

[Readings: Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Psalm 118; I Corinthians 5:6b-8; John 20:1-9]

Happy Easter! Christ is risen, Christ is truly risen! When I was a student at Orchard Lake St. Mary's College, I learned how to say this in Polish: "Wesołego Alleluja! Chrystus zmartwychwstał, zaprawde zmartwychwstał!" When I was a student in Rome, I learned how to say it in Italian: "Buona Pasqua! Cristo e risorto! Veramente e risorto!" Unfortunately, I would forget the rolled letter r in the middle of the word and said, "Cristo e risotto," which means, "Christ is rice! He truly is rice!"

As a young priest, my priest mentor told me that the two major feasts which are the hardest to preach about are Christmas and Easter. Because everyone knows why we are here for those two feasts. So, he said, his homilies tend to be more brief than usual. Many years later a pastor would say to me, "You have a captive audience on Christmas and Easter, so give them all you've got!" So guess which of the two options I am going with?

Many years ago in another parish assignment, a disgruntled parishioner came up to me and said, "You know why I don't come to church every Sunday? Because whenever I do come to church, all you have in the church are poinsettias and lilies, poinsettias and lilies!" Is that the usual frequency of YOUR presence at Mass? Do YOU tend to come only at Christmas and Easter? If you do, thank you. You are teaching the rest of us something very important, which we who attend more regularly forget and can take for granted.

You are teaching us that the two greatest things Jesus Christ did for us was to become one like us in all things but sin at Christmas; and to show us how we could become like Him. And then to love us so much that He takes even our sinful humanity with Him on the Cross; to save us and to rise from the dead as the very first human being to be resurrected.

The Catholic Church teaches that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, which we honor today and for the next fifty days, is the crowning truth of our faith.

Along with the essential sign of the empty tomb, the Resurrection of Jesus is witnessed to by the women who first encountered Christ and proclaimed him to

the apostles. Jesus then "appeared to Cephas (Peter) and then to the Twelve. Following that he appeared to more than five hundred of the brethren at one time" (*1 Corinthians* 15:5-6) and to others as well. The apostles could not have invented the story of the Resurrection since it seemed impossible to them. As a matter of fact, Jesus himself reprimanded them many times for their unbelief.

While being an historical event, verifiable and attested by signs and testimonies, the Resurrection, as it is the entrance of Christ's humanity into the glory of God, transcends and surpasses history as a mystery of faith. For this reason, the Risen Christ did not manifest Himself to the world but to His disciples, making them his witnesses to the people. The Resurrection of Christ was not a return to earthly life. His risen body is that which was crucified and bears the marks of His passion. However, it also participates in the divine life, with the characteristics of a glorified body. Because of this, the Risen Jesus was free to appear to his disciples how and where He wished and under various aspects. Have YOU met Jesus Christ? Is Jesus Christ a part of YOUR life?

Jesus Christ, through His life, death and Resurrection, reconciled the world to God and saved us from sin. Beyond this, is it still necessary to have a personal relationship with Him? Three Catholic speakers and writers explain why it is of crucial importance.

Teresa Tomeo is a syndicated Catholic talk-show host, author of numerous books and an international speaker. Building a relationship with Jesus is critically important, Tomeo said, something to which everyone needs to strive. "We were made for relationship," Tomeo said. "First with God and then with each other. Who better to have a strong relationship with than the one who knows us so intimately because he created us?"

Something -- or, more accurately, Someone -- will be missing in our lives if we don't have that relationship with God first, she said. "We may have good marriages and numerous friends, but we are never completely fulfilled without Christ." Tomeo said she once had everything that is supposed to make us happy: success, material possessions, good friends and family. "But I was still empty inside until I made my way back to the Church and into a deeper relationship with

Jesus Christ.” Tomeo offers four potential first steps for those trying to build a stronger relationship with Jesus.

1. Surrender daily: Tomeo points out that in our me-first world, the concept of surrender has an extremely negative connotation; but we must offer our lives to God’s will, not our own, to be fully open to a relationship with Jesus. “It’s a process,” she said. “But it starts with putting God in the driver’s seat and asking him to take control.”

Before I leave my man cave in the rectory every morning, I kneel in my prayer corner and pray the Prayer of Abandonment of Blessed Charles de Foucauld:

Father, I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.

