

## Feast of the Ascension – A Cycle

June 1, 2014

*(Acts 1,1-11; Ephesians 1, 17-23; Matthew 28,16-20)* Many of you know the story of how St. Boniface Church began. Since, however, 2013 is the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding and we have been celebrating that anniversary for the past year, I thought it would be appropriate to say a few words about our history. Catholics who settled in this area of Cumminsville, as it was called, went to St. James Church in White Oak or traveled downtown to a Catholic Church down there. By the way, the name Northside was used to designate the north side of Cumminsville. In 1853 a parish was established in Northside and was named St. Aloysius. Within just a few years, the parish had grown so large that a second parish was built. The official reason for this was they needed more space to accommodate everyone. The unofficial reason, I have heard, was that the Irish and the Germans who made up the congregation didn't get along with one another very well. They drew lots as to who would keep St. Aloysius, and the Irish won the draw. The Germans were given \$1500 to build a new church. That's a bit more than what the parish will have to pay to put a new garage door on my garage. The German church was dedicated in November, 1863, and appropriately named St. Boniface after the patron saint of Germany. St. Aloysius Church's name was changed to St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland. I might mention that my great, great uncle, Fr. Boniface Godfrey Topmoeller was the second pastor of St. Boniface and he pastored the parish for 21 years. Of course, I can't go into detail about everything that happened here in the past 150 years, but I would like to mention a couple of personal items. Over 100 years ago my grandparents built their home just one block away on Delaney St. where they lived for the rest of their lives. My mother, aunt and uncles all went to St. Boniface School and my parents were married here. They were German. My father was Irish, so after their marriage they went to St. Patrick's and that's where I went to school for three years. Twenty-five years ago, I was stationed in Loveland, and when I left there, I was so worn out that I requested a year and a half sabbatical, which the Archbishop allowed. When it was time to come back to work in a parish, I was sent to St. Patrick's and was told that I should work to merge St. Patrick's and St. Boniface. Within a year they were merged and now the Northside community, which began as one parish, is one parish again and I have been blessed to be the pastor here for almost 23 years. That's almost half of my priesthood. A lot of people's lives have been touched here at St. Boniface. The time has really gone fast. That's the end of my history lesson. I am grateful to all those who worked hard making it possible for us to celebrate 150 years.

Today we celebrate the Ascension. It is interesting that our gospel from Matthew does not mention the Ascension. Matthew's gospel ends with an appearance of Jesus after the resurrection. What Jesus had to say on that occasion, which I will reflect on in a few moments, is appropriate to today's feast. First I want to say a word about how Mark, Luke and John deal with the Ascension. John only mentions the Ascension in Jesus' comments to Mary Magdalene when he appeared to her. Mark has a very brief mention of it, without giving any detailed or visual description of it. The image we all have of the Ascension comes from both the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles which Luke also wrote. Luke gives us two versions of the Ascension. In his gospel he tells us

Jesus ascended on Easter Sunday night and in the Acts of the Apostles, Luke informs us that Jesus ascended 40 days after Easter. Fr. Benoit makes a useful distinction between these two portrayals in Luke's two volumes. The ascension of Jesus on Easter can be understood as the glorification of Jesus in his Father's presence; i.e., being seated at God's right hand thus making the ascension an essential part of the resurrection while the levitation of Jesus' body 40 days later symbolized the terminus of the appearances of the risen Jesus. During that brief period of time between the two ascensions, Jesus made many appearances: to his women followers, to his apostles and to other disciples, instructing them and assuring them he had truly risen. (*Ray Brown, The Anchor Bible, John XIII-XXI, pg 1012*)

This brings us back to today's gospel. It is an appearance of the risen and glorified Jesus. If we accept Fr. Benoit's explanation of Jesus' ascension to glory on Easter and his other ascension 40 days later, Jesus would already be seated at the right hand of the Father in this appearance to the eleven in Galilee which we just heard in today's gospel. Indeed we could assume that from what Jesus said in the gospel: "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Today's gospel is often referred to as the Great Commission. Matthew stresses the teaching part of Jesus' ministry as he commissions the eleven to carry on his teaching mission. They are to teach all nations what Jesus taught them and baptize them, and they are to know that Jesus is still with them. Matthew begins his gospel with this theme when he quotes Isaiah the prophet that "the virgin will be with child and bear a son, and they will call his name 'Emmanuel' (which means 'God with us')." Matthew now ends his gospel on that note.

And on that note I will continue on with the Mass, knowing that Jesus is always with us, but especially when we are united with him in the Eucharist. Amen.

