Homily May 22, 2011  
Fifth Sunday of Easter,  
20th Anniversary of St. Vincent De Paul Parish  
Acts 6:1-7; Psalm 33:1-2,4-5,18-19; 1 Peter 2:4-9; John 14:1-12

How many of you know someone who went to mass regularly, but now doesn’t go very often, if at all? ... {pause} ... That’s not surprising.

Many people stop going to Church because they either lose the faith, or they are struggling to figure out what it means to practice their faith in a culture that exalts independence and individualism.

• Some people leave because they get mad or upset about something.
• Others leave because they just don’t feel connected.
• They may say they are looking for a smaller, more intimate community.
• Perhaps they want a community of like-minded people who share a very particular approach to liturgy or mission.
• There are lots of reasons ... lots of excuses.

I think the problem is that most people don’t have a firm foundation for what it means to be a church. Their foundation was built on sand rather than rock.

Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, a columnist and author, who focuses his efforts on people at the margins of the faith — those who ‘are spiritual but not religious’ — has noted that there are so many ways of misunderstanding what it means to be a ‘church’. When trying to understand the church, he argues, it’s easier to begin by understanding what it is not.

The church, he says, is not a gathering of like-minded individuals who get together on the basis of mutual compatibility.

Just think the first disciples, the twelve men chosen by Jesus. They were the embryonic church. Several were fisherman, but one was a tax collector, another was a zealot. Chosen later, Paul was a well-educated Pharisee and a tent-maker by profession. Were they like-minded and mutually compatible? I don’t think so. We know they argued and disagreed, sometimes quite vehemently. Scripture doesn’t try to hide this. It’s part of our history.
And it wasn’t just the leadership in the early church who sometimes struggled with disagreements. In our first reading we heard that “as the number of disciples continued to grow, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.”

Nor is the church necessarily meant to be a small and intimate group with close family-like qualities. I guess it’s nice when circumstance make that possible, but that’s a lot of pressure to put on people who aren’t related and who may really not know each other that well.

What about large congregations or parishes? If you reflect on your knowledge of the Gospel, you will recall that Jesus drew large crowds, often numbering in thousands. Most of them, I’m sure, were strangers to one another. Yet because of those crowds, he performed the miracles of the multiplication of the loaves, which foreshadowed the Eucharist.

From the book of Acts we’ve heard:

• “The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem increased greatly.”
• “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand persons were added that day.”

It’s okay to be a large parish. In fact, it is very good … a blessing.

The real understanding of the Church comes from our second two readings. We are the church because we are community of disciples united by our love for Jesus Christ who is ‘the way and the truth and the life.’

We are a people who ‘... like living stones, have let ourselves be built into a spiritual house.’ We are, writes Peter, ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own.’

Whether we gather in small groups or large assemblies to hear the Gospel and be fed once again by Jesus through the miracle of Eucharist, it is our shared baptism and worship of the Lord that fundamentally makes us the Church, especially when we gather in the way Jesus taught us through the apostles:

as a sacramental people united around our bishop, one of the successors of the apostles, who continues their teaching under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
If we are not gathered around the altar of the Son, giving thanks and praise to the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are not church.

Paul wrote, in the Letter to the Romans: “None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.”

That’s how you should feel if you belong to the Church, if you belong to the people of God.

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It has been twenty years since this parish was established. We accomplished quite a lot, though there is more to do. The school needs to be finished and someday we will need to build the parish center. These things are good, but if we define ourselves only by what we build, then when the building ends, we too will find ourselves at an end.

We are the parish of St. Vincent De Paul. In the Spirit of our patron saint how are we to live out our love for God? I think for us it is in living out the works of mercy — demonstrating our belief through our works as Jesus commanded:

Doing the corporal works:
• feeding the hungry
• giving drink to the thirsty
• clothing the naked
• welcoming the stranger
• caring for the sick
• visiting the imprisoned
• burying the dead

And the spiritual works:
• admonishing the sinner
• instructing the ignorant
• counseling the doubtful
• comforting the sorrowful
• bearing wrongs patiently
• forgiving all injuries
• praying for the living and the dead

Many of these works we can do within our parish, because we are so large and diverse.

Each Sunday we have an opportunity to welcome the stranger. Through our various educational activities we instruct the ignorant and counsel the doubtful.

When conflicts arise we must 'bear wrongs patiently' and 'forgive injury'.
Through our worship together and our liturgies we pray for the living and the dead, and we bury those who have died.

Through our Outreach Ministries, the St. Vincent De Paul Society, the One Can Help monthly food collection, and the Knights of Columbus we feed the hungry, cloth the naked, and shelter the homeless, both within our parish and without.

Our EMHCs visit the sick, bringing Eucharist and companionship to those in need. We also care for the sick through such simple activities as the parish blood drive.

Keep up the good works.

Do more if you can, for we can always do better.

If you know someone who has left the Church, don’t be afraid to talk to him or her about it. Talk to them about what it means to a church, or a parish. Don’t be afraid to share with them what it has meant for you. And of course, invite them to come back.