

Homily - Fifth Sunday of Easter

“Remain in me, as I remain in you.”

Some things just take a while.

Nothing has taught me that more clearly than my time in seminary.

Becoming a priest is one of those processes that just takes a lot of time by its very nature.

Getting to know your diocese and vocation director and actually applying to become a seminarian? That’s at least a few months, if not years.

Studying philosophy so you understand the intellectual foundations of the faith? That’s two, maybe four years.

Internships at parishes and pastoral assignments? Multiple summers, plus another entire calendar year.

Learning theology for the foundations of your preaching and teaching ministry. Yep, that’s another four years.

Recently, the Church decided that men going into priestly formation should also have a period of spiritual preparation to help them grow in prayer and transition out of the secular world. Guess what? That’s yet another year.

When I started seminary, most of my friends were just finishing college. By the time I was approaching the final years, many of them were married and had multiple children, while I was *still* in school.

It was a strange experience - and honestly, it was a good and necessary process. None of that time was wasted or unnecessary.

But committing to that process hammered home a point that was essential for our vocation, and is true more broadly in so many places and times in our journey

Sometimes, the most important thing in the spiritual life is to remain where you are, and remain close to the Lord.

Christ's image of the vine and branches is a powerful reminder that our spiritual life is not really about anything that we do on our own, or any natural strength or capacity that we have within ourselves.

It's about remaining close to him, united with his heart, and letting him nourish us from within.

This is true for us as individuals, and likewise true for the entire Church as a whole.

The episode we heard today from the book of Acts is a snapshot of the events immediately following Saint Paul's conversion, when he is first beginning the process of entering the Christian community, many of whom were not yet convinced that he wasn't still out to persecute them.

There's a beautiful theme throughout this and many of the other early chapters of Acts that shows how the Holy Spirit was working not just to bring about remarkable transformations and conversions like that of Paul, but also to unite and bring about a supernatural harmony within the life of the Church itself.

As that final verse stated, "The church throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria was at peace. It was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit it grew in numbers."

Peace. Unity. Organic and dynamic growth.

These are hallmarks of the Spirit's work, signs that the members of Christ's Body are living and nourished by his presence and our union in his love.

Today, there's a whole industry of books, programs, and media that are all about trying to come up with some proprietary way to reproduce and package this kind of renewal.

And, to be fair, there's some merit to some of these resources - if you need it, you can find useful insights or educational materials more easily now than any time in the history of our Church.

But none of it can ever substitute for being joined with the heart of Jesus Christ, the living vine, the source of our life.

And trusting in Christ as the heart of our growth and renewal means that we have to accept that we cannot control that process, or master it for ourselves and have it our way and on our timelines.

Some of you may be taking up spring gardening projects this year.

It may go without saying that no matter how much you may wish otherwise, there's no way to make a plant grow faster just by wanting it to happen.

All you can do is nurture it, care for it, and then... wait.

The fact is, our process of growth in holiness is really quite similar, and more often than not, it's not terribly complicated.

We have to stay close to Jesus. We have to remain close to him and be willing to draw strength from his sacraments, talk to him about our needs, those of the people close to us, and the needs of the world.

We have to abide with him and be at peace that whether he's taking us on a journey of healing, sending us on an apostolic mission, or forming us for our vocation, that process can take time.

It's a slow, beautiful, and consoling process, even in those moments in which it challenges us and prunes us of those parts of our lives which are not of God.

Today, I simply want to encourage you, as the Gospel encourages you - be willing to wait and abide with Our Lord.

Be willing to allow that process of conversion and formation to unfold in your life, as long as it takes.

That's the way his Gospel will bear fruit, and lead us to new life.

In this Eucharist we celebrate, we now offer him our hearts, and pray that through the renewing power of his Word and the consolation of his sacramental presence, he will keep us always united with himself, that we will remain in him, and he in us.