## **Vigil of Pentecost – A Cycle**

**June 8, 2014**

**INTRODUCTION:** There are eleven possible readings for the feast of Pentecost, six for the vigil and five for the feast itself. [On Sunday there is a special sequence before the gospel. Only Easter and Pentecost have a special sequence that is required and Corpus Christi has an optional one.] That's because today is indeed a special feast, the third most important feast in the Church year. That's why I asked everyone to wear red, the color of the Holy Spirit. Today's feast celebrates the completion of Jesus' saving work with his sending of the Holy Spirit.

Our first reading today is from Genesis. The story follows the story of the great flood. Those who survived the flood intended to make sure they would be able to escape floods in the future, so they decided to build a high tower. Notice a little satire here. In their pride, they are going to build a tower up to the heavens and God decides to "come down" to see what's going on. He confuses their speech to put an end to their prideful building project. God does not want to divide people but to unite them. In the account

of Pentecost, in a passage that is read Sunday from the Acts of the Apostles, that's exactly what he does as he gives the apostles a special gift of tongues so that people from every nation would understand the message of God's universal love that they were preaching.

### ***Pentecost – A Cycle***

***June 8, 2014***

Most of our prayers to the Holy Spirit involve asking the Holy Spirit to come. A monk named Symeon, the New Theologian who lived about 1000 years ago, wrote a prayer that begins: "Come, true light! Come, eternal life! Come, hidden mystery! Come, nameless treasure!" It goes on and on using thirty different titles for the Holy Spirit, each of which starts with the word "come." (*I Believe in the Holy Spirit, Congar, Part II, pg 112*) [The sequence we just prayed follows a similar format.]

Two weeks ago, we heard a gospel where Jesus was talking to his apostles at the Last Supper. He told them "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me because I live and you will live." "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth..." It is this other Advocate who gives us the hope and the joy and the love that comes from knowing that Jesus is with us. Just as Jesus reveals the Father to us, the Spirit reveals Jesus to us. Especially do we experience this in the Sacraments, in helping a person in need, and while reading the Scriptures. St. Augustine speaks of the Spirit as our inner Master, our inner teacher, or as Jesus calls the Spirit, the Spirit of truth.

I could give many examples of how the Spirit has touched my life, but I will limit it to one. I may have told this story before, and if I have, please pardon me for repeating it. When I was in grade school, the Sisters encouraged all of us to say three Hail Mary's every day that God would help us know what our calling in life was to be, whether we would serve God as a married person or dedicate ourselves to a religious vocation, whether we would be a teacher or book keeper or secretary or sales person. So from grade school on, for many years I said three Hail Mary's every day, never sure what I should be. I thought of being a farmer or an artist or an accountant or teacher. The one thing on my list I kept hoping I wasn't being called to do was to be a priest, because, as a priest, I knew I would not be able to marry and have a family. Because the idea kept coming back to me, I decided maybe that's what God wanted, so I decided to go to the seminary after Elder. I had a lot of doubts as to whether it was right for me, but I promised myself I would try out the seminary for one year. The next year I went, still full of doubts, and I committed myself only for one year. I did that for about five years until one day I was in the chapel praying, and all of a sudden, in an instant, every doubt left me. It was like I had been in a dark room and someone came along and turned on all the lights. Being the compulsive type that I am, I had to check to see if what I felt was for real. I stopped asking God if he would show me what he wanted me to do, and I prayed that if being a priest was something he didn't want me to do, he would have me flunk out of the seminary. That was the only sign I asked for. God gave me a sign I didn't ask for: my grades significantly improved after that experience. I guess that was like Pentecost for me. It was an experience that kept me from dropping out of the

priesthood in the 60's and early 70's, while other priests were requesting laicization. I saw guys leave the priesthood who were much more talented, much more intelligent, much more personable than I was and I asked myself, what do they see that I don't see that they are leaving. But the experience I had in the chapel that day in the seminary continued to make clear to me where God wanted me.

The Spirit is like the wind; we can't see the wind but we can see what it does as it shakes the trees and flies the kites and brings in the clouds that give us rain. The Spirit works in hundreds and thousands of ways, to be a gift to us and to help bring us to God. When people tell me they are not religious but they are "spiritual" I hope it is the Holy Spirit that is guiding them and not a narcissistic spirit. There are many kinds of spirits and some of them are not the kind we want to follow. St. Paul tells us: "when the Holy Spirit controls our lives, the Spirit will produce in us: love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." (*Galatians 5,22-23*). It's no wonder we pray Come, Holy Spirit, Come.

