

4th Sunday of Easter, C

The anniversary of my father's death was on April 16th. He's been gone since 16 years now. Time really does have a way of healing....so much so, that I am mostly only able to recall all the good things about him.

My Dad.... would burst into song any number of times in a given day. It could be a little embarrassing, but the truth is, he had a wonderful sweet voice that I do miss.

One of the songs he sang often was the great Protestant Hymn "Blessed Assurance". I had forgotten that until I read today's first reading because the lyrics are based at least loosely on the theology of that reading from the Book of Revelation and of the Sacrament of Baptism.

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

Refrain:

This is my story, this is my song, Praising my Savior all the day long;

Sometimes, people see the book of Revelation as something unapproachable, even scary. The visions, the allegories, the prophesies, of this book have prompted a lot of speculation, argument, Holy inspiration and sometimes.... just plain wacky explanations of its meaning.

But...However interesting the Book of Revelation can be, the **majority** of the interest in signs and warnings and symbols of the End Times, is relatively new in Christianity's 2000 year old history.

However..... other topics such as:

- the roles of free will...
- faith....
- and grace... as they pertain to our salvation.....

are some of the most controversial doctrines in the history of Christianity, especially since the Reformation.

Central to our understanding of any of these things is faith.

Faith is a supernatural reality. We cannot manufacture it. It is a gift ...that, once received, becomes a virtue, a power that enables us to **think, act, and be** different.

But, Faith....particularly Christian faith..... is also a paradox.

One cannot truly know Jesus unless you already belong to him. Jesus says today that **My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me** (Jn 10:27).

- But how do people come to be His?
- Are they predestined to belong to him?
- Are others predestined to reject him?
- Is there no free choice?

Until faith is received, we do not have it in us to even recognize Christ as the divine savior, let alone accept Him.

So.... supernatural grace must precede and enable even our first baby steps in the Christian life. Everything...even eternal life... depends on God's Mercy and Grace.

The grace that Christ gained for us as a result of His death and resurrection , is God's perfect gift..... However - God never forces it on anyone.

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- Why then, do we baptize our children at such a young age?
- Are we not forcing the Grace of God upon them?
- Shouldn't it be their decision when they get older?
- Do we violate their free will?

As parents, we naturally want what is best for our children. Why wouldn't we want them have God's perfect gift in Baptism, which is the way people become Christ's own?

This is where the Church places its trust for its future and for the salvation of souls..... in parents.

The primary role of the parent and the God-parent..... in fact, of the entire Church community is to nurture the gift of Faith... not only in our children and the newly baptized of any age.... but also in one another.

This is both a Sacred Trust and a Sacred Risk because a person is always free to say "no thank you" to God, at any time...even after saying "yes" to the initial gift.

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It is our duty to all the baptized to give them the tools to make this choice.....

- in.....
- free.....
- will..... for the will can only be truly free when it knows what it is saying "yes" or "no" to.

Every one of us faces the opportunity to accept and cooperate with God's Saving Grace, or.... to reject it..... and not just once.

The Christian life is not about accepting this gift once at an altar call or even on the day of our baptism or confirmation. It is about saying yes... each and every day.....a persevering yes... until our very... last... breath.

That is why Paul and Barnabas instructed their converts to "hold fast to the grace of God" (Acts 13:43).

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Today's Gospel tells us that no one can snatch us out of the Good Shepherd's hand. That sounds like a blessed assurance to me. But then I know all too well that **we can let go of that hand....., either by choice or by complacency.**

As to the question of whether people are predestined for God?

The Church's concise and constant teaching on both predestination and the possible loss of our souls can be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church -

(1037) (QUOTE) God predestines no one to go to hell;[618] for this, a willful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end. (End Quote)

That same paragraph goes on to this joyful message:

(QUOTE) In the Eucharistic liturgy and in the daily prayers of her faithful, the Church implores the mercy of God, who does not want "any to perish, but all to come to repentance" (END QUOTE)

This should give us hope and strength even in our weaknesses.

Blessed assurance. Confidence in God's power..... and the understanding of the depth of his love.... are part of the Christian virtue of hope. We are a people of hope.

Yet our **blessed assurance** must be balanced with humble vigilance and prayer for the grace of perseverance, the grace to "hold fast" to his hand and to rest in the knowledge the Psalmist gives us today..... that:

The LORD is good: his kindness endures forever, and his faithfulness, to all generations.

So, let us strive to live in the light of God's Grace, so that one day, **we may "stand with the countless multitude, before God's throne and worship him day and night in his temple"**.....Where the **Lamb who is in the center of that throne will shepherd us and lead us to springs of life-giving water, and wipe away every tear from our eyes.**

(Very soon, we will baptize _____. After her baptism, when she is freed from the stain of original sin, and unable to sin for many years to come..... she is perfection. This is the manifestation of the promise of eternal life and God's desire for us to be triumphant.... in His grace.... It is the LIVING Good News of Jesus Christ. Let us try to live in the light of that same Good News.)

This promise of eternal life and God's desire for us to be triumphant.... in His grace.... is the Good News of Jesus Christ. Let us try to live in the light of that same Good News.