

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter + 28 April 2024 + Acts 9:26-31 + I John 3:18-24 + John 15:1-8

We just heard Jesus say in our Gospel, *By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples*. But what does this really look like—our “bearing fruit” and becoming a “disciple”? Well, I think one way of looking at discipleship is examining what sort of legacy we are leaving behind. But before we answer that question, we might first consider those whose legacies changed us for the better. Put another way, each of us is the good *fruit* of a disciple who stayed connected to the Vine. Who is that person for you?

There are so many people I could name here, but one person that comes to mind was my pastor when I first started working as an accountant in Grand Rapids, Fr. Den. I think I learned enough from him in the few years I was at his parish to make up for anything that I failed to learn about the faith in my childhood. And not just in what he taught us, but also in how he lived. He was a walking history book of the Catholic Church in Grand Rapids. He was a police and fire department chaplain for over 40 years. He lived very simply, and preferred to serve at poor, inner-city parishes. He was a great preacher, and said Mass in English (as we know it), as well as the old Latin Mass, in Spanish, and even in Lithuanian.

I was at his parish not long after the abuse scandals first really hit our nation, and he wrote a series of bulletin columns explaining his experiences in the seminary in the 1960s-70s, which shed a lot of light on the question that so many people were wondering at that time; namely, “how could this happen?” He wrote of how his high school seminary went from, as he described it, “half monastery, half bootcamp” in the early 60s, to an “anything goes free for all” in the late 60s/early 70s, where things like daily Mass and prayer were optional, devotions were frowned upon, theology was confused at best, and the kind of bad behavior that would be so devastating later on was ignored by bewildered administrators.

Well, seminary got so bad that at one point he decided to leave. He wanted to be fireman like his father. He shared this desire with a policeman one day as they were on the beat together and he said the policeman pulled over, turned off the squad car, looked at him, and said, “*if you leave who will take care of us?*” So Fr. Den stayed, got ordained, and served faithfully as a priest for 45 years until cancer hit him in full force in the Spring of 2020—that same awful spring when the world shut down due to covid.

Dying of cancer in his room, families of first responders lined the sidewalk next to Fr. Den’s rectory with signs of support and gratitude. When he passed, only a handful of people could attend his funeral. So the local TV news channel in Grand Rapids televised the funeral—something I don’t think they even do for deceased governors. One of the news anchors even eulogized him on-air. His body was transported by a horse-drawn caisson from the Cathedral to the cemetery, lined much of the way by police and firefighters, saluting the man who for 40 years took care of them, so that they could take care of the rest of us. They are his good fruit; I can say he was a big part of why I am a priest today.

And so as we consider those whose discipleship nourished our faith, we also must consider what kind of fruit we are bearing. All of us will someday leave some sort of legacy behind. Hopefully this is something we think about frequently. After all, we never know when God will call us home. It could even be today.

So how do we leave a lasting legacy, or, Biblically speaking, bear *fruit that will last*? Well, Jesus goes on to say in our Gospel, *Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me*. We have to remain connected at the center—at the source, in order to live and to bear fruit. And our source of life is God. Fr. Den left a legacy of good fruit because he remained connected to the Lord. We could give many counterexamples of people who reached the heights of fame and fortune and are now completely forgotten, or, even worse, have names that live in infamy. Why? Because they were not connected to the Lord. They may have bore some worldly fruit, but worldly fruit quickly rots and is no more. When the harvest time came for them, they and their works were quickly burned in the fire. That's a pretty stark image, but it comes to us from Christ himself in our Gospel, so we cannot ignore it.

So how might we describe good fruit—the kind that will outlast such a trial by fire? St. Paul, as ever, has some helpful words here. Obviously, he doesn't praise the usual kinds of legacies that the world honors: fame, fortune, power, and the like. In his 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Corinthians, he speaks of many spiritual gifts: tongues, prophecy, generosity, and even martyrdom, all gifts we associate with the greatest Saints. But as powerful as these gifts are, even they are not sufficient if they are not animated by love. And so he concludes the matter: *now faith, hope, and love remain*, he says, *but the greatest of these is love*. And that's a hard teaching, because you cannot quantify these so-called "theological virtues." But in the end, they are all that we will leave behind, and all that we will carry with us unto God.

One more question: how do we remain connected to the Vine? There is obviously so much we could say here. But specifically for us as Catholics, the "source and summit" of our faith is Jesus Christ, truly present in the Most Holy Eucharist. Many of our parish children will receive their first Holy Communion tomorrow/today. Whether they realize it or not, this is the most precious gift, next to their very birth, and their re-birth in the waters of baptism, that these children will ever receive. And it is a gift that they will be called to multiply.

Lastly, in the year 304AD, the Emperor Diocletian forbade Christians, under pain of death, from meeting on Sundays to celebrate the Eucharist. In a town in modern-day Tunisia, 49 Christians defied this order and gathered for Mass. They were found out, and before they were martyred, were asked why they defied the order. One of them named Emeritus gave this reply: *Sine dominico non possumus*; which is translated, *without Sunday, we cannot live*. It is true: without the Lord Jesus, the Vine, we cannot live. Without His living Word and Sacrament, we cannot remain in Him. And without remaining in Him, we cannot bear eternal fruit.