

13th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Spiritual Vaccine”

Bishop Frank Schuster

My friends, now that I serve as the extension of Archbishop Etienne’s ministry as the Southern Regional Bishop for the Archdiocese, this frees me to visit parishes each week in my region. It is a joy to be here this weekend at Saint Stephen the Martyr parish.

Many of you may have heard of Bishop Robert Barron. He gave an analogy, years ago, about how vaccines work, something we are all familiar with having gone through Covid 19. How does a vaccine work? The doctor injects us with a little bit of the disease, or something that mimics the disease, so to stir up a transformation in our immune systems. This is how the body can learn to cope with the actual disease if we are ever infected. Scripture can have the same effect for the soul. I think we see this dynamic at work in our readings this weekend.

Let’s begin with the very first sentence of our second reading today. Saint Paul writes, “Brothers and sisters: Are you unaware that we who were baptized in Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” All right. Let’s stop right there! Who is Saint Paul writing to? He is writing to a very small group of fledgling Christians in Rome. These Christians were under a constant threat of being martyred for identifying themselves as Christians. Saint Paul is writing them while he is imprisoned and awaiting martyrdom himself. At this point in his pastoral letter, he is getting to the heart of what they probably feared the most, the fear of dying for the faith. If the fear of death can be likened to a spiritual disease, keeping disciples from following Jesus to the full, for Saint Paul the paschal mystery is the inoculation, the vaccine, and the cure.

I mention this because, if we are honest with ourselves, many of us would say we fear the idea of dying someday too, which is why we do everything we can not to think about it. In fact, psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have argued that many of our dysfunctions and addictions we develop over time can be attributed in some manner to an unresolved fear of death. In our second reading from Romans, like I said, Saint Paul goes straight to the heart of the matter, but then gives us reason to hope. “Brothers and sisters: ... We were indeed buried with [Jesus] through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.” That is our Easter hope. We can also see this theme playing out in our Gospel reading. Consider anew what Jesus said to his apostles, “Whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Do you see it? This is counter cultural stuff, but it is also good medicine. Why?

My friends, our culture does everything possible to inebriate us so to divert our attention to the fact that we are mortal. Every supermall offers all kinds of stores and products designed to make us look younger and feel younger. Commercials on television tell us over and over that we will feel more alive if we spend money on this or that

product. Honestly, have you ever seen a beer or fast-food commercial with somebody fat in it? Of course not, it's a lie! (Exhibit A.) It gets worse. Our culture even suggests that success means to make more money so we can buy more things. If we run out of money, here is a credit card, so we can buy more things. Happy days, we can now be slaves to a bank. The thing is, we can try all we can to fill up our lives with money, sex, drugs, alcohol, gambling, whatever it is, but (news flash) nothing works, nothing addresses the root cause of our behavior and gets to the heart of the matter of why human beings are a hot mess. My friends, bottom line, we are sinners. We cannot save ourselves. We need a savior. His name is Jesus.

Jesus says, "Whoever does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me". Why is this Good News? Why is this a vaccine? Hear Saint Paul again, "We were indeed buried with Jesus through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life." That is our Easter hope. This hope in the future has an impact on how we can see and conduct our lives today. We can now live our lives without fear if we just keep the big picture in view.

I find it ironic that, if we can say that our culture is doing its very best to help us forget about death, have you noticed how the Church has a way of rubbing our faces in it? From the moment we sign ourselves with the cross with holy water when we walk in, to seeing our crucifix on the wall as if you can miss it, our procession in and out of the Church following a crucifix, to our celebration of the Eucharist where we proclaim the death of Christ, until the final blessing at the end of Mass with the sign of the cross, the Church is giving us a massive inoculation each Sunday, a vaccine if you will, that should stir up in the soul a transformation that should protect us from the culture out there. My friends, coming to church on Sunday matters, carving time out of each day for prayer matters, praying with our family members and friends, matter. Accepting God's will for us in good times and in bad, matters. Brass tacks: with God's grace, we no longer have to be slaves to this nagging, underlying, fear of death and all the problems this causes. There is a catch though. We have to pick up our cross and follow Jesus, who alone is the way, the truth, and the life.