

2nd Sunday of Easter “The 14 Holy Helpers”
Fr. Frank Schuster

Given that we are a little over a month into celebrating Sunday Mass remotely due to Covid 19, I got thinking about life in the Middle Ages with all the diseases they put up with and wondered if the people in those days had favorite saints to venerate or plea to for intercession during times of plague. What I discovered is that there were a number of saints that were called upon for intercession during those years, 14 to be precise. These 14 saints were collectively called the 14 Holy Helpers. Giving them this title was a way of venerating and calling for their intercession all at once instead of individually, quite practical when you think about it. The Holy Helpers are Saints Acacius, Barbara, Blaise, Christopher, Cyriacus, Catherine of Alexandria, Denis, Erasmus of Formiae, Eustace, George, Giles, Margaret of Antioch, Pantaleon, and Vitus.

All of them are worthy of reverence and have interesting stories worth looking into, however, for today I am only going to focus on a couple of the many interesting thoughts about them. The first is, we have a relic in our altar of Saint Blaise, Bishop and Martyr. His story is well known because he is associated with the throat blessing every February. Recall that he miraculously saved a boy from choking on a fish bone prior to his gruesome martyrdom. The second interesting thought I would like to share today about the 14 Holy Helpers is that every one of them died a martyr’s death with the exception of Saint Giles who was actually a holy monk who founded a monastery and was also a great visionary. And, although he was not martyred per se, he was accidentally pierced with an arrow in a hunting accident. This made him physically handicapped for the rest of his life and thus, in addition to being a patron saint for those experiencing plague, he is also the patron saint of those who are physically handicapped, even those who experience depression, who knew?

The reason why I mention all of this is that I find it very fascinating that the people of Europe during the times of the great plagues would venerate these 14 saints who, every single one of them, are remembered in part because of the wounds they received. Let’s think about that for a moment. The 14 Holy Helpers are intercessors in large part because of the wounds they endured faithfully when they gave witness as disciples of Jesus. Another way of saying it, their wounds have the power to heal.

My friends, Jesus appears before the eleven and what do we find? The Risen Lord has wounds, glorified wounds. Wounds that no longer hurt, but rather have become a source of strength, able to heal the world! The incongruity for us however is that wounds are not a very pleasant thing to think about at all. Wounds hurt, right? Who really wants to be wounded, raise your hand? No one wants to be wounded. However, when we allow the Risen Lord into our lives, wounds no longer have to hurt us day after day.

The Risen Lord can transform our wounds into glorified wounds, holy wounds, that can become a source of strength and healing to others if we only unite our suffering to Christ’s suffering and then unite his Resurrection to our own Easter hope. Then wounds no longer would have to beat us down day after day. Through a relationship with

Jesus, we can gain strength from the accidents that befall us, or injustices committed against us, as much as we can learn from our own mistakes. Our transformed wounds can then become a source of strength and motivation, influencing us to do little things to help Jesus heal a wounded world. This all invites us to consider, what are our wounds? This is a good thing to think about for a moment, what are our wounds? Now can we trust our wounds to Jesus? Can we trust him with our wounds?

In the Gospel today, Thomas has his doubts. I think many of us might appreciate his honesty. He said, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger into the nail marks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” And I suppose we can all relate with that. At times, we can all struggle with questions or even doubts. Perhaps, more than a few people watching right now come to this mass with hurts and doubts. In addition to the 14 Holy Helpers, maybe Saint Thomas can also be a patron saint today.

The Gospel says that the following week Thomas and the other disciples were in the upper room with the doors locked and Jesus appeared before them anyway and said “Peace be with you”. Jesus then invited Thomas to touch his wounds. And then Thomas, in awe and with joy exclaims, “My Lord and my God”. It is interesting to me that Jesus’ medicine for Thomas was to offer him his glorified wounds.

My friends, today is also Divine Mercy Sunday. St. Faustina had a vision of the Risen Lord which we have a copy on display here in the sanctuary. St. Faustina’s vision of the Risen Lord has a remarkable example of what glorified wounds mean. From the side of Christ, water and blood shine out like rays of the sun. The water represents the waters of Baptism and the blood represents Holy Eucharist.

In St. Faustina’s diary about the origin of this feast day, Jesus told her “...tell the whole world about My inconceivable mercy. I desire that the Feast of Mercy be a refuge and shelter for all souls, and especially poor sinners. On that day the very depths of My tender mercy are open. I pour out a whole ocean of graces upon the souls who approach the Fount of My Mercy. On that day all the divine floodgates through which graces flow are opened. Let no soul fear to draw near to Me, even though its sins be as scarlet.... Mankind will not have peace until it turns to the Fount of My Mercy”. (Diary 699)

Under the image is St. Faustina’s prayer that I believe we could all pray when we have our doubts or hurts. Jesus I trust in you. Many of you who really know me, know that I really like this prayer. Jesus I trust in you. For me it is like a prayer of abandonment. I don’t know where my life is going. Jesus I trust in you. I may be racked with sinfulness, but Jesus I trust in you. I may be wounded by the sins of others, Jesus I trust in you. My life may seem like it is crumbling all around me, but Jesus I trust in you. It is a beautiful prayer. In our times of woundedness and doubt we just simply need to trust that Jesus knows what he is doing even when we don’t. Jesus will never let us become lost, if we just simply trust.

My friends, we all have wounds and doubts. We are invited to be cleansed by the healing touch of God's love and forgiveness. We are invited to come to the Lord with our aches and hurts. We are invited to contemplate the insight that St. Thomas discovered in our Gospel today. Wounds can have the power to heal. That is the witness of the 14 Holy Helpers and those who venerated them during times of plague and hardship. And, our wounds can have the power to heal as well if we allow Jesus to transform our wounds by his glorified wounds. This Sunday, the invitation is to let Christ's Body and Blood spiritually cleanse our body and blood. Let Jesus' wounds transform our wounds. And, as Church, let us pray over and over again, especially during these very difficult times: Jesus I trust in you.