Whatever you may do, I thank you: I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.

I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul; I offer it to you

with all the love of my heart, for I love you, Lord,

and so need to give myself, to surrender myself into your hands,

without reserve, and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father.

And, as I leave my man cave, I can hear the Father say, “I’m going to hold you to this, Nick!”

2. Immerse yourself in Scripture: Tomeo suggests thinking of the word “Bible” as an acronym: Basic Instruction Before Leaving Earth. As St. Jerome said, ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ, so reading the Bible daily is a great way to build a relationship with Him. When we love someone, we want to get to know them better, and reading the Bible is how we can come to know Jesus.

3. Study the Catholic faith: “When we are serious about getting healthy, earning an advanced degree, saving for and building a new home, raising children, etc., we research, we investigate, we talk to all sorts of folks in order to

make educated decisions,” Tomeo said. And yet, the wealth of beauty and knowledge in the Church often stays on the literal or figurative shelf. Opening ourselves up to the truth will open us up to Jesus, as He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. I am happy to share with you the Good News that each one of you will have access for at least one year to FORMED – an internet connection to Catholic videos, books, and other learning tools that are kid-friendly, teen-friendly and unchurched-friendly. More information in today’s bulletin. Try it, you’ll like it!

4. Get to know the saints: The Letter to the Hebrews refers to the great “cloud of witnesses” (12:1), which Catholics understand as the Communion of Saints. The stories of the saints “encourage us to persevere through suffering and to maintain joy no matter the circumstances,” Tomeo said. “The more we get to know them, the more we get to know Jesus.”

The Catherine of Siena Institute works to ensure that every Catholic has access to a distinctly lay formation that calls each of the baptized to intentional discipleship rooted in the Tradition and magisterial teaching of the Church. Sherry Weddell is the executive director and co-founder of the Institute. In 2012 she released a book titled “Forming Intentional Disciples” (OSV, \$16.95), which has sold more than 100,000 copies and has helped in the formation and discernment of Catholics all over the world.

In “Forming Intentional Disciples,” she speaks of the importance of a personal relationship with God. One chapter opens with a quote from Origen of Alexandria’s homilies on Luke, which summarizes perfectly the importance of a relationship with Jesus: “For what profit is it to you, if Christ came once in the flesh, unless he also comes into your soul?”

Sherry Weddell provided a few basic, beginning steps in building a relationship with Jesus -- steps from which anyone can benefit, she said, although each individual’s journey is unique.

1. Spend time with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament: This should be done regularly, kept on the calendar as a sort of standing appointment. “The resurrected, glorified Jesus is there in the tabernacle for you,” she said. “Go

spend time with him.” We have adoration on Monday afternoons and the First Friday of the month from 12 Noon to 3:00 PM.

2. Regular attendance at Mass: Worshiping the Lord before the Eucharistic table, and our reception of His Body and Blood at Holy Communion, are of utmost importance in fostering a relationship with Christ.

A dear couple who were close friends when I was an associate pastor in Hamtramck had a beautiful tradition. They had been married about twenty years. Their three daughters were old enough to take care of themselves, so every Friday evening was “date night” for them. They would leave work, go out to dinner, then go to a movie or go bowling. Just to re-connect. Jesus invites you every Sunday for a “date.” He wants to re-connect with you.

3. Regular confession: Part of building a relationship is righting the relationship when things go awry. Regular confession is an important step in growing closer to Christ. Try going at least 3 or 4 times a year. Or more.

4. Daily religious reading: Do not underestimate the power of daily prayerful, meditative reading of Scripture (for example, *lectio divina*) or Church teaching (the Catechism, Pope Francis’ daily homilies, encyclicals from any of the recent popes). Our Sunday Visitor, Zenit, and FORMED are starting points. And don’t forget the Eternal Word Television Network and Catholic Television Network Detroit on your cable channels.

Jeff Cavins is a widely renowned speaker and writer. Raised a Catholic, he fell away from the Church during college. After 12 years as a Protestant pastor, he returned to the Church and founded the EWTN television program “Life on the Rock,” which he hosted for six years. He is well-known for his Bible study programs, particularly the “Great Adventure Bible Timeline.” He says, “Jesus is the fullest revelation of who God is. Jesus is the icon -- God in the flesh. So getting to know Him is your full entry into understanding the Trinity and understanding your relationship with the Father.”

