

5th Sunday of Easter - B
Acts 9:26-31;
I John 3:18-24;
John 15:1-8
Little Flower - 5/3/15

My Brothers and Sisters,

In today's Gospel, Jesus said, "*I am the vine, you are the branches,*" and "*Remain in me, as I remain in you.*" This image suggests that we as individuals and as a community are in an intimate relationship with Jesus. Also, as the reading suggests, and as we know from experience, when branches are cut off from their vines, they wither and die.

In last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus proclaimed himself the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd leads and guides his flock: "*My sheep hear my voice;...and they follow me*" [Jn. 10:27].

Last Sunday's Gospel and today's Gospel offer two different but complementary visions of what it means to be Church. Msgr. M. Francis Mannion has argued that churches can be communities of intimacy and/or communities of shared vision, mission, and values. I would suggest that Christian communities can and should be both.

The image of the Good Shepherd suggests that we should be a community of shared vision, mission, and values. As I mentioned last week, by our baptism and confirmation, all of us are called to be Christian leaders within the Church and the world. We are called to leaders like Jesus; i.e., we are called to share his vision, his mission, and his values with others. We see something of the church as a community of shared vision, mission, and values in today's reading from Acts. Paul reported to the community "*how he had seen the Lord and that he had spoken to him and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.*"

The image of the vine and the branches suggests that we should be a community of intimacy. However, it does not mean intimacy as we typically use the word. We often say that the Catholic Church is a sacramental church. All the sacraments deepen our union with God and our unity with one another, especially the Eucharist. Next Sunday's Gospel will outline some of the qualities of a community of intimacy.

Some people within the Church want the Church to be only or primarily a church of intimacy while others want the Church to be only or primarily a church of shared vision, mission, and values. However, if we look at the early Church, two things attracted people to Christianity: the willingness of Christians to die for their faith, suggesting a Church of shared vision, mission, and values, and their love for one another, suggesting a community of intimacy.

Today's reading from St. John's First Letter complements the Gospel: "*Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit that he gave us.*" In other words, the Holy Spirit is the soul or life principle of the community. The Holy Spirit keeps us connected to Christ and to one another.

Interestingly, when St. John refers to the commandments, he reduces them to one with two parts: "*we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he has commanded us,*" i.e., love one another as he has loved us. However, he is emphatic that we must love not just in word or speech but in deed and truth.

My brothers and sisters, in today's second reading, St. John also reminds us that "*God is greater than our hearts and knows everything.*" I think that he is reminding us that God's love for us is an infinite love that loves us as we are while constantly calling us to believe in Jesus and to love one another.