

# FIFTH SUNDAY EASTER YEAR C

1

May 6, 2007

This past week I spent at the Villa Maria Community Center conducting my annual retreat. Villa Maria is owned and operated by the Humility of Mary Sisters. It is located about twenty minutes west of New Castle right near the border between Pennsylvania and Ohio. It is a lovely place that is situated on over 700 acres of land. In addition to the Sisters there is a community of people, predominately elderly who live in apartments. And there are always visitors on the campus using the conference center, indoor swimming pool, exciting trails, and observing the animals. There is a farm on the property with cows and sheep. As a retreatant I talked to those animals. I did a lot of mooing and baaing. But honestly, in those days I really talked to God, but even more so God talked to me.

Retreats are a special time to let go and let God. The fruits of a retreat are many like rest, peace, quiet, and communion with God. All of these realities can be summarized in one word ENCOURAGEMENT. The great thing about spending time with God is that there is no negative thinking. For him, the glass is always ½ full because he looks at us not for what we are, but for what we can become.

As a Church we continue to celebrate Easter, a time of joy, peace and victory, all of which spell ENCOURAGEMENT for the believer. The readings for today are all about encouragement. In the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles Paul and Barnabas continue preaching the good news. The author intimates that they also offered encouragement. He says, "They strengthened the spirits of the disciples and exhorted them to persevere in the faith, saying, 'It is necessary for us to endure many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.'" Paul and Barnabas did not want the people to become discouraged by their hardships. And today, nor should we become discouraged about our own hardships that come in mind, body or spirit. They need not be stumbling blocks but stepping stones to the Kingdom of God.

In the second reading from the Book of Revelation, John likewise offers encouragement. He points to a new heaven and a new earth where God will always be with his people. What is more, John adds, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, weeping or pain, for the old order has passed away." Imagine a world without tears, death or suffering. That is the promise of heaven. And regardless of how young or old we may be, is it not encouraging to hear these words, "Behold, I make all things new." We receive a foretaste of this vision every time we receive the Eucharist. And may God bless our second graders who will experience this newness today as they meet Jesus for the first time in the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Finally, in the gospel today, as Jesus prepares to say good bye, he offers some words of encouragement to his disciples. He says, "I give you a new commandment: love one another." Then Jesus qualifies it when he says, "As I have loved you, so you also should love one another." How did Jesus love us? None other than suffering and dying on the cross. Such a deed was not easy or painless. It hurt. If we really love in the true sense, how can we not expect it to hurt? Such love, while painful, is revealing in as much as it demonstrates discipleship. For Jesus says, "This is how all will know that you are my disciple, if you have love for one another."

So the word God wants us all to take home this week, the Good News, if you will, is ENCOURAGEMENT. We are to be encouraged and go forth to encourage one another. With all due respect to our individual names and origins therein, I think God wants us all to be called Barnabas. Barnabas, whom we heard about in the first reading, has one of the most interesting names in all the scriptures. His name means "Son of Encouragement." May we go forth today, encouraged by God's grace and seek to be sons and daughters of encouragement.