There are those who might say, “I go to Church; isn’t that enough? Why do I need to have a relationship with Jesus?” Jeff Cavins says “No, there is a whole life to be lived, and there is life outside of the centerpiece of the Mass.

Conversation, encouragement, teaching, rebuke, correction -- all of this is part of relationships, and those relationships have to be cultivated and nurtured. And this is how Jesus Christ – and we – rise spiritually from the dead! Do YOU want to see Jesus? Come where He lives, join us, and have life abundantly!

ALLELUIA! AMEN!

[Readings: Acts 4:32-35; Ps. 118; I John 5:1-6; John 20:19-31]

Once upon a time, a long time ago, there was a public service announcement commercial playing on the family TV set when I was a high school student back in the early 1970's. By the way, my high school graduation was 46 years ago! And the people of God said, "OY!" On the screen was a high school senior female, looking right into the camera and speaking to her parents. She said, "I hated it when you told me on school day mornings to go back upstairs and change my clothes into something more respectful and appropriate.

"I hated it when you said I had a curfew of 11 PM when my class mates could stay out all night. I hated it when you told me to respect my body and not let boys use me as a plaything. I hated it when you had to check out my friends to see if they met with your approval. I hated it when you checked me for drugs. I hated it when you made me go to church every week." At the end of the commercial, she simply says, "Thank you." She learned that respect for authority comes with authentic parenting.

St. John tells us in today's Second Reading: "We love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments... And his commandments are not burdensome." The young lady in the commercial came to the awareness that rules and regulations are not meant to enslave but to free. When you know what is right and what is wrong; when you know the boundaries that should not be crossed over; when you start your relationships with respect for yourself and others, you are truly free.

It is the one who has no boundaries, who respects no truths, who is a slave to what Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI called "the slavery of relativism." Relativism says: you have your truth and I have mine. There are no absolute truths, only your own truth. Do your own thing. What this way of living does NOT tell you is that the consequences of this way of thinking and living leads to what we have now in the world: moral confusion, religious indifference, rampant sin and despairing chaos.

Our First Reading describes a newly-born, newly-founded Church that is seemingly without any problems at all. Let's all go back in time and live in the early Church! What a delightful community that was: the apostles as teachers, continual fervent prayer, and the meaningful breaking of bread. Awe came upon everyone, we are told; signs and wonders were commonplace.

No one had more than they needed, and no one had less. Praise leapt from every sincere heart. And the community multiplied like hot cakes, as more people wanted whatever it is those folks were having.

It would be ecstatic to live in such a place and time – except for one thing. It's an ideal community, which means you and I are ill suited for it. In fact, most people were. From what we can tell from the letters of Paul, which were written to “real” communities, the early Church had tons of conflicts and arguments, power plays, and sinners causing trouble. In fact, the “real” communities Paul dealt with don't resemble Luke's “ideal” community much at all. Paul's communities sound more like the Church we know and love and occasionally suffer today. So I suspect we're stuck with it.

Shortly after recovering from my heart attack in June of 2010, I met up with Archbishop Allen Vigneron at a gathering at the seminary. I informed him that my cardiologist said that I needed to be transferred to a parish that was stress-free. He didn't miss a beat when he told me, “Nick I have the perfect parish for you. There is only one problem. There are no people in it!”

Lots of people disagree about how stuck we are; you are welcome to join them. They are mostly known as Protestants, who left the imperfect Church we know in order to found a better one, which they are convinced is possible. It has to be possible because Luke says so. History relates that the perfect congregations of the Reformation were later abandoned by some who found them inadequate and started their own, and so on through several thousand branches so far. In our country alone, there are over 30,000 different Christian denominations. The perfect Church, it seems, may not be a matter of the right pastor, the right doctrine, the right ritual, or the right interpretation. Unless you get perfect people to join it, I suspect, sooner or later, the institution ends up looking suspiciously like Paul's communities instead of Luke's.

So where do we go looking for the Church, the real Church, and nothing but the Church? Ask Jesus. After the Resurrection, He had one place to go, and that was back to the disciples. These were the people who denied and betrayed and abandoned Him not so long ago. These were the people who never fully understood what He said or did, no matter how simple it was.

