

Homily 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

By Deacon Chris Frame

Jesus and the apostles are in Caesarea Philippi which is well known at that time in history to all the people in the land for the huge temple of the Greek god Pan which is cut out of the rock face into the mountain over a cave at the mouth of one of the tributaries to the Jordan River. It's is such a massive part of the landscape that certainly they can see it from where they're sitting. And as they're watching people coming and going from this huge rock temple at Pan's cave, Jesus asks his disciples: "Who do you say I am?"

And Simon answered, "You are the Christ the son of the living God."

In return, Jesus told Simon Bar Jonah that, unlike the false rock on which the pagan church was built, that he, Simon, would from here on out be known as Peter, the rock, on which Jesus would build His church.

For what we know to be true is that Christ's church is not a building made from brick and mortar, but that it is each one of us, gathered together as a community of believers, and that what began on that human rock, Simon Bar-Jonah, now Peter, has grown into the largest religion in the United States and the world.

Which is an amazing statistic, but do you want to hear an even more amazing statistic?

First let me ask you something...Raise your hand if you know of at least one person who has left the Catholic Church?

That means that for nearly every Catholic sitting in these pews tonight there is another Catholic who has left the church. And I would venture to say that it is no different at any Mass at any church across the country.

The 2nd largest religious demographic in the U.S. is adults who were born, baptized and raised as Catholics but are no longer affiliated with the Catholic Church.

And if you are like me the probability is that at least one of those you are thinking about who has left is a son or daughter or someone very close to you.

Tell me if this sounds familiar:

Our smart and gifted child leaves home for school. He makes new friends. They spend most of their time partying, chasing girls, and embracing new philosophies. He becomes drawn to his friend's philosophies of relativism agnosticism or atheism. Eventually, he moves in with his girlfriend and they have a child, without being married.

If you think it sounds familiar that's because it's the story of many Catholics today ... and it may or may not comfort you to know ... it's not a new story. In fact, it stretches back for centuries and in the case I just described ... even more than a millennium. It's actually the 4th century story of St. Monica and her young wayward son, Augustine.

Though brilliant and gifted Augustine spent most of his time carousing the streets with friends, stealing food, and living promiscuously ... he even fathered a son out of wedlock.

But Monica refused to give up on him. She prayed daily and intensely for Augustine, fasted for his sake, and begged God to help him return to the faith ... and when Augustine traveled to Rome and Milan for his education, Monica followed him and continued praying.

While in Milan, she met Ambrose, the local bishop, who would later be canonized a saint. Ambrose became her spiritual guide. He noted her restless longing for her son and the hours she spent praying for him. And famously he promised her, "Surely the son of so many tears will not perish."

Through Monica Augustine and Ambrose struck up a friendship and began talking about Christianity and as a result of their many back-and-forth dialogs; Augustine finally decided to convert to Catholicism. Ambrose baptized the 32-year-old Augustine, who would eventually grow into one of the most influential thinkers in Western history, and one of the greatest saints in the Catholic Church.

Tomorrow we celebrate the Feast Day of St Monica and Augustine's is the following day.

St. Monica exemplifies the power of a praying parent. She wasn't able to convince Augustine with words, and in fact, whenever she tried to talk to him about religion, he brushed her away. But through her daily, committed intercession, over more than 15 years, Augustine was able to journey into the church.

What can we learn from Monica's example?

First, don't stop praying for your child. When Monica complained that Augustine would not listen to her preaching that he become a Catholic, Ambrose urged her, "Speak less to Augustine about God and more to God about Augustine." She took his advice ... and never gave up, even when things looked dark. Eventually her persistence paid off.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells of a widow who was upset because the judge refused to hear her case. She kept coming to the judge with her request, over and over, until he finally relented, saying, "while it is true that I neither fear God nor respect any human being, because this widow keeps bothering me I shall deliver a just decision for her lest she finally come and strike me."

Jesus explained the parable, saying, "Pay attention to what the dishonest judge says. Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to Him day and night? Will he be slow to answer them?" (Lk 18:1-8).

In other words, God loves persistent prayer. He never tires of your requests, even if you bring the same needs to him every day.

And if you think persistent prayer doesn't work just ask Ernie Lubiani, he prayed for 40 years that his son would return to the faith and 2 years ago he finally returned to sit with his father at Mass on Easter Sunday

So don't give up praying for your child. Like St. Monica, Ernie and the persistent widow, have confidence that God will reward your perseverance.

The second thing we can learn from St. Monica is not to just pray for our child - we should also pray for an "Ambrose" to step into our child's life. Perhaps there is just so much baggage between you and your child that your child will no longer hear truth from your lips. That's understandable. Pray that God will bring someone else into his path, someone with just the right combination of personality, interests, motives, and heart..

Also, keep in mind that while you are praying for someone to step into your child's life, other parents are praying the same thing for their child's life. And you may be that person! Even if your child tunes you out, you could be the Ambrose for someone else's Augustine!

The third thing we need to take away is that we can ask St. Monica's intercession for our child.

Among all the saints in heaven, few know the gut-wrenching pain of a wayward child better than St. Monica. Reach out to her and ask her to pray for your child, just as she did for Augustine. We regularly ask our friends on earth to pray for us, and we can do the same with the Saints. In fact, the Saints prayers are generally more powerful than ours here on earth, since they are closer to the mind and heart of God - they're already in heaven!

So next time you pray, offer a short request to St. Monica that she ask Jesus to soften your loved one's heart, prepare a path for their conversion, and activate the Holy Spirit and their life.

Lastly I would like to leave you with this quote from the prophet Jeremiah

"The Lord says ... stop your crying and wipe away your tears. All that you have done for your children will not go unrewarded...

There is hope for your future: your children will come back home.

I, the Lord, have spoken."

Jeremiah 31: 16-17 (NIV)

Story of St Monica adapted from the book "Return" by Brandon Vogt