

[Readings: Acts 8:5-8, 14-17; Psalm 66; 1 Peter 3:15-18; John 14:15-21]

I am so happy and relieved that Archbishop Allen Vigneron has lifted the Mass ban. You can go to the website and read my column in next Sunday's bulletin for all the details. The way we celebrate Mass will not look the same as before the Mass ban went into effect. This will be another change in our lives, another challenge to move out of our comfort zone, and to bring us closer to God and to one another as we continue to grow deeper in our faith.

How have these two months of quarantine and "Stay Home/Stay Safe" affected your faith? What has gotten you through these days of sacrifice and solitude? Send me an email and tell me: frnz@smdeporres.com. Also, if you have any special needs or prayer requests.

I have found over the years that the Number One Reason people who are welcomed, baptized and received into the Catholic Church at the Great Easter Vigil on Holy Saturday evening is simple. They say, "I want what you have." They have seen our Catholic faith in action, our relationship with Jesus Christ, and they want to share in that themselves. Do we need a helper, an advocate, like those Apostles upon whom the Holy Spirit has not yet descended? Jesus uses a curious word here.

Some scholars translate the word as "Advocate." In Latin, it means, "to speak for someone, to plea on one's behalf." Literally, in Greek, it means, "to call alongside."

When do you and I call someone to be alongside us? When we are running a relay. When we are playing "Tag." When we want someone to accompany us. To walk alongside us when we go to the doctor for The News or to the hospital for The Procedure. To the funeral home to make arrangements, or as in the case of a husband and wife, to walk alongside each other down the aisle on their wedding day and on their entire married lives together.

Alisa Hope Wagner once said, "The Holy Spirit is like the wind. It can be gentle enough to stroke a leaf but hard enough to bend a tree."

How is the Holy Spirit working in your lives right now? Is it a gentle breeze or a powerful force? The Apostles and the disciples are fruitful in their ministry because they have someone alongside of them, in addition to the Holy Spirit. They have each other. We have each other here at St. Martin de Porres Parish.

Jesus is giving you the best partner ever. In this Sunday's Gospel reading, Jesus tells us that the Holy Spirit is our "Advocate". Some scholars translate the word to "Counselor". In the original Greek, it means "called alongside". It's closely related to the verb "parakaleo" ("to call" or "summon") from which we get "Paraclete" as a name for the Holy Spirit. It referred to a legal assistant, a courtroom advocate. Jesus is telling us that the Holy Spirit is our legal assistant when we're falsely accused, misjudged, or wrongly condemned.

Notice that Jesus refers to our Advocate as the "Spirit of Truth." No matter what other people think about us, no matter what wrong things they say about us, no matter what opinions they have of us, God always knows the truth.

And the truth that sets us free from their bad attitudes is this: It's only God's opinion that really matters. And His opinion of us is better than we think it is! We judge ourselves more harshly than we should, and this is why we worry so much about how others are judging us. If we honestly examine our consciences, seek reconciliation with God for our sins during the Penance Rite at Mass or in the Sacrament of Confession, and strive to improve, then Jesus says to us what he said to other sinners: "I do not condemn you; go and sin no more."

Don't you sometimes wish that Jesus would come physically to your rescue when you're misjudged? He said that he will not leave us orphans -- His Holy Spirit will always be with us when we need to be defended, telling us the truth about our goodness. Even when we sin, the Spirit of Truth defends us to our heavenly Judge: "Look, this precious child really does want to be holy." To us, the Spirit says, "Let me teach you how to grow in holiness and avoid this sin." And to others, the Spirit says: "If you love me, love this good friend of mine."

How have you been unjustly accused and unfairly judged? Imagine what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Father about that. And to those who condemned you. What is he saying to you about you? Think of a time when God defended you. How did the Advocate manifest His help? Who learned more from it: you or your accusers?

You and I are now at the same place where Jesus and His Apostles are in today's Gospel. Between Jesus' departure from this earth and His return in glory at the Second Coming. What does this pastor, Jesus, say to his people when He is still with them but will be leaving them shortly? Jesus chooses His words and His advice carefully. What's the first thing He says in today's excerpt from His farewell speech? "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." What were HIS commandments? Love God. Love others. Love yourself. So simple to say. So difficult to live out.

We are becoming that "leaner, meaner church" that Pope Benedict XVI once spoke about. Not "meaner" in the sense of being mean, but "meaner" in the sense of becoming spiritually stronger, more fit. Now we need to figure out how to be an evangelical Church, as Pope Francis is challenging us to be. How to be what the new catch words are: intentional, joyful, missionary disciples. That's still our job title and our mission: you and I are to become intentional -- we freely choose to and want to do it; joyful -- we are happy to do it; missionary -- we are called to get out of bed, get off the couch, get off the pews and work; disciples -- students, learners, realizing that we still have so much to learn and to do! AMEN!