

Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year C
(May 9, 2010)

Special Celebrations

When people disagree with one another about deeply held convictions, especially those based on religious beliefs, coming to peaceable agreement is no easy task. The vitriolic exchanges and even threats of physical violence that have been voiced in the process of reforming health care in the United States, for example, are quite different from the way the first Christians resolved their differences regarding observance of the Mosaic law in changing circumstances. (Barbara Reid, *America*, May 3, 2010)

There are so many things to talk about today. I am going to do something that we were told we should not do when we are preaching a homily and that is talk about more than one thing. I want to say a little about the readings because they are so rich. I want to talk about the first communion that will happen during this celebration. Then, too, it's Mother's Day and we can't ignore that. Finally, this past Friday was the twenty-fifth anniversary of Fr. Horace McKenna's death and I want to say a few words about him as well. Is that too much? Well, bear with me and we'll see if we can't bring it all together somehow and still manage not to go on for too long.

First of all the readings: In our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles we see the early Christian community coming to grips with a problem, a major problem. There was disagreement about admitting Gentile converts to the church. Some people said that they first had to become Jews, that is, observe all the laws and customs of the Jewish religion. Remember these first Christians were all Jews and for some of them there was no other way to call themselves children of God except by following the Law of Moses and so they felt that Gentiles who wanted to follow Jesus had first to adhere to the Mosaic Law, all 613 items of it. But others felt differently, especially Paul and Barnabas who traveled all the way back to Jerusalem to take part in this, the very first Council of the Church.

Well, you heard the outcome. Together people with widely opposing opinions came to a peaceful agreement under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In their letter to the new Gentile converts they said, “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” not to impose anything burdensome on the people but only what was necessary. Only what was necessary, not anything burdensome! A truly inspired decision. The wonderful thing was that both sides, divided as they were in the beginning, were willing to listen, to work through their disagreements, and to let the Holy Spirit carry the day. It’s a model for all our meetings and discussions – unfortunately not always followed in the subsequent history of the Christian community.

According to Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, it was the guidance of the Spirit and the openness of the community to the presence of the Spirit in their deliberations that allowed them to reach this harmonious conclusion.

The Spirit also brings peace. In the Gospel Jesus says that peace is his farewell gift to them. But what does this mean? What in fact do *we* mean when we turn to one another before sharing the Body and Blood of Christ and wish each other the peace of Christ? What does peace mean in a world that is so torn by dissension, strife, and division, even among Christians? What’s interesting is that Jesus predicted this confusing mix. He tells his friends, “I have said this to you so that in me you may find peace. In the world you will find suffering, but have courage, I have overcome the world.” Jesus overcame the world by opening his heart to others and by the ultimate gift of self, his death upon the cross. The great and glorious fact is that we, too, can overcome the world, by opening our hearts as he did, opening our hearts to that Spirit that helped resolve the disagreements of the first Christians, opening our hearts to the Jesus who said, “Come to me, all you who are burdened and I will refresh you,” opening our hearts to one another. Do we want to feel the peace of Christ? Do we want to glow with it? The best way to do that is to share it, to give it away.

As you say “peace” today, think this: with all my heart I wish you and pray for you, the salvation God took flesh to bring, the redemption from sin Christ bought with his blood. I wish you the grace of God that is the beginning of glory, that is eternal life here and now. I wish you deeper and

deeper oneness with God. I wish you the love that binds us all together and makes us his one body. I wish you the compassion that heals all hurts and cures the wounds of sin and division. I wish you the peace of Christ.

Fr. Horace McKenna felt that peace. And he did his best to share it, to give it away. Do you remember how last week we heard Jesus say, "Love one another as I have loved you"? Jesus loved us to death, literally. Horace lived and died for the people he served, especially the poor. He actually put his life on the line in trying to bring justice to what he perceived as the unjust situation that existed in southern Maryland while the churches were still segregated. And when he tried to correct the injustice his life was threatened. But he did not give up. Indeed we can honestly say he loved his people to death, just as Jesus loved us. We will celebrate the life of this extraordinary man this coming Saturday here at Holy Trinity at 6:30 p.m. in our parish hall named, as we all know, for Fr. McKenna. All are invited.

And of course today is Mother's Day, a day to remember and to be grateful for our mothers who brought us into this world and who in their own way knew what it meant to love as Jesus loved, even if they never thought about it. We'll never know the sacrifices that they made and made willingly and with love. Today we thank God for them and we pray for them.

Finally we know how Jesus loved children and how he wanted them to come to him. And today twelve of our young parishioners will receive their first Holy Communion and I would like to spend just a few moments speaking to them. . . .