

Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A (May 17, 2020)

"[The two] prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit." (Acts 8:15)

Today marks the Sixth Sunday of Easter. It is the Sunday before the Solemnity of Ascension of the Lord, followed by the Solemnity of Pentecost with which the Easter Season ends.

A Small Window for Contacting the Diocese

Since the Third Sunday of Lent this year, my Sunday homilies have been posted as the bishop's words in the "Bishop's Message" section of the diocesan website, and the guidelines for dealing with the novel coronavirus infection in the "various documents" section.

Reading them again, I realized that they have been a kind of window of communication with the diocese for you. I would like to thank the staff of Administrative Office and many others who have been involved in this work for encouraging me, and for recording, transcribing, summarizing, proofreading, and translating my writings.

I would also like to thank my brother priests for making sure that my messages reach as many people as possible by photocopying them, republishing them on their parish websites, and posting them on the church bulletin boards. For example, at Urawa Church, I saw some of the faithful visiting the church, picking up the copies of the bishop's message along with the leaflets of "Bible and Liturgy" of the Sunday Mass, and praying in front of the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The Word of God for This Sunday

First, let us look at the main points of each reading passage.

The First Reading is the Acts of the Apostles 8:5-8, 14-17. It conveys an event that calls our attention. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews who regarded them as heretics and a mixed race. But when Philip proclaimed to them Jesus, who had done so much healing, as the true Messiah they had been waiting for, they embraced what he taught.

Later, they received the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands from Peter and John, who were sent from the community in Jerusalem to confirm those who had been converted by Philip's evangelization. As the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman shows in John 4:1-45, there was a conflict between the Jews and the Samaritans with a long history behind it. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians, and some of the Samaritans were taken captive. When they returned, they regained their central place of prayer on Mount Gerizim and rebuilt the temple there in the 4th century B.C. However, the temple was destroyed by John Hyrcanus, son of Simon Maccabee, the king of Judaea in 128 B.C.

At the Second Reading from Peter's Letter (I Peter 3:15-18), I would like to emphasize that we're called to give an explanation about our hope for living even in the midst of difficult situations such as injustice, pandemics, and natural disasters; we need to be always ready to identify what to hope for lest people be crushed in such situations. Hope...look back at your life, think of the meaningful moments to you, and make a list of reasons to live. As we read through our life in this way, we can find God always there for us, having been involved in our life in some way, never having abandoned us even when we sinned or were in crisis.

The Gospel Reading, John 14:15-21, describes the last word of Jesus to his disciples as he is about to leave them. "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever." Jesus wants to tell his disciples that they need this Advocate: You will face many difficulties, opposition, and even

persecution for believing in me and proclaiming my name throughout human history; that is why you need the Advocate.

In Communion with Priests and with One Another

Although we haven't been able to celebrate Mass as a community for an extended period of time this year, many parishes have looked for ways to keep connected spiritually through prayer, especially with the rosary prayer. Some parishes have started praying online with Zoom and Line, and the participants are growing in numbers. Some of them have time to share the Word of God for the next Sunday with one another after the prayer.

In this time of the novel coronavirus I find with joy many of our priests accompanying their flock on the walk of faith by posting their comments on the Word of God with brief greetings on the website of their parishes every Sunday.

In some parishes the faithful themselves have asked their pastors to prepare their greetings and messages and have post them on the Internet or leave the photocopies at the entrance of their church. These signs show us that we have not fallen asleep in our prayer life: The coronavirus haven't made our faith lukewarm, or led us to lose our sense of belonging to the Church, or made us indifferent to prayer.

Jesus the Risen has been with us throughout this long Easter Season. He makes us feel the need to help those who are suffering from the spread of the coronavirus. May we all spend this Sunday, united in prayer throughout the day, remembering them in particular. I ask everyone to read my message, "In the Time of Trial". And if we find people in need around us, let us reach out to them as the Church. Let us respond to the call of the Lord at the last Judgment as described In the Gospel of Matthew 25: 31-46.

Awaiting Public Masses to be resumed on Pentecost Sunday

The government has lifted the state of emergency in a number of prefectures including Gunma, Tochigi and Ibaraki. However, Saitama was not among them. Therefore, we, the Diocese of Saitama, must resume public Masses at our parishes in stages. While we cannot even gather together to discuss it, I would like to ask our priests to take creative initiatives in learning preferences of the members of their own community and thinking about how to resume the Mass on condition that it only be done gradually, how to celebrate the communal Mass in a safe way.

Some of the foreign nationals are looking through the Internet at how to resume the Mass after the end of the novel coronavirus in other countries and considering how to apply it to their own parishes. These initiatives will surely help us resolve this situation. In the near future (preferably this weekend), our Diocese of Saitama hopes to provide guidance on how we can move toward the public Mass. The sudden resumption of the Sunday Mass at the chapel will surely cause an extreme three C's: closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings. Therefore, we must proceed cautiously with it to avoid relapse. I ask from my heart for your understanding and cooperation.

May the Lord Jesus fill you with joy! May our churches be open to the public for the liturgy as soon as possible, and may our parish life gradually get back to normal. Let us continue to pray the rosary with one accord, trusting that the Mother of Jesus will protect us from being infected with the novel coronavirus.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).