

## **Easter Saturday**

Project Advance, St. Matthew's Parish

7 April 2017

Dear brothers in the priesthood and dear brothers and sisters in Christ who labour so tirelessly to make Project Advance a fruitful apostolic initiative in your parishes, for our local Church and, ultimately, for the Kingdom of God:

### ***Introduction***

Once again the good Lord gathers us together to give him thanks and praise for, by his grace, he enables us to the success of last year's Project Advance Appeal and to launching in our parish families this year's Appeal with the theme, "Support the faith, Continue the legacy." And, as you will see in the video prepared, what a legacy it is!

I offer my profound gratitude to all of you for your faithful prayer and hard work in fostering in your parish communities a spirit of stewardship, which calls us to live gratefully and to give generously. It's not a stretch to say that your efforts are an authentic response to the Lord's command that we just heard proclaimed in today's Gospel: "proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). Project Advance is an instrument which facilitates our fulfilling this Great Commission of Jesus handed on to us after his Resurrection. It does this by supporting many of the ministries offered at the archdiocesan and pastoral level, such as youth and young adult ministry, family life and evangelization programs, prison and hospital chaplaincy, First Nations

outreach, providing catechism for special needs children and feeding the hungry at the Door Is Open. “To proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15) means that we accept the responsibility of our Baptism to show the world, by our lives and our actions, that we believe in Jesus’ Resurrection from the dead, that is alive and with us.

Now I would like to turn to the Scripture readings appointed for today’s Mass.

### ***The Continuing Presence of the Risen Jesus***

In the passage from St. Mark’s Gospel we have his summary of three of Jesus’ appearances after his Resurrection from the dead. Despite the initial difficulty of the witnesses to believe that the man they had down preach and heal during his public ministry had conquered death, they came to be convinced that he was indeed alive and still with them. Armed with this conviction, they were able to receive Jesus’ last words to them, which we know as the Great Commission: “To proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15).

### ***First Reading***

Our First Reading tells us just how successful the Apostles were in implementing the project to advance the good news.

The time is about two months later. It is after the Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit filled the hearts of the faithful and removed any lingering

doubts about the reality of the Resurrection had been removed. They were now emboldened and had a new courage which they previously lacked.

Let's look a little more closely at what the Acts of the Apostles tells us about Peter, the chief Apostle, and John, the beloved disciple. And I ask you to put yourself in their shoes. You are Peter; or, you are John. And you can do this, because, like them, you have been confirmed with the power of the Holy Spirit. So, what does this mean for you?

Peter and John had cured a lame man, and this had stirred up both the enthusiasm of the crowds opposition of the religious leaders. As a result they were dragged before the authorities. These members of the Sanhedrin were "amazed" by the "boldness" of the Apostles' speech for "they were uneducated and ordinary men" and recognized as "companions" of Jesus (Acts 4:13).

Note that the Apostles are described as "ordinary men." The Great Commission was not given to saints or great orators or learned theologians. It was given to you and me – ordinary folks. So we can't count ourselves out!

The leaders astutely recognized that these two men were "companions of Jesus." Literally, the phrase means, "they had been with Jesus." Unconsciously, no doubt, they were reinforcing what Jesus had

taught in the Gospel: that the first task of the Gospel was to “be with him” (Mk 3:14); that is, to know Jesus personally, to be his friend. It is the same today with us. Before being sent out *from* Jesus, we must first be *with* Jesus. We must be close to him.

Again and again in the accounts told in the Acts of the Apostles, the disciples are said to talk with boldness, always a cause of amazement for they were ordinary fishermen. Without training in rhetoric or preaching, they spoke both with confidence and authority. We might call this the gift of courage, one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit you received at your Confirmation. Just think: we are equipped to do as Peter and John did. Well, maybe a little less successfully, but effectively nonetheless.

The religious leaders are befuddled and frustrated. They want to limit the damage being caused by the Apostles’ preaching, which had at its heart that the crucified Jesus had been raised from the dead for the forgiveness of sins. This proclamation, of course, remains the heart of our preaching today – and what we celebrated just last week in the Liturgy of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

“What will we do with them” (Acts 4:16). Because the cure of the lame man had been public, they couldn’t declare it a hoax. So, what did they do? They wanted to stop Peter and John from preaching. Just “shut

them up,” and the message they were spreading would go away. So “they called the two Apostles and ordered them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus” (Acts 4:18).<sup>1</sup>

This prohibition sounds contemporary. We have authorities today who likewise want to silence all voices that question them. I can’t help but think that some similar is at work among those leaders who try to suppress opposition to physician-assisted death or to summer jobs to students with pro-life convictions.

With Peter and John such bullying does not work. They do not cave in but courageously proclaim, in words later taken up by thousands of martyrs down through the centuries: “we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen heard” (Acts 4:19). The Great Commission cannot be blocked.

All this can be accomplished – as likewise we can accomplish any good – only because the Risen Jesus himself continues to act and teach in his community of the faithful. He is the source of our courage and the force behind our initiatives to proclaim the good news to others.

We, too, filled with same Holy Spirit as Peter and John, at our Confirmation, are empowered to tell others of our experience, our

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. William S. Kurz, *Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 83-84.

personal friendship, our encounters with the Lord. We don't have post-Resurrection appearances to narrate, but we can talk about our faith to others.

Sometimes, or even often, we don't know where to start or what to say. But, when we think about it, we have had and do have our own experiences of Jesus' entering into our lives. We have felt his encouragement, seen his blessing on works achieved or perhaps even seen a miracle in your own life or the life of a loved one. Maybe you were helped at just the right moment. Maybe the right word came your way. Maybe you had the sudden strength to overcome a temptation.

Our experiences may not be as dramatic as those of Peter and John who witnessed the Risen Lord, but they are *ours* – and personal. And sharing these experiences is the way the faith is passed on to others. Sharing with a friend – or even a stranger – a story of how God has entered into your life is fulfilling the Great Commission to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world.<sup>2</sup> And that world begins on our doorstep.

### ***Conclusion***

As we continue now in our celebration of the Eucharist we are beneficiaries of the promise the Lord made long ago that he would be with us – no matter where we are on our journey of faith across the

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *The Word among Us* (Easter 2015), 27.

stormy sea of our lives – until the end of the ages. Here, in this Mass, he opens the door to eternal life – our sharing in his risen life – so that we might pass through that door, taking others with us through our preaching the good news by our lives and encouragement.

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