## **Feast of the Holy Trinity – A Cycle**

**June 15, 2014**

**INTRODUCTION:** (Exodus 34,4b-6.8-9; II Corinthians 13,11-13; John 3,16-18)

Today in our first reading we hear about Moses who lived about 1300 years before Christ. At that time and for hundreds of years thereafter, all the nations that surrounded Israel worshipped many gods. It would be difficult to count all the Egyptian, Greek or Roman gods, some of which we are familiar with, but imagine having 700 gods to keep track of. Evidence was discovered that around the time of Abraham (about 4000 years ago), the Babylonians did honor 700 gods. If a person had to pray to all of them, they would never get to eat or sleep. Since the gods expected earth people to give them honor and sacrifices, one would become anxious thinking one or the other god might come and take vengeance on you for neglecting to give him or her appropriate worship! Anyway, that's the way it was for centuries – except for the Hebrews. Their God revealed to them that there was no other God, but their God, often called the God of our Fathers or the Holy One of Israel. In the early history of the Hebrew people, they believed there were other gods in the world, such as the gods of the Egyptians, the Babylonians, or the Canaanites, but their God was the only God they must worship. We know from their history they failed a lot in limiting their worship only to their own God. Around 500 or 600 years before Christ, they came to the conclusion that the gods of other nations did not exist at all, that their God was the only God in the entire world and their God was powerful everywhere. At the time of Moses in 1300 BC, when God was leading his people out of Egypt, God gave them a special gift: he told them his name. Having God's name symbolized a more intimate relationship between God and his chosen people and it meant also they could call on God, by name, when they needed God's help. In our reading today, we hear God revealing his sacred name to Moses. In the Hebrew bible, that name is Yahweh, but the Jews chose never to pronounce it. That is because they wished to avoid any possible risk of saying God's name in vain. So whenever Yahweh came up in the sacred text, as it does today, they always

substituted the word “Lord.” God not only revealed God’s name but God revealed the kind of God he was: God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity. Although God has no gender, it tends to be customary to refer to God as “he” because Jesus taught us to think of God and pray to God as our Father.

**HOMILY:** Congratulations and best wishes to all of our fathers and father figures. We are all grateful for your support, your guidance and direction, your patience, your dedication and most of all your unselfish love.

We inherited our faith in one God from the Jews. When Jesus came, an observant Jew, he revealed to us new ideas about this one God. Jesus spoke of God as Father, yet Jesus showed himself to be God. He healed people, raised the dead, forgave sins and gave the apostles the authority to forgive sins, he cast our demons, he interpreted the Torah (the law of God) with authority, and he spoke not as if he were the Father, but as if he were equal to the Father. In John’s gospel he says: “I and the Father are one,” and “he who sees me sees also the Father.” He tells the Jews “before Abraham was, I am.” (Abraham lived 1800 or 1900 years before Christ). He prays for himself: “Father, glorify me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world began.” He prays for his apostles, “I pray that they all may be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you.” In addition to what Jesus said, and by showing signs that he was divine, Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Truth, another Advocate who was neither Father nor Jesus, who would speak with authority, and would take what belongs to Jesus and declare it to the apostles.

How to integrate all this with faith in one God took a few centuries as Church Fathers debated, as various heresies arose, as wars were fought and blood was shed especially in the long process of overcoming the heresy of Arianism, which taught that Jesus was not equal to the Father. Eventually a Church Council, the Council of Nicaea in 325, declared what we profess each Sunday in the Nicene Creed, that the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; the Father, however, is not the Son and the Son is not the Father and the Father and Son are not the Holy Spirit. The council of Nicaea did not say much about the Holy Spirit, so more was added on to the Creed by the council of Constantinople in 381. The difficulty of dealing with the mystery of the Trinity continues today as the Church suffered centuries ago and continues to suffer a great split in what it believes about the Holy Spirit. Roman Catholics teach the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son while Orthodox Christians say the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father through the Son. And still today two of the largest denominations of Christians in the world are the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church.

Should we be surprised that God is too great for us to fully understand? If we perfectly understood what God is like: we would be as great as God. We just accept what is a mystery, the mystery of the Trinity, a term given to us by Tertullian around the year 200 AD.

Why should the Trinity matter? Simply because God wants to reveal God's self to us, just as two lovers want to share with each other their hopes and dreams and joys and fears. God wants us to know him as well as is possible because he loves us and wants us to love him. The Trinity also matters because it is the only way that we can know the greatness of Jesus and the love Jesus has for us that our God humbled himself totally for our sake. The persons of the Trinity are united in love, and God is a model for how he would want us to be, not fighting with one another or exploiting one another but loving and caring about each other.