These were the folks with no special talents or skills, short on theological brains, long on personal insecurities. Jesus came back to those old sinners and said, “Peace

be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit.” Was He kidding? Jesus sent the apostles out to be apostles, the ones sent. He sent sinners out to forgive sins. He sent doubters out to spread the faith. Either Jesus didn’t have other options, or he did it deliberately. Or both. And He does the same with us.

The story of Thomas is standard during the Easter season, the time dedicated to remembering the early Church. We kick off the post-Resurrection narrative with Thomas because he’s the “twin.” Whose twin? Ours, most likely.

Thomas is like us, ready to believe, but only if you pull out all the stops and give him a dramatic example of why he should. If he can touch Jesus with his bare hands, he’ll show you all the faith you want!

And when Jesus takes him up on the dare, Thomas is all proclamation: “My Lord and my God!” We call him The Doubter, rather unfairly, because he is also The Proclaimer. It’s just that Thomas requires certain circumstances under which he is prepared to render his faith. The truth is, so do we. So did the ideal early Church, which vacuumed up new members in droves because of what people saw happening all around them. If they hadn’t seen the changes in their neighbors, heard the singing, felt the excitement, no one would have signed up for Baptism. And if you and I didn’t know people whose lives were transformed by the Gospel -- the officially recognized saints, perhaps our own unofficial saints in our own lives: grandparents, parents, siblings or friends most hopefully -- we wouldn’t be here celebrating the Easter mysteries, either.

No one comes to faith in isolation. No one plucks Christianity off the shelf of potential world religions and decides intellectually that it’s right for them. Christianity is an incarnate religion, all about what happens when God gets flesh and blood and dwells in our midst. People come to the Church because they see something they haven’t seen outside of it. We all say “My Lord and my God!” because somewhere, in a place we can touch, the glory of God was concretely proven to us. The Divine Mercy is given to us.

We must ask ourselves: what is new about this message of Divine Mercy? Why did Pope John Paul II insist so much on this aspect of God’s love in our time? Is this not the same devotion as that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus?

Mercy is an important Christian virtue, much different from justice and retribution. While recognizing the real pain of injury and the rationale for the justification of punishment, mercy takes a different approach in redressing the injury. Mercy strives to

radically change the condition and the soul of the perpetrator to resist doing evil, often by revealing love and one's true beauty. If any punishment is enforced, it must be for salvation, not for vengeance or retribution.

This is very messy business in our day and a very complex message... but it is the only way if we wish to go forward and be leaven for the world today; if we truly wish to be salt and light in a culture that has lost the flavor of the Gospel and the light of Christ.

Where hatred and the thirst for revenge dominate, where war brings suffering and death to the innocent, where abuse has destroyed countless innocent lives, the grace of mercy is needed in order to settle human minds and hearts and to bring about healing and peace. Wherever respect for human life and dignity are lacking, there is need of God's merciful love, in whose light we see the inexpressible value of every human being. Mercy is needed to insure that every injustice in the world will come to an end. The message of mercy is that God loves us – all of us – no matter how great our sins. God's mercy is greater than our sins, so that we will call upon Him with trust, receive His mercy, and let it flow through us to others. Essentially, mercy means the understanding of weakness, the capacity to forgive.

Remember the words of Pope St. John Paul II spoke at the concluding mass of World Youth Day at Downsview Park in Toronto on July 28, 2002. These words keep us focused on the importance and necessity of mercy in the Church today.

"...At difficult moments in the Church's life, the pursuit of holiness becomes even more urgent. And holiness is not a question of age; it is a matter of living in the Holy Spirit..."

"...Do not let that hope die! Stake your lives on it! We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures; we are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son."

On this Divine Mercy Sunday, let us take time to be with the devotions given to St. Faustina Kowalska by Jesus Christ Himself. How do you testify to the presence of the risen Christ in your life? How do you love as God wants you to love? How do you spread God's justice, peace and merciful forgiveness to others? Come join us at St. Faustina parish this afternoon. Let us give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His Divine Mercy endures forever! ALLELUIA and AMEN!

[Readings: Acts 3:13-15; 17-19; Psalm 4; 1 John 2:1-5a; Luke 24:35-48]

It was widely reported last week that Pope Francis, in an interview with Eugenio Scalfari of *La Repubblica*, said that, “Hell does not exist.”

