

Mass for Life 2020  
Feast of St. Matthias

[Acts 1:15-17, 20-26; Psalm 113; John 15: 9-17]

We have been struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic for a number of weeks now. We have watched with fascination and horror the relentless progression of this virus, which has been unstoppable. It has spread with a rapidity and persistence that has overcome barriers and overwhelmed many healthcare systems throughout the world. Until a vaccine is found, all we can do is take avoidance measures to limit its impact.

For much longer than a few weeks - for generations, in fact - we have been witnesses to another juggernaut that is far more horrifying and lethal than any virus, and that has continued to move ahead in a manner that appears irresistible. I speak, of course, of the worldview that affirms the autonomous Self over all other considerations, the mentality whose spread has increasingly overwhelmed moral sense, resulting in a situation where we have in Canada no law against abortion and a Criminal Code increasingly attenuated to expand access to legalized euthanasia. Far from promoting distancing measures that would separate us from this infection, governments and vast swathes of society are at pains to escalate its reach.

In such a situation, it would very easy for people committed to the pro-life cause to fall prey to discouragement and despair, were it not for another movement that is truly irresistible, that no human effort can ever ultimately quell, and that is completely on the side of life. Here I am referring to the saving will of Almighty God, the divine purpose to save each and every human life from the forces of sin and death that rage against it. Having created the human being in His image and likeness, God acted through his Son and Holy Spirit to redeem that life when it fell under the power of the evil one. His plan of salvation was accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and now moves inexorably through history, by the gift and agency of the Holy Spirit, towards its final fulfillment at the end of time. God is at work, and God is an unstoppable force. His saving will simply cannot be thwarted by human iniquity.

This is the lesson taught to us by the choice of St. Matthias, whose memory we honour in today's celebration of the Eucharist. The passage from the *Acts of the Apostles* recounts St. Peter's insistence that the place of Judas Iscariot among the Twelve Apostles must be filled. It is important to grasp the reason for Peter's resolve. Central to the saving plan of God was the reconstitution of His people as the New Israel that would embrace Jew and Gentile alike. The choice by Jesus of twelve Apostles is reflective of the twelve tribes that constituted the Israel first called into being by God's loving choice, and signals the new creation that God is now fashioning. Peter's determination to see the number of apostles restored to twelve arises from his conviction that the plan of God cannot be stopped, even by an act as horrendous as the betrayal by Judas of the Incarnate Son of God. This intuition of Peter was clearly of the Holy Spirit, since it was based upon a scriptural prophecy and confirmed by God's act of choosing Matthias. God is Himself making known that His will is irresistible. No evil, however horrifying, can ultimately succeed in stopping God's determination to save the life He has created and redeemed, and to manifest and uphold its incomparable dignity.

This is immensely consoling for us. If our gaze is directed only toward the powerful forces aligned against us and making persistent headway, we can easily lose heart. Sacred Scripture summons us to broaden our perspective and contemplate first – always first – the love of God and His will to save. We must remember that the will of God shall win out over all evil, because God has determined that all of His children, without exception, have life, and have it to the full. Indeed, God’s determination is such that He turns even an evil act to His saving purpose. This was the case with Judas. His betrayal of God’s own Son was used by God to create the opening in which His saving power burst into the world through the Paschal Mystery.

This does not mean, of course, that we have nothing to do in the service of life. Quite the contrary. As we remain with the sacred texts, what we see manifest is our call to pray and to give witness. Let’s consider each in turn.

The encouragement to pray comes from Jesus himself, as he makes this extraordinary promise: “the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.” To ask in the name of Jesus is to pray in communion with him. Indeed, prior to making the promise of the Father’s sure responsiveness to our pleas, Jesus speaks at length of his desire that we abide in his love, which is to say, that we remain always in deepest communion with that love he fully manifested in his self-gift on the Cross. To abide in the love of the Lord is to love as he loves, and to will as he wills. Jesus loves the Father, and his only desire is to accomplish the Father’s will; his only prayer is that the Father’s will be done. Our prayer, then, arising out of our communion with Jesus, can itself only be to ask that the Father’s saving purpose be accomplished. The will of God is life, and when we pray for the fulfillment of that will in the name of Jesus, we know for certain that our heavenly Father will hear and answer, just as the Lord promised.

This conviction grounds our hope and impels us to give witness. The importance of testimony – our second duty lifted up by the Scriptures - is evident when we return to St. Matthias. As one who had firsthand knowledge of Jesus “beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up,” as one specifically chosen by God to fill up the number of the Twelve, the apostolic ministry of Matthias counterbalanced the evil perpetrated by Judas and pointed to the unstoppable power of God. We are not eyewitnesses the way that Matthias, Peter and the other Apostles were, but we do know from personal experience the indescribable beauty of God’s love and the transformative power of His mercy. In a day when there is no shortage of acts by which the divine love is betrayed, our call is to offset the infidelity by witnessing in word and action to the truth of God’s saving and undefeatable will. We cannot march this year because of the coronavirus that places limits on movement. Yet because of the other contagion that lethally restricts the right to life itself, it remains incumbent upon all of us to look for any and every opportunity to witness to the truth of God’s own love for life.

Sure of this love of God, we approach the Eucharist united in hope. Here we gather in communion with the love of Jesus, and pray in his name that the Father’s will be done. We go forth in the certainty that the Father will answer, and that He, the Author of life, simply will not allow any forces arrayed against life, any powers that presume to stand athwart his loving purpose, to have the final victory. That belongs only to God, whose love is moving history irresistibly toward the accomplishment of His purpose.

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St. Joseph's Basilica (livestreamed)  
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