

5th Sunday of Easter: Life in the Spirit (Year B)
“It is the glory of my Father that you should bear much fruit”

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John: (Jn. 15: 1-8)

Jesus said to his disciples: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that bears no fruit he cuts away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes to make it bear even more. You are pruned already, by means of the word that I have spoken to you.

Make your home in me, as I make mine in you. As a branch cannot bear fruit all by itself, but must remain part of the vine, neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing. Anyone who does not remain in me is like a branch that has been thrown away, he withers; these branches are collected and thrown on the fire, and they are burnt.

If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask what you will and you shall get it. It is to the glory of my Father that you should bear much fruit, and then you will be my disciples.”

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

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“I am the vine-tree; you are the branches” (Jn. 15: 5). This Sunday’s Gospel brings along with it the image of a tree, its branches, the pruning that the fruit bearing tree is subjected to in order that it may bear more fruit. Let us try to understand this image.

As we know a tree lives by the sap, the juice, that it draws from the soil through its roots and which it sends up along the trunk, making it reach even the last tiny branch, the last tiny leaf at the very top of the tree. The branch lives exactly the same sap by which the tree lives. There is no difference between the life of the trunk and that of the branches..... Even a child knows that it can’t; it withers and dries up; it will never yield fruit again.

Jesus tells us this Sunday: “I am the vine-tree; you are the branches”. The meaning now is obvious. We belong to Christ, we are part of him. There is no difference between the Life in the Spirit given to us and his own life. We live by him. “Cut off from me, you can do nothing” (Jn. 15: 5). That is, there is no way for us to maintain the Life in the Spirit except by being united to Jesus and living in his friendship. The moment we break away from him by serious sin, divine life within us dies away.

Jesus has been very kind to warn us against the most serious danger in life, i.e., that cut off from him we can do nothing. Jesus does not say “little” but “nothing”. Serious sin truly wrecks our Christian life

Our life with the Lord can also be compared to a babe in the womb of the mother; it cannot live unless united to the mother by what is called the umbilical

cord. The blood of the mother passes also through the child; the food that she takes become the child's own food. Similarly too our life in the Holy Spirit.

Jesus goes further and says: "It is the will of my Father that you should bear much fruit" (Jn. 15: 8). That is, it is not enough that we remain united with Jesus, we must bear much fruit. This means that God's divine life within us must develop; it must grow, reach maturity and bear fruit. A babe newly born is a wonderful thing, but unless it grows, it dies.

- Something happens with the Life in the Spirit which does not happen in nature; a child is born and grows up; but on reaching adult life growth ceases, life starts decaying until, eventually, the person dies. This should not happen with divine life within us; ours should be a continuous growth throughout life.

- Again, trees yield fruit only once a year; Christians instead should yield fruit every day, nay every moment in their life.

Now let us ask a question: What is expected of me a Christian who should stay always be united with Jesus? What must I do to produce fruits?

I will suggest to you four ways to remain united with Jesus. The first one is that of prayer; the second, reception of sacraments; third, carrying out God's will in our life; and fourth, by accepting suffering be willing to be pruned by the Father who is the vinedresser!

Let me take each of them one by one.

First and most essential bond with Jesus is through prayer. Staying united to the vine means constantly growing in our life of prayer. There are very common practices of piety that a Christian must engage in to live a life of prayer on a daily basis. They are: *Morning prayer... reading the word of God and meditating... whenever possible I try to attend the Mass; during the day or in the evening I say the Rosary... before going to bed I examine my conscience, say a few prayers*

That is a good rhythm of prayer. Just as plants need exposure to sunlight for energy, so we need to expose ourselves to God's truth and love through reading and reflecting on the sacred scriptures, and through conversing with him in the quiet of our hearts. Together with that, we must also try to live in the presence of God, in interior silence.

