

St. Monica

Jumpstart, St. Matthew's Church

27 August 2018

Dear Father Tran, pastor; Father Patrick, Vicar of Catholic Schools; Deacon Henk, Superintendent of our Catholic Schools; and dear principals, other administrators, but above all new teacher to the independent schools of the Archdiocese of Vancouver, and dear parishioners:

Introduction

That we have come together to begin this day for new teachers by celebrating this Mass is a blessing. It sets just the right tone for a new beginning, for it places all that you are about to do in the coming year begins with God, as all your endeavours will be sustained by him. Coming together to begin Jumpstart by praising the Lord and imploring his grace is a forceful reminder that the call to be an educator in a Catholic school is a sacred one. It goes to the very heart of the Church's mission of bringing Jesus himself and his Good to the world – and specifically to the world of education in the Archdiocese of Vancouver.

Today's Saint

Today the Church is celebrating St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine who, together with St. Thomas Aquinas, is numbered among the great teachers of the Church, a theological heavyweight. That Augustine came to have such an influence on Christianity is in no small measure due to the influence of his mother.

Monica is a fascinating figure in her own right. Her husband was a pagan and, although Augustine learned the Catholic faith from her as a child, he was not baptized. Indeed, his journey to the Church was a tortuous one: one which involved, step-by-step, an intellectual, religious and moral conversion. Monica was like many mothers today, who are concerned and saddened by the fact that their children do not practice the faith they have been taught.

What did she do? On the one hand, it was not beyond her to exercise some pressure on her rebellious son for his lifestyle, but what she really did was pray and weep for many years because he did not share her faith and over his irregular life, which included fathering a child with his mistress.

Like a good mother – and like a good teacher! – Monica never ceased to pray for her son and for his conversion. Eventually she had the consolation of seeing him accept the faith first learned from her, receive Baptism, and turn to a life in the service of God. She could therefore die happy, and in fact she passed away on 27 August 387. And among her last words are those recorded in the Confessions:

What more I have to do here and why I am still here I do not know, since I have no longer anything to hope for in this world. There was only one reason why I wanted to stay a little longer in this life, and that was that I should see you a

Catholic before I died. Now God has granted me this beyond my hopes. For I see that you have despised the pleasures of this world and have become his servant.

St Augustine used to say that his mother had “conceived him twice.” She gave birth to him as a human being and, through her prayers and weeping, she birthed him a second time to his life as a Christian.

All the accounts of Monica’s life mention that she expressed her prayer by weeping. And today’s Gospel reinforces the place of weeping as a wordless but effective prayer which touches God’s heart.

With his disciples, Jesus arrives in Nain, a village in Galilee, right at the moment when a funeral is taking place. A boy, the only son of a widow, is being carried out in procession for burial. Jesus immediately fixes his gaze on the crying mother. He grasps the misery of this widow standing alone, without husband or other children to support her in her grief.

The Evangelist Luke says: “When the Lord saw her, was moved with pity for her” and said “Do not weep”(Lk 7:13). He does not say this to her because her tears are embarrassing or a nuisance but rather to tell us – as John does in the Book of Revelation, that the Risen Lord himself is the One who “will wipe away every tear” after death is finally conquered in the Kingdom of Heaven where “neither shall there be mourning, nor crying nor pain any more” (Rev 21:4).

But until such time – in the here and now – Jesus responds to our tears. His human heart is moved by them. And so, in the Gospel account, he calls to the dead boy and wakes him up, as if from sleep (cf. Lk 7:14-15). The procession to the graveyard stops. Jesus commands death to come to a halt, and at Jesus’ word it does.

Moreover, tears appear in the Opening Prayer or Collect (for it collects all our prayers) for today’s Mass. We prayed:

O God, who console the sorrowful (widow and Monica)
and who mercifully accepted
the motherly tears of Saint Monica (as a kind of prayer)
for the conversion of her son Augustine, (and made him great)
grant us, through the intercession of them both, (family)
that we may bitterly regret our sins (call to us to weep: today,
abuse)
and find the grace of your pardon. (More than apology; it begs)

I encourage those who are mothers and parents not to give up praying for their children. At the same time, while principals and teachers might not cry for their students, I do hope that they will pray for them, especially those whom they know are experiencing difficulties.

Conclusion

As we continue this Eucharist, let us renew our faith in the power of our prayer, whatever form it may take, even that of weeping, to touch the heart of God and bring about changes in the lives of those whom we love and of those entrusted to our care.

_ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver