

**THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER – C (EVANGELIUM VITAE MASS, ND, APRIL 9, 2016)**

**In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we heard the bold and courageous response of Saint Peter and the Apostles who were ordered by the Sanhedrin to stop teaching in the name of Jesus. They said in reply: *We must obey God rather than men.* When they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, they rejoiced that *they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.* At this Mass, there is a community of sisters with us who, in the face of a terribly unjust mandate of our federal government, have stood up and by their actions have said what Saint Peter and the apostles said to their government in the earliest years of the Church: *We must obey God rather than men.* I wish to say to the Little Sisters of the Poor who will receive the Evangelium Vitae medal this evening, thank you for your courageous witness! You have also suffered dishonor from powerful segments of our secularist culture. May you, like the apostles, rejoice that you have been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name of Jesus! Thank you, Sisters, for your witness to the Gospel of life by your loving care for the elderly and the poor. We pray that the Supreme Court of our nation will rule in favor of our religious freedom – that of the Church, the Little Sisters, and the many Catholic institutions, including our**

diocese, that have lawsuits pending against the HHS mandate. The Little Sisters of the Poor stand at the forefront in this noble cause.

When human laws contradict God's laws, believers are called to obey God even if disobeying human authority will cost them social advancement, their livelihood, or their lives. Saint Peter's words in today's reading are a rallying cry in many situations in which people are pressured to violate their consciences by human laws or commands. *We must obey God rather than men* are words that echo Jesus' directive to render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. Both these sentences are foundational for the Christian understanding of conscience and good citizenship. The Catechism teaches that we should be good citizens, but that "the citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel" (2242). In many parts of today's world, there are civil authorities and laws that violate human dignity or improperly restrict the Church's freedom to evangelize. The HHS mandate is a violation of our right to live and practice our faith in our apostolic works, our works of charity, to serve the sick and the poor in a way that does not force us to do things that are morally unacceptable. It is important that we resist such abuses of civil authority.

**In the liturgies throughout the Easter season, we hear a continuous reading of the Acts of the Apostles. It is good to ask ourselves: where did the first disciples find the strength to bear witness to Christ? What was the source of their joy and courage to preach and live the Gospel in the midst of so many obstacles and even violent persecution? They were simple people. They weren't scribes or doctors of the law; they weren't powerful in the eyes of the world. Yet, despite their status and their limitations, with the authorities against them, they still managed to make many converts. The Church grew and flourished. How can this be explained? We learn from Acts that the only explanation is the presence of the Risen Lord with them and the action of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Their faith was based on their strong personal experience of the crucified and risen Lord in their lives. That's why they feared nothing and no one and even saw persecution as a cause of honor. They were enabled to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, to witness to Him with their lives, and to share in His sufferings with joy.**

**Pope Francis says that "the history of the first Christian community tells us something very important which applies to the Church in all times and also to us." He says that "when a person truly knows Jesus Christ and believes in him that person experiences his presence in life as well as the power of his**

**Resurrection and cannot but communicate this experience. And if this person meets with misunderstanding or adversity, he behaves like Jesus in his passion: he or she answers with love and with the power of the truth.”**

**In today’s Gospel, Jesus asks Peter three times to feed his flock, to feed it with his love. Our Lord then prophesies to Peter: “when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” We too are called to be carried by God’s will, sometimes to places where we would rather not go. We must be prepared to bear witness to Christ and to be faithful to Him even when it involves suffering for the faith. We know that for Saint Peter it meant martyrdom. We can think today of so many of our brothers and sisters in Christ for whom this fidelity also means martyrdom. It is good to pray for them today, especially our brothers and sisters in Iraq and Syria and other places where their lives are at risk because of their Christian faith.**

**How do we bear witness to Christ through our faith? Do we have the courage of Peter and the other Apostles to think, choose and love as Christians, obedient to God, in the culture in which we live? This begins with what Pope Francis calls even our “humble little witness, even the hidden witness of those**

who live their faith with simplicity in everyday family relationships, work relationships, friendships.” He says: “Let us all remember this: one cannot proclaim the Gospel of Jesus without the tangible witness of one’s life. Those who listen to us and observe us must be able to see in our actions what they hear from our lips, and so give glory to God!” Preaching with our life, with our witness, is necessary, and it takes courage. The Church’s credibility is undermined, Pope Francis says, when there is an inconsistency on the part of pastors and the faithful between what we say and what we do, between word and manner of life. Saint John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI would speak about Eucharistic consistency, the consistency between our worship and our lives. There must be a consistency between what we profess and the way we live, and this includes not only our personal lives, but also the lives of our communities, in our dioceses and parishes, our Catholic schools and universities, our Catholic health care facilities and other institutions. What a powerful witness in society when there is a real consistency between what we proclaim our mission to be and the way we live that mission! When there is not this consistency, as Pope Francis says, we lose our credibility.

This faithful and joyful witness to Christ and the truth of His Gospel is only possible if we are close to the Lord, like Peter, John and the other disciples in

today's Gospel as they ate breakfast with Him. This intimacy of life with Jesus is not only necessary, it is beautiful. Our daily closeness to the Lord in prayer and our communion with Him in the Eucharist is what gives us strength and joy. The Eucharistic overtones of the breakfast that Jesus provided to the disciples are clear. He took the bread and gave it to them and in like manner the fish. Just as Jesus revealed Himself to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in the breaking of the bread, so He continues to reveal Himself to us today. He provides us with the food that strengthens us, His very Body and Blood. May this Eucharist strengthen all of us to proclaim His Gospel and to witness to His love!