The Vatican quickly responded, in effect, that this “quotation” should not “be considered as a faithful transcription of the Holy Father’s words.” In fact, the Vatican clarified that Mr. Scalfari had not even officially **conducted** an interview with Pope Francis, though the two had met and had a conversation at the pope’s residence. Nevertheless, the story took on a life of its own, and the internet was ablaze with comments. John Clark is an author and speechwriter. This is what he writes about the quotation attributed to Pope Francis. He refers them to the Vatican’s official response. Though the Vatican’s response was prompt, one might speculate as to whether it was sufficient. One might further speculate as to whether the time was ripe for a “teachable moment,” as the kids say today. I would have been happier if the Vatican’s response had included the actual teaching on Hell; it would have given me something meatier to forward to my friends to answer their fundamental question about Hell.

In that spirit, I would reference the following.

In his *Catholic Dictionary*, Father John Hardon explains that **de fide** (“of faith”) teachings of the Catholic Church are “infallibly true” and that their “infallible certitude derives ultimately from divine revelation.”

Does the church have any **de fide** teachings regarding Hell? The answer is yes. Ludwig Ott, in his famous and oft-cited *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, lists two specific **de fide** teachings that apply to our present conversation. **First**: “The souls of those who die in the condition of personal grievous sin enter Hell.” **Second**: “The punishment of Hell lasts for all eternity.”

Here is something unofficial that I learned from my dear Mom; I think it might be called “Catholic Karma.” She says that whatever blessing or curse we say to others comes back at us. So, if I tell YOU to “go to Hell,” guess where I am going to end up!

In rejecting God, we risk eternal punishment in Hell -- this is a consistent thread running throughout Scripture. Dire warnings about Hell appear in the Old Testament, and Ludwig Ott references several such passages, including Daniel 12:2, "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." There is also Judith 16:17, "Woe to the nations that rise up against my people! The Lord Almighty will take vengeance on them in the Day of Judgment; fire and worms he will give to their flesh; they shall weep in pain forever."

The New Testament contains many passages as well. Saint Paul's letters frequently reference Hell, as in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, "They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might...."

Of course, the weightiest warnings come from the very lips of Jesus Christ, such as Matthew 25: 41 & 46, "Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'...And they will go away into eternal punishment..." In case one didn't get the point in the first six dozen books of Scripture, Revelation 20:10 reads, "...the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." So, yes, Virginia, there is a Hell!

One should note for the record that Pope Francis has hardly been shy about discussing Hell. In a morning meditation Nov. 22, 2017, for instance, when confronted with the idea that the talk of Hell might frighten people, [Pope Francis said](#): "It is the truth. Because if you... always live far away from the Lord, perhaps there is the danger, the danger of continuing in this way, far away from the Lord for eternity." Beyond that, [he has specifically warned members of the mafia](#), "Convert, there is still time, so that you don't end up in hell. That is what awaits you if you continue on this path." Of course, these are actual quotes, which are weightier than made-up stuff. This week, Pope Francis issued an apostolic exhortation on what we can do to grow in holiness: "Rejoice and Be Glad!"

Incredibly, we are living at a time in which journalists have re-invented the meaning of the quotation mark. But authentic journalism is less an art than it is a science, it is prose rather than poetry, it is fact rather than fiction. Either it is precise or it is wrong. Something to consider the next time we read an “interview.”

All three of our readings today call us to repent of our sins and to be converted. If we say we are friends of Jesus, but still sin, we are liars. And if we do sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ. When you and I repent, we are forgiven, converted, and missioned to preach in His name to all nations. In today’s readings we hear of how we come to love. Repentance, conversion, and forgiveness -- these experiences are met by God’s love and lead us to return that love to God and others. We encounter this love in the person of Jesus, the fulfillment of God’s promises.

Those who keep the Commandments will know God. How do I understand keeping the Commandments? As simply a matter of following the rules and doing one’s duty? Or is it something more? How can I ground fulfilling obligations more deeply in the love of God?

What do I believe I have been promised by God, the church, my family, the people I love and serve? What do I promise them in return?

From what have I needed to be converted? How did that conversion come about? How can I most effectively communicate the possibility and power of conversion?