Let me sum this all up with two quotes I thought were very good. The doctrine of the Trinity is given to us in Scripture, not in formulated definition, but in fragmentary allusions. Alister McGrath said about the Trinity: the individuality of the persons is maintained while each person shares in the life of the other two.

## **The Body and Blood of Christ – A Cycle**

**June 22, 2014**

**INTRODUCTION** – (*Deuteronomy 8,2-3.14b-16a; I Cor. 10,16-17; John 6,51-58*)

The setting for our first reading is on the east side of the Jordan River across from the Promised Land. Moses' job of leading the people of God is just about finished. He is giving them some last minute instructions before they cross the Jordan and enter the Land and he goes off to his eternal reward. His fear is that the people, once they get comfortable in this new land, will become complacent and forget the God on whom they depend. So he tells them to remember - remember the journey from Egypt, remember the long time they spent in the desert and especially remember the food with which God fed them - the manna. This reading (especially the mention of manna) is meant to introduce us to the main focus of today's feast - how God sustains us with the flesh and blood of his Son, Jesus, the bread of life.

**HOMILY:** Food is a big part of our lives. Not only are we aware of it throughout the day (and even at night sometimes), our newspapers, magazines, books, ads on TV keep telling us about food, how to fix it, where to buy it, what tastes good, what is healthy for us and what isn't.

When Jesus taught, he used examples that touched the lives of the simple people in the culture in which he lived. I suspect their interest in food was just as great as ours. The whole sixth chapter of John is about food. It begins with Jesus feeding a crowd of 5000 people with 5 barley loaves and two fish. None of the gospel stories tell us how he did it, but it must have been spectacular because it's the only miracle (other than the resurrection of Jesus himself) that all four gospels tell us about. The people were so impressed that they wanted to make Jesus their king. They didn't understand that he was already a king, but his kingdom was not of this world. He tried to explain that he didn't come to them to feed them free meals, but to feed them with a food that will bring them eternal life. "I am the bread that comes down from heaven, that a person eat it

and never die.” (*Jn. 6,50*) Initially as he spoke of himself as the bread of life he was talking about having faith in him and living as he has taught.

Today’s gospel, however, continues on with a new theme on Jesus as the bread of life. Not only were they to believe in him, but they were to eat his flesh and drink his blood. If they had some problems with what Jesus had already said, this really blew their minds. Jesus knew this idea really disturbed them, so what did he do? He repeated it with greater emphasis and clarity: “Amen, amen, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.” (*Jn 6,53*) And he repeated it again. This is where many in the crowd began to walk away, saying to themselves that Jesus was out of his mind. Jesus didn’t call them back to tell them they were misunderstanding him. He knew they understood exactly what he was saying.

This is where many people today part company with Jesus. They don’t say he is out of his mind, for they like many of the things he taught. They think his teachings on love and his demonstration of his love for people by forgiving their sins or healing the sick is awesome. They may even call themselves Christians or Catholics, but they find it too much to accept that this consecrated host and sip from the chalice is really Jesus’ body and blood. They can’t say what Peter did when Jesus asked him if he wanted to leave with the others. Peter said: “Lord, to whom shall we go? It is you who have the words of eternal life; and we have come to believe and are convinced that you are God’s Holy One.” (*Jn 6,68*)

We take it on faith when we eat healthy food, take our vitamins, count our calories that this is good for us. We have to take it on faith too that the Eucharist is good for us. “The person who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life (and he remains in me and I in him).” (*Jn 6,54&56*) We can’t go wrong in believing in these words because they come from God himself and God would not lie.

We cannot see with our eyes that bread and wine have been changed into the body and blood of Christ, we can only see that this is so with our mind. We allow our mind to see what our eyes cannot see because we have chosen to believe what Jesus said. As I seek to believe and to visualize the Eucharist as Jesus himself, I find I am helped by modern physics. This is how it works for me: modern physics tells us that a substance may look solid, but it really isn’t. That is because everything around us is made of atoms and molecules. There’s a lot of space in things, and a lot of energy. If I were to set this podium on fire, what would make it burn? It would burn because of the energy contained in it and the burning would release that energy. If I sit down and eat a sandwich, my body breaks the sandwich down into energy that allows me to keep going. I like to visualize the Eucharist in terms of divine energy. I picture the Holy Spirit transforming the normal energy that’s in wheat and wine into divine energy, an energy that somehow creates in us eternal life. What that means, we have yet to find out. We only know that Jesus referred to eternal life as “the fullness of life.” (*Jn 10,10*) No more suffering, pain, growing old, no more wars or hatred and no more death.

