

Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 2, 2021

Have you ever wondered what it was like to become a Christian when the Faith was new to the world? In the decades and first few centuries immediately following the Resurrection and Ascension of our Lord?

For a convert from the Greek or Roman world, one not only had to believe in Jesus Christ but often had to stop living the type of life one had been living before. With conversion and Baptism one was expected to think and act in a very different way. To become a Christian was to change one's worldview and one's lifestyle.

We have to remember this was a time when the outside world knew almost nothing about the Faith but was nonetheless hostile to believers and their values. A world that could suddenly erupt into violent persecution by the State and in which the religious scene was pluralistic and very pagan.

We forget that the gods in which the ancient Greeks and Romans believed were not seen as good. Read their mythology! Neither were they seen as caring much about you let alone loving you. They were more often indifferent to humans unless one was to curry their favour; and they could toy with your life or even destroy it simply out of whim or pleasure.

It was a world in which there was no sense of the equal dignity of all human beings, where slavery was rampant, where some temples had

prostitutes available for male attendees, where gladiator fights and the torturing of prisoners was considered entertainment, where infanticide was accepted and common.

And so, when an adult was asking to be Baptized, the Church was in no rush to do it. While today an adult seeking to be Baptized might have to go through an RCIA process that lasts maybe six to eight months, in those days the process was much longer.

There is an ancient Christian document, called the “Apostolic Tradition,” that was written by Saint Hippolytus of Rome in the early 3rd century. It gives us an insight into the process. When newcomers presented themselves to the Church, Hippolytus insisted that they be interviewed, along with those who brought them, later called “sponsors.” Sponsors would be questioned as to whether their guests were “capable of hearing the Word”? The questions were less about motive and more about lifestyle.

Did these prospective converts have mistresses? Were they gladiators, charioteers, sculptors of idols, actors, brothel-keepers, city magistrates or employed in some other then immoral trade? If they were, they would be required to make the costly choice to cease or be rejected.

Once admitted as catechumens they would receive instruction for three years. After this period, they and their sponsors would once more be examined in preparation for Easter Baptism; again, with attention primarily to lifestyle. “Have they honored the widows? Have they visited the sick? Have they done every good work?”

For you had to make a decision as to who really was Lord in your life? And was this reflected in how you live your life? For what you believe has to influence what you do. Or as Saint John puts it in the Second Reading, *“Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”* What we profess on Sunday has to influence what we do the rest of the week.

I know it is not easy. We may totally believe what the Faith holds but still have trouble completely living it. Certain habitual sins may have a strong grip on us. And we may fear that if we change too much those around us, those dear to us, may reject us. It has always been easier just to fit in, to be like everyone else.

Things have changed since the days of Saint Hippolytus, thank goodness, but living the Christian faith is still a challenge. It is still countercultural. And the world is once again becoming hostile to us and our values.

Christ’s call to conversion is not just a one-time occurrence. It is a lifetime process. And it extends beyond our individual lives to the Church as a whole, ever called to increasing fidelity to the Gospel.

But if all this only serves to make you feel discouraged, then it is important to hear what Saint John says immediately following the last text I quoted: *“And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before Him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and He knows everything.”* Never

give up. Persevere. God's love for you is greater than your own. He knows you better than you know yourself. God bless.