Even when I feel most unworthy, I am loved. When in my life have I been forgiven in a way that transformed me? What did this experience tell me about forgiving others?

Lent has brought us to Easter. Easter brings us to a new chapter in our lives of faith, to a renewed commitment to follow God’s commandments, and to the hope that one day, our eternal home will be Heaven, and not Hell.

ALLELUIA! AMEN!

[Readings: Acts 9:26-31; Psalm 22; 1 John 3:18-24; John 15:1-8]

Have you ever heard the expression, “Make yourself at home?” That means that you are a guest in someone’s home, and they want you to feel as if it is your home. There is an Italian expression that says you should only visit for no longer than three days: “Ospidi sono come pesce, dopo tre giorni, puta!” Guests are like fish, after three days you have to throw them out!

There is an important word in two of our three Readings this morning: “remain.” In the original Greek, the word means to dwell, or to indwell, to make a home inside. That’s what Jesus wants to do with each one of us. He wants to make a home within our hearts. How do we do this? He says, by keeping His commandments.

Have you heard of the Ten Commandments? That’s part of what we have to do. We have to follow all of the Ten Commandments given to us by God in the Old Testament. But we also have to become people of the Beatitudes in the New Testament. “Beatitude” means, blessed or happy. Blessed are you when you do this or do that. If we do both things, follow the commandments and do the Beatitudes, God lives in us and we live in God.

Today’s Gospel talks about vines and branches. Most of us are city people, and we don’t know much about this kind of work. But those who do work in vineyards know two things: you have to keep the vines off the ground, and you have to prune or trim the branches to keep them healthy and to produce much fruit. If you leave a grape vine on the ground, each of the individual branches will try to take root in the ground. Each branch competes for the soil, the nutrients and the water, and they don’t survive. By themselves, whatever grapes are produced are small, tiny and bitter. You cannot eat them and you cannot use them to make wine.

The Italians were the first to build what we call trellises. These are wooden frames, usually in the shape of arches that you would rap the vines around to keep them off the ground and expose them to the sunlight. Their branches would produce big, juicy grapes. But the branches need to be trimmed to bring forth fruit, and, most importantly, the branches need to be connected to the vine in order to receive food, nutrients and water. If the branches are cut off from the vine, the branches die.

If we are connected with the Lord, the St. John says, “Ask whatever you want, and it will be given to you.” OK Lord, I want five million dollars, a Mercedes, and live in a million dollar home!” Will Jesus give this to me because I asked for it? No, because

there is a very important condition: We need to be doing God's will, and not ours.

If everything we think, say and do is according to God's will, then whatever we ask God we will receive because we are doing what GOD wants us to do, NOT what WE want to do! This is how we stay connected with Jesus. Perhaps a visual demonstration might help. I need my little friends who are making their First Holy Communion to come up and help me. Please come up and stand in front of the altar. You will be the branches, and I will be Jesus, the True Vine.

[The First Communicants come up and form a single line in front of the altar.]

This reminds me of a story about me and my brother David. When we were in grade school, one day we came home from school and asked our Mom for a snack. There were only two chocolate chip cookies left. One was really, really big, and the other one was a regular size. David and I fought about who should get the larger cookie. My mom said, "You know, if one of you was Jesus, He would give the bigger cookie to the other one." My brother David looked at me and said, "Nick, YOU be Jesus!" So I will be Jesus again today!

Now look at how happy all of us are when we join our hands and are joined to Jesus. See how happy, strong and healthy we are? [Children join hands with Fr. Nick. They are standing tall and smiling.]

Now, look what happens when we cut ourselves off from Jesus. Our leaves get heavy and droop, and our branches begin to wilt and wither. [Children pretend to be wilting, slouching with their heads to one side, their arms limp at their side]. What is so sad is how so many people are walking around with drooping spirits and wilted lives. They are cut off from Jesus. But if they come back to Jesus, and join hands with Him and with each other, they become happy and healthy again. [Children once again join hands with Fr. Nick and are "restored" to their happy, healthy selves.]

Parents, make sure you keep your children spiritually happy and healthy. Bring them to Church every week, so that they can be nourished spiritually by Jesus in Holy Communion. Every day, help them and help yourselves – and everyone -- to ask Jesus to come into your hearts and to "Make Yourself at Home!" AMEN!