Living with a constant awareness of the presence of God is one of the most sure means of growing in holiness and perfection in charity. It consists in making ourselves "aware" or "conscious" of God's loving presence around us and in us every moment. It is not going to take us away from God (image of the child one arm in Dad's hand, the other playing and plucking fruits...)

So what should we do: we should to place ourselves in the presence of God, every now and then. We can do it at the beginning and end of every important activity, before and after the meals, through a short prayer. What we need to cultivate is a lively and attentive awareness of the omnipresence of God: God is everywhere, and we become attentive to and conscious of God's presence in our

workplace, in the kitchen, in our bedroom, in the nature, in the world. When we are not attentive to God's presence close to us, then it is as if we do not know the truth. It is then we lose respect and reverence to God and easily fall into sin.

We can also place ourselves in God's presence by becoming attentive and conscious of His presence in our heart, the very centre of our spirit. "He enlivens and animates it by his divine presence, being there as the heart of your heart and the spirit of your spirit. The soul is spread throughout the entire body, and is present in every part of it, yet resides in a particular manner in the heart."

Another way of becoming aware of God's presence is by thinking of the glorified Lord Jesus who sees all of us from His place in heaven. This is not mere imagination, but is the truth, which St. Stephen saw just before his martyrdom. He then "saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at God's right hand" (Acts 7:55). Though we do not see Him like that yet, he is really seeing us his disciples.

A fourth way consists in using our simple imagination and see Jesus in humanity close to us in our work. His promise, "I am with you always, until the end of time" (Mt 28:20), is indeed true. He is spiritually present with us, and is really present in the Holy Eucharist. A visit to the Blessed Sacrament is hence a very good practice to live in God's presence.

We also live in the presence of God through "longings of the hearts" for God, "ejaculatory prayers," and "good thoughts". Thus we grow in our spiritual life, in our friendship and communion with the Lord.

In other words we live in the presence of God by recollecting our spirit within our heart every now and then through one of the ways suggested above. There, separated from everyone else, we can speak to God about ourselves.

The second way of "remaining in Christ" is to make good use of the sacraments, most especially the sacraments of the Eucharist and confession.

Let us go back to the image of the wine and branches: if a branch gets damaged in a wind storm, the gardener knows how to tie it up properly so that it will once again attach itself firmly to the trunk. He binds it or grafts it back on to the vine. If it is withering because of lack of water or manure, then the farmer will supply water and manure.

Some of the sacraments are meant to heal our woundedness and sicknesses. For instance that's what happens with confession: Jesus renews the connection with him that our sin has damaged or broken. All the saints and popes recommend that we use this great gift regularly and frequently.

And in the Eucharist, we receive the food from the tree. Our union with Christ is strengthened more powerfully than at any other time - we receive an influx of grace like no other, because he is truly present there under the appearances of bread and wine. Every Holy Communion is like a spiritual springtime in which a new outpouring of divine life surges into our hearts and minds.

St Gaudentius of Brescia put it very clearly when he wrote: “This is the food which sustains and nourishes us on our journey through life, until we depart from this world and are united with Christ.”

The third way of staying united to the vine requires loving obedience to God’s will. In his first letter to the Christians of Corinth Paul gives the following precious advice to the Christians of all times: “Whatever you eat and drink, whatever you do, do it for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10, 31).

That is, it is not our position in life that counts: whether we be man or woman, children or adults, learned or unlearned, servants or masters, farmers or ministers; it is immaterial whether we are at work or at play or taking our rest: each moment in our life can and will be rendered fruitful on just this one condition: that we keep in God’s friendship and strive do what God planned for us for each particular moment.

It’s easy to say pretty words, to talk the talk of being a good Catholic. But that talk has to translate into actions and the strength of virtues, into honesty, purity, faithfulness, courage, self-sacrifice, and obedience to Church teaching. Otherwise, we are no better than actors on a stage, making a show out of looking like Christ’s followers, but not really following Christ.

This loving obedience to God our wise and all-powerful Father, in big things and little things, is the surest sign of humility, and humility the shortcut to holiness, wisdom, and lasting happiness.

