



The Catholic  
Archdiocese  
of Edmonton

## Every Life Matters Easter Series

### Session 5

#### What Must We Do?

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was sent upon the nascent Church. The event was accompanied by wondrous happenings, as the apostles were able to speak in a variety of languages with great boldness. People who witnessed this asked, "What does this mean?" St. Peter responded by announcing the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This engendered a second question: "What must we do?" Peter's reply was straightforward: "Repent and be baptized." (Cf. Acts 2: 12 and 38).

These two questions capture the motivation of this series of encounters. We are witnesses in this country to extraordinary events, which, contrary to Pentecost, are not of God's doing: the legalization of assisted suicide and euthanasia. This is incompatible with the Judeo-Christian heritage that has shaped Canadian society for most of its history. These developments, together with the controversy surrounding them, have left us asking, "What does this mean?" In their own way, our sessions have attempted to address numerous aspects of the answer to that question.

Now we conclude our series by turning to the second, "What must we do?" During the many small listening sessions that were held in the Archdiocese around this issue, I found consistently that as people became more aware of the urgency of this issue, that same question spontaneously arose. Often it was phrased as "What can we do?" As we pick up the question here, though, I am shaping it to accord with the biblical narrative: "What must we do?" The situation demands a response from us. In this presentation I am proposing four courses of action, which I summarize as follows: Be Catholic! Be Informed! Be Vocal! Be Inoculated!

#### **Be Catholic!**

St. Peter's reply to the second question has perennial relevance. His first command - repent! - is always the first instinctive response to the announcement of God's saving purpose and to our awareness of divergence from it. In the course of our series we have been reminded of the wonder and beauty of every human life created in the image and likeness of God. We are acutely aware that the consequent responsibility to respect the dignity of human life at each stage and in every circumstance is not honoured in our country. As Christians our response must always first be a humble examination of conscience, in which we ask, "How might I have contributed to this? How must I change to be again in conformity with my covenant relationship with God? How must I repent?"

His second command - be baptized! - is also immediately relevant, even for those of us who already are. This is not a question, of course, of being baptized again; that is impossible. It is a matter, though, of responding to the urgent need of owning our baptism, of living fully all that it means; a matter, in other words, of being who we say we are, of being authentically Catholic. Be Catholic! This, in fact, has been the insistent plea of the Holy Father from the beginning of his pontificate.

Central to the teaching of Pope Francis is the theme of discipleship. Time and again he calls us to take seriously what it means to be baptized so that we consciously strive to live out that meaning fully and authentically as sons and daughters of God. Much can be said about discipleship, but the Pope is intent on singling out one particular dimension of being a disciple. He continuously reminds us that to be a disciple is to be missionary, to be sent. You and I know by now that the words of the Pope are always simple, easy to understand, and in virtue of that simplicity, very incisive. To the point we are making here, he once said at a weekday mass homily that Christians cannot live like bats, living only in the shadows; on the contrary, he said, we are called out into the light!

Are we living like bats? In Canada, approximately forty percent of the population identify themselves as Catholic - nearly half. In the whole of the Western Hemisphere the percentage is about two-thirds. Let's think about this. If we stepped out into the light, that is to say, if we were, indeed, living fully and authentically our identity in Christ as members of his Church, our society would be transformed! What must we do? If St. Peter were here to answer the question, I dare say he would reply: Be who you are! Be Catholic!

### **Be Informed**

Sharing and discussing information has, of course, been the point of this series. The issue is complex, and I recognize that everything that we have shared with you in the course of this series is not all that can or needs to be said. For this reason the Archdiocese is offering documentation that captures and fills out the principal points we have raised in our sessions. Furthermore, I will be reviewing with my team the many questions that came our way during this series, to see what more information needs to be offered. Some printed material is available for you at the end of the evening, and we also intend to make the resources available on our Archdiocesan website. Becoming and staying informed helps us face our own situations. It is also helpful - indeed, necessary - if we are to give effectively to witness before others. This leads to the third area of response to that question, "What must we do?"

### **Be Vocal**

Remember that, in our first session, we spoke of the need to see with God's eyes. His vision, reflected in the gaze of Christ, reveals the beauty and dignity of every human being. Pope Francis reminds us that the Church is called to be the bearers in history of this contemplative gaze of Christ (cf. *Lumen Fidei*, 22), called to look upon our brothers and sisters as Christ does. From this vision arises the demand to speak and act whenever that dignity is threatened, as it is now by assisted suicide and euthanasia. There are many opportunities to do this. Of course, we need to reach out to elected officials, both federally and provincially. Available are online consultations and petitions, but the most effective way to speak to government is by direct contact - personally composed letters or emails; phone calls; and even visits to the office. What can be particularly challenging sometimes are the water-cooler conversations, when we hear colleagues and friends speak of the issue in ways that differ from our position. It is tempting just to stay quiet, or worse, to go along in order to get along. These are moments when, if we are afraid to speak, not sure what to say or how to say it, we can recall the promise of Jesus to give us the words to speak as we need them. I often think of the prayer used by a woman in one of my parishes in Nova Scotia. Facing a really difficult situation where she knew she would have to speak and debate a serious life issue, she said, "Holy Spirit, land on my tongue!"

