

## The Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time: God Gives the Growth

The ancient Hebrews understood agriculture. Their lives were dependent on the crops they cultivated and the animals they raised. Yet, they knew that the wonder of growth belonged to the Lord. Paul would allude to this in *1 Corinthians 3:6-7*:

*I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.*

When, in today's first reading, *Ezekiel* prophesied that the Lord would take a sprig from a tree and turn it into a noble cedar, the people recognized in this prophecy that growth is always in God's hands. He would do more for them than they could imagine. Israel, a nation in exile at the time of this prophecy, would become the nation that the whole world would look to with respect. For from Israel would come the Savior. Every kind of bird, all the nations, would live under the tree of Israel.

The people who heard Jesus tell the parable in today's gospel, the Parable of the Farmer's Life, also shared the wonder of the soil. The farmer works hard during the day, but he cannot make the seed grow into a plant, and the plant produce fruit. God causes the growth. Jesus' point is that like the plants, the Kingdom of God is in God's hands. The workers in the Lord's fields must do their best to create the proper environment for growth, but God causes the growth. The parable comforted the people of the early Church in face of discouragement when their efforts did not seem to be getting them anywhere. Remember, early Christianity grew as a development of the Jewish faith, but the Christians were rejected by the Jews. It must have been difficult for them to explain to the pagan gentiles how Jesus was predicted by the Jewish prophets when the Jews had rejected Him and them. Early Christians were mocked and persecuted by the pagans. They witnessed Peter, Paul and many of their leaders martyred. Persecuted on every side, the early Christians had to trust God to give growth to His Kingdom.

And He did. And He still does. The Church lives on despite the persecution from the Romans, despite the internal dogmatic fights and debates of the second through fifth centuries, despite the Fall of Rome and conquest of the barbarians, despite the corruption from within during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, despite the Christian fratricide of the Reformation, despite the onslaught of rationalists in the last two centuries, despite the clergy sex abuse scandal, despite the attacks on Christians by various radical groups particularly in Asia and Africa, despite those people within the contemporary Church that would turn us against each other, and despite two thousand years of martyrdom aimed at destroying the faith, the Church still lives on, and grows. God gives the growth. He does wonders with our feeble efforts. He turns that which is insignificant into that which is substantial.

I was blessed to have ministered with priests who were members of the Missionary Society of St. Thomas, Fr. Thomas Kumblanthanth and Fr. Mathew Mootheseril. The main work of the Missionary Society of St. Thomas is to spread the

faith in India. Now Christians are persecuted in many of the sections of India. Both Hindus and Moslems attack them. Fr. Mathew used to tell us horror stories of priests being killed, nuns being attacked, etc. In many of the sections of India where they work, they are not allowed to display signs of their faith. If they give someone a bible, a catechism, a cross or a rosary, they are facing certain persecution, possibly beatings and death. Fr. Mathew told me about a time that one of their clinics ran out of medicine. The people rioted demanding that they find more medicine for them. I asked him why they didn't call the police. He told me that the police would join the rioters. Yet, the Missionaries of St. Thomas have been successful in leading people to Christ. How do they do it? They don't. The Lord does. What they do is move into a village or town and establish a mission center. They care for the needs of the people, dispensing medicine and food and teaching the children. They are not allowed to speak about the faith. They live the faith. And they will do this not for a few years, but for generations. Fr. Mathew said that sometimes they begin making converts among the third generation of people in the village, people whose grandparents were young when the missionaries arrived. Perhaps it may take 80 years, but then the faith begins to flourish in the village. The Missionaries of St. Thomas give a great example of trusting in God to give the growth.

We need to recognize God's work in the faith lives