The fourth way of staying united to the vine means allowing God to prune us. Jesus says, “Every branch that does bear fruit my Father prunes to make it bear even more” (Jn. 15,2).

You must have seen some farmers pruning the fruit trees. Pruning trees was unknown to most of us till recently; we see it done mainly in Government farms. In winter, a man goes from fruit tree to fruit-tree cutting away some shoots and leaving others. He knows how to distinguish fruit bearing branches from the useless ones. By so doing, the strength of the tree concentrates on the fruit bearing branches and the yield of the tree increases. I think, if the trees could complain on being pruned, they would do so loudly. The tree, so to say, suffers for a moment but the suffering is worth enduring for it to produce fruit.

- In a similar way, Jesus means to tell us, there will be suffering in our life but this suffering helps God’s life within us to grow and mature, and the joy of the fruit attained through suffering far exceed the pain it entails. It happens with us just as it happened with Jesus.

It may be painful, physical sufferings, like sickness, disease, financial insecurity, or old-age. It may be hidden, interior sufferings, like losing a loved one or watching a dear relative abandon their Catholic faith.

Whenever God permits these kinds of sufferings - the ones that we don't seem to have any control over - we have to let our faith remind us that they are under his control. He is the vine-dresser.

He knows how much pruning we can handle (and the amount is different for each branch). And he knows how to use that suffering to unite us more deeply with Christ, who suffered on the cross to redeem the world.

In times of pain and hardship, God is begging us to trust in him more and more, to pray in the depths of our hearts that beautiful prayer that he himself taught us through his revelations to St Faustina of the Divine Mercy: "Jesus, I trust in you."

Accepting the Cross, not rebelling when God tries to prune us, is the secret of all the saints.

As St Ignatius of Loyola put it: "If God causes you to suffer much, it is a sign that he has great designs for you, and that he certainly intends to make you a saint. And if you wish to become a great saint, entreat him to give you much opportunity for suffering; for there is no wood better to kindle the fire of holy love than the wood of the Cross, which Christ used for his own sacrifice of boundless charity."

Dear God's family: God wants us to bear fruit and to bear in plenty. Prayer, the sacraments, loving obedience, and suffering in union with Christ are what keep the Christian sap flowing in our lives.

This is what God wants for us; this is why Jesus came to earth: "By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." Bearing such fruit makes life worth living; without it we are dry, dead branches good for nothing except the fire.

A very good example of the fruit bearing branch is Saint Paul. The first reading of this Sunday tells us how the Christians of Jerusalem were hesitant to accept Paul in their midst. They could not possibly imagine that their former persecutor was now a genuine disciple of Jesus.

Paul was the best example of God's incredible love in sharing his divine life with anyone who accepts it. He is also an example of God's power which can turn a persecutor of the Church into a loving child of God, nay into an apostle.

Paul understood the preciousness of the gift Baptism had brought to him. Listen to his words written to the Christians of Galatia: "I live now, not with my own life, but with the life of Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2, 20).

He became a branch in the tree which is Christ; the branch yielded an extraordinarily abundant, good quality fruit, throughout his life: how many people Paul brought to Christ! How many Churches he established! He continues to yield fruit even today, so many years after his death, through his letters. He was intimately united to his Master; that explains the abundance and quality of the fruit he yielded!

- But Paul was pruned, pruned day after day throughout his life. He had much to suffer for the sake of the Church. The words of Jesus to Ananias were indeed fulfilled to the letter: "I myself will show him how much he himself must suffer for my name" (Acts 9: 16).

But Jesus remained at all times, by Paul's side giving him the strength he needed. He is by our side too, never closer to us than when we suffer.

Let us pray: Father in heaven, we thank you for sharing with us your own life, thus rendering our lives meaningful and fruitful. Strengthen our resolve to grow into mature Christians, till we come to heaven where we shall fully share your life and joy. -Amen.