

A bishop's sermon enlightens more than a group of teenagers

TWELVE CONFUSED MEN

“Don’t they look like little angels and saints?”

Taking Kristi’s hand, Ace whispers, “That they do, If the bishop only knew...”

A soft chuckle escapes, Kristi’s lips.

“I think their parents could tell the bishop a thing or two about teenagers and piety, or knowledge, or wisdom,” she says.

It’s Darryl’s turn to chuckle. Gently squeezing his wife’s hand, he whispers in her ear.

“Somehow I think he already knows.”

Hi, Tony here. It is an early Wednesday evening here at St. Kate’s. Some of the Easter lilies still decorate the altar as Easter Sunday was only ten days ago. The church is a little more than half full which is a bit surprising when the bishop presides over a service here. Then again, it is a special evening. Tonight, the sacrament of Confirmation is being celebrated. Forty-nine young men and women from St. Kate’s and two nearby parishes, all twelve to fourteen years old, are being

confirmed by Bishop Michael Richardson. So, the assembly consists of the bishop, Father Bob and Father John, the priests from the other two parishes, parents, sponsors and friends.

Darryl and Kristi Martinson have joined their friends for this service. They don't have a child being confirmed but several of the teens are sons and daughters of close friends. And, there is a reception following the service; another good time to get together. Of course, here at St. Kate's, a reception is really another excuse for a party. A tame one, tonight, mind you, but a party nonetheless.

Everyone settles in as Bishop Mike, as he likes to be known, especially to the young people of his diocese, descends from the pulpit and stands before the candidates and their sponsors. Well-known for his keen wisdom, and unique understanding of the faith, a feeling of anticipation hangs in the air. Holding his shepherd's crook, a sign of his office, Bishop Mike smiles and begins his sermon ...

What do you say we listen in ...?

“Tonight, my young friends, we celebrate another sacrament of initiation in our church, Until now others have determined and directed your participation in our faith. Your baptism, your first confession and first Communion were choices made for you. That is how our Lord, by his life among us, shows us to be proper. Parents and guardians, are your first teachers. But tonight, that changes. Tonight, you choose to embrace this sacrament. This is your decision ...

“Confirmation, is our sacrament, somewhat similar to the Jewish tradition of the bar or bas mitzvah, wherein a young person accepts becoming part of the Covenant of the faith. A tradition in which our church has its roots. Tonight, the Holy Spirit will descend on you, bringing you the gifts of this sacrament. So, in a very real sense, this is your personal Pentecost Sunday ...

“Now in preparing for this night, you have learned Confirmation affords you seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. So, can you tell me what they are?”

"Wisdom," a young lady in the second row quietly says.

"Understanding," comes another answer

"Fortitude," a young man at the end of the front row says. And so on, as the teens respond with the seven.

Taking a sip from a glass of water placed on the side of the altar, Bishop Mike smiles. “Wonderful,” he says, ... “you’ve learned well.”

Pausing for a long moment then raising his hand; pointing and shaking his index finger skyward, he scans the group. "But my young friends, it is not those seven I want to talk about this evening. I want to offer you something else, something you need to develop, not only to allow this sacrament to bear fruit, but also essential in this journey we call our Catholic faith."

The sound of people shifting in their seats is heard.

"I am speaking of two character traits within us. Something, we find in the apostles, and particularly, Peter."

The attention of the entire congregation is focused on the man holding the shepherd's crook. I get the feeling Bishop Mike is about to offer a thought new to the people. He has a habit of doing that.

The bishop winks at the teens. "What are they? ... well, I'll tell you; they are patience and persistence."

Curious looks abound, not only on the kids, but throughout the congregation. I think many are wondering where the bishop is going with this. Heck, I know I am.

Again, sipping from the glass of water, he pauses briefly, then continues.

"In John's gospel, we hear Jesus teaching about giving us Himself under the form of bread and wine. The Eucharist, Holy Communion as we know it, and you have received. Jesus says to the disciples they must

eat his flesh and drink his blood, and they will have eternal life.

“Now, His words are shocking. What Jesus says is an outrage; maybe even an abomination. To His listeners, what He says is to render oneself unclean, defiled, unworthy of God’s love. Consequently, when we read the account of this event, we see that many said, ‘this is too hard, we cannot accept this’, and they left him.

“So, what happens next? Simple, Jesus turns to Peter and the apostles and asks, ‘are you going to leave me too?’ And it is Peter’s response here, of which I am speaking.

“ ‘Where would we go Lord, we know you have the words of eternal life?’ Peter says. Notice, Jesus does not elaborate further. He says nothing more.

“Now, when this incident is read at Mass, I find myself wondering, how many people think, ‘well of course Peter would say that, the apostles knew what Jesus meant’.

“Personally, I think, as people say today, ‘hey, slow your roll.’ I mean, I can see several of the apostles ... say, Nathaniel, James the Lesser, and Simon the Zealot walking down a road, following Jesus, and talking among themselves - remember these men were Jewish - and James asks, “He said, eat my flesh and drink my blood’. Is He crazy?”

“You don’t think He’s wandered off the reservation, do you?” Nathaniel asks, shaking his head.

“I’m starting to wonder if he’s a few cherries short of a fruitcake, myself,” Simons says softly, almost to himself.

Soft laughter rolls through the pews at the image Bishop Mike’s words create. Pausing a moment for it to subside, he continues.

“Now, I’m not meaning to be disrespectful, but I have to think those twelve men were just as confused as the rest of the crowd. But unlike those who relied on their own understanding, the twelve chose to believe in our Lord, even when they didn’t understand; to trust in Him, not their own wisdom.

“And as we know, on Holy Thursday night, at the Last Supper, Jesus takes bread and wine and says, “THIS is my body ... and THIS is my blood. He makes clear the meaning of His earlier words. And, it’s here the apostles began to understand all Jesus had taught them. The light goes on. They get it! And on Pentecost, the Holy Spirit empowers them to take that understanding and go forth with wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord, to spread His Word. They received those seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as you do today on your personal Pentecost Sunday.

“My young brothers and sisters in Christ, I encourage you to embrace the patience and persistence of the apostles. Your lives will present many things; difficulties, confusion, and problems that seem to have no good solution at the time. It happens to us all on this

journey we call life. When that confusion arises, when those difficulties and problems present themselves, I urge you to remember the example of Peter and the others. Trust in God, and eventually, in His time, all will become clear.

“And one final thought. I can’t promise you as you grow in your faith, life will automatically get easier ... but have the courage, the fortitude to remain faithful, to trust Our Lord and His Church, even when you don’t fully understand, and you will get stronger.

Making the sign of the cross in blessing, Bishop Mike smiles broadly ...

... “God Bless you, my young friends.”

How many of us fall into thinking the twelve Jesus called, understood perfectly everything our Lord said and did?

Bishop Mike, makes a good point. Not only did Peter and the apostles probably not understand fully, but were as confused as the others at times. But unlike those who walked away - those seeds that fell on hard ground or rocky soil - the apostles rooted themselves in their belief in the truth of Jesus. They stayed the course, believing even when they didn’t understand, and in the end, blossomed and yielded great fruit. Why? ...

**...because they stuck around.
Thinkaboutit ... I'm Tony Baggz.**

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