It is a prayer I recommend for our use, too. When we do speak, we need to make known our opposition to these practices as morally wrong; we need to call for the protection of the vulnerable; and we need to stand solidly with healthcare workers and institutions whose rights of conscience are under threat. "Holy Spirit, land on my tongue!" When we need to speak, He will give us the words.

It is also very important to be having conversations with family members in order to help one another understand and stay faithful to our Catholic identity. We need to make sure that those to whom we assign power of attorney for personal care understand our wishes well so that they can express them unambiguously if and when called upon to do so.

This is not a matter of imposing our beliefs or position on society, or of interfering in another person's autonomy or choice. I addressed in our third session the Christian meaning of freedom, autonomy and choice, so I won't repeat that here. What I would add at this point is that our opposition to the legalization of assisted suicide and euthanasia is not an imposition but a defense. We are defending the dignity of every human life. We are standing against the message, implicit in the Supreme Court decision, that there are some lives not worth living. We are upholding the principle necessary for all people - believers and non-believers alike - to live together in common society: the killing of the innocent is always morally wrong. What is being imposed is coming not from us, obviously, but from the State. And we are saying "No, it isn't right."

### **Be Inoculated**

What do I mean by this? I have shared often the story of an encounter with a group of grade twelve students. We were discussing the various influences acting upon them and their peers. They spoke to me of favourite television shows, musical performers, movie celebrities and so on. Since I didn't have any idea who they were speaking about, I asked the simple question: "If you listen to these voices and follow them, would they lead you away from Jesus or toward him?" Their answer was swift and definite: "Away from Jesus." To which I replied, "Why, then, would you listen to them?"

The same question should also form part of our own self-examination. Who are we listening to and why? The multiplicity of voices often carries messaging that tempt us away from our pledge to God of covenant fidelity. Against such voices and their malignant effect, it is good - it is necessary - to be inoculated. That inoculation happens when we make a deliberate and persistent effort to listen to the words of Christ and allow them to shape our lives. We inoculate ourselves by listening to Jesus and following the light of His Word.

Tonight I'm proposing a way we can do this together in the Archdiocese. In our parishes there is already a variety of Bible study programmes that people are following, and that is wonderful. Yet is there one thing that we can all do together to keep the Word of God at the centre of our daily lives? I emphasize "daily", because it is on a daily basis that we are bombarded with a range of voices that can tempt us away from him. There is, and it comes to us from Pope Francis himself.

In his encyclical on the care of creation, he issues an invitation. Referring to the practice of prayers before and after meals he says this: "I ask all believers to return to this beautiful and meaningful custom. That moment of blessing, however brief, reminds us of our dependence upon God for life; it strengthens our feeling of gratitude for the gifts of creation; it acknowledges those who by their labours provide us with these goods; and it reaffirms our solidarity with those in greatest need." (*Laudato Si*, 227) So, let's do this; let's together heed the invitation of our Holy Father and embrace the custom of praying at mealtime. To the traditional meal prayers, I'm proposing that we add one line from the Sunday Gospel and one line of prayerful response to it.

We have prepared cards for everyone to use. Before the words of grace, the card offers the Scripture verse at the heart of this Year of Mercy, "Be merciful as your Heavenly Father is merciful", and gives a prayer in response that we be merciful toward one another. That Scripture verse and prayer can be used throughout the year. In addition, I shall tweet out each week an alternative Scripture verse for the week's meal prayers, a verse that will be taken from the Sunday Gospel. For those not on Twitter, the verse and prayer will also be sent to parishes for inclusion in the weekly Sunday bulletin.

Be Catholic! Be Informed! Be Vocal! Be Inoculated! Four important courses of action demanded by the times in which we find ourselves. It goes without saying that all of this needs to be undergirded by prayer - fervent prayer. Prayer for the protection of all human life; prayer for the transformation of our society into a culture of life. In a short while we shall celebrate Pentecost. This will be an important occasion for us to pray fervently for a new and mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon our land. In fact, let us make this our prayer even now as we conclude our series of reflections.

May the Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead raise us up here in Canada to a new and effective respect for human life. May that same Spirit, who filled the apostles with boldness to announce the Gospel, also inspire us to speak courageously in defense of human life and of conscience wherever and whenever these are threatened. Finally, may the Holy Spirit, who was promised by Jesus to remind us of all that he taught, keep us close to our Lord in covenant fidelity to his Word. Amen.

✠Richard W. Smith  
Archbishop of Edmonton  
13 April 2016  
St. Charles Parish, Edmonton