Do you want to grow deeper in your faith in the Eucharist. One way I would suggest is to come to Mass one day during the week or to come to a Holy Hour on Wednesday morning or Friday afternoon. I pray that more people will take our Lord's words to heart: "The bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world." (*Jn 6,51*) Amen.

## **Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul – A Cycle**

**June 29, 2014**

One cold and snowy morning at 7:00 a.m. when I was stationed at St. Columban in Loveland, walking over to the Sisters' house to say morning Mass, I was preoccupied with staff problems, stress, building a church, finances and the disunity in the parish. I felt like "who needs this?" I can't do it anymore. I'll confess my mind was not on the prayers of the divine office which I was saying as I walked. But suddenly the words of St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians (6,9) got my attention. Paul wrote: "Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up." It was one of those moments when I knew clearly it was God speaking to me rather than Paul, and the words gave me a new spurt of energy that helped me keep going.

The memory of this event comes back from time to time, and it especially occurred to me when I was trying to figure out what to say on the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul. Both Peter and Paul are considered to be the persons most responsible for the development of Christianity after Jesus ascended into heaven. Many books are written about both of them, and I could say a lot about each, but in trying to think of what to say, I was looking for some common theme. The words of Paul in Galatians: "Let us not grow tired of doing good, for in due time we shall reap our harvest, if we do not give up" seemed to be a common theme for both of them.

I know Peter's mind was closed to any suffering Jesus might have to go through when Jesus predicted that as Messiah, he would suffer greatly under the Jewish leaders. But as we know from the Scriptures, in spite of his aversion to suffering, Peter went through some very challenging times. He didn't give up; he stayed faithful even when the going got really difficult. There is an apocryphal story about Peter toward the end of his life. When he was in Rome, Nero was the Emperor and he was persecuting the Christians. Peter found out he was to be arrested and his friends persuaded him to leave the city. As he does so, he sees Jesus approaching, walking toward Rome. Peter asks, "Quo vadis?" (Where are you going, Lord?) Jesus said he is going to Rome to be crucified again. Peter realized he could not give up the ministry he was doing or run away, but he had to stay in Rome and continue witnessing for his faith - even if it meant he would have to give up his life, which he did. He was crucified upside down. One commentator (Bart Ehrman) claims that Peter chose to be crucified upside down, not because he felt unworthy to be killed in the same manner as Jesus, but to teach the people around him a lesson: that the world and its values are upside down. The words *Quo vadis?* are the title of a movie some of you may have seen.



Paul, too, would not abandon his ministry even when it meant he would have to suffer. Let me illustrate. While Paul was most probably working in Illyricum, he was getting reports that his community in Corinth was being seduced by false teachers who were not faithful to the gospel. These false teachers were trying to ruin Paul's character that he was not a true apostle. Paul was forced to defend himself, proclaiming that he was just as committed to the gospel as anyone and even more so. His defense is very useful to us who have lived many years after Paul to get to see the human side of Paul and what being dedicated means. He says in his second letter to the Corinthians "Now I'm talking like an insane person. Five times at the hands of the Jews, I received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I passed a night and a day adrift at sea, on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own race, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers, in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fastings, through cold and exposure. Apart from these things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches." (*II Cor. 11,23-28*) Does that sound like the kind of job any sane person would want? Paul was sane, yet he was driven, driven by the Spirit. A few years later, as Paul was making his last journey to Jerusalem, he was warned by his friends who tried to persuade him not to go. They prophesized that bad things were going to happen to him. His answer: "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? I am prepared not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." He was indeed arrested in Jerusalem; however, Roman soldiers protected him from being killed, since he was a Roman citizen. He was sent to Rome to be put on trial. Eventually that's where he was martyred, and as a Roman citizen he was not crucified but was beheaded. The one who said, "Let us not grow tired of doing good," lived up to what he preached. Tradition has it that Peter and Paul were put to death on the same day, in Rome; Peter was crucified near to where he is believed to be buried under St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican and St. Paul was beheaded within a mile or two from the Church of St. Paul outside the Walls (of Rome) where Paul is believed to have been buried.

I do not say all of this to make anyone feel guilty because they had to call it quits over a situation they might have been in. Once I was at a parish and I knew things weren't going well and I asked to be moved. I've counseled wives who were in a physically abusive relationship to get out. Even Jesus told his disciples if they persecute you in one town, flee to the next (*Mt. 10,23*). But sometimes the Spirit calls us to hang in there and this is a lesson I think we can take with us from the celebration of this feast of St. Peter and Paul: "Let us not grow tired of doing good." Amen.