-openings, our enrollment has been stuck at 57 students. In a conference call with those in the diocesan Catholic Schools Office, the conclusion was reached that 57 students does not compose the "critical mass" needed to re-open our parish school in September.

After much discussion, it was decided that we could reopen if we can get enrollment up to at least 80 students by August 14th, one week after the Governor's decision. A letter was sent last Tuesday to all school families with this information. While many of our school families have, for a variety of reasons, not normally completed the registration process each year until close to Labor Day, that cannot be the case this year. The clock is ticking, and Friday, August 14th is the deadline—not one that will be extended: our actual enrollment at that time will determine the decision whether we stay open.

To assist our successfully meeting that deadline, the registration fee has been cut in half and various tuition aid and scholarships are being made available as much as we have to offer. Other positive reasons to enroll include:

- our building capacity is 720 students, so we need not worry about the 80% restriction with which area public schools have to contend;
- our classrooms are large and our classes are small, so social-distancing will not be a problem for all Pre-K 3-year-olds through 5th graders that you register;
- we will not have to resort to a hybrid approach: we will have in-person instruction full day, five days a week (no need for parents to stay home);
- we have free breakfast and lunch and before & after care if needed.

Our school's 100th anniversary is only 3 years away, and it is our strong hope that we will have a grand celebration when these next 36 months have transpired.

Since our letter was sent out last Tuesday, a number of households without children have stepped forth to offer donations or even full scholarships to help those families who want to enroll but whose economic situation during these months has not allowed them to find a way. So if anyone else is in that position to offer such assistance, please contact the school or our parish Finance Office to let us know. Every bit helps.

I know that—before the shutdown in March—a similar challenge to secure sufficient registrations for Siena Junior High was not successful, and they are closing. However, two other elementary parochial schools which are more like our own—St. Agnes School in Avon and St. Mary Our Mother School in Horseheads—were given that same challenge, and they succeeded.

Therefore, yes, it is possible and—given that we are being asked to enroll at least 80 and not the full 110 we had last year—I believe it is quite doable. It is all up to ourselves and what we can do in these next 20 days. Indeed, if we get to that 80, I truly believe we'll actually be able to get an enrollment closer to that higher number by the time opening day arrives.

So, if God should now say to us, "Ask something of me and I will give it to you," among the many things that come to mind, let us include our school. And if we should now be asked, "What is our buried treasure for which we would sell everything to obtain?" let's remember our school which may have been buried in the back of our mind until this critical challenge which has now emerged brought it to the forefront. And if we should be asked, "What is our pearl for which we would trade everything?" let's truly not forget the great jewel our school has been during the years of the Great Depression, World War 2, a fire which almost destroyed the school, 9/11, the 2008 financial crisis, and more. COVID-19 will be conquered soon with a vaccine. Let's not let COVID-19 conquer our school!

As we take to heart the rich images in today's readings and apply them to ourselves, our times, and our parish and its school, let's all continue to raise all these concerns to our God, the source of comfort and compassion for ourselves, and the One who enables us to be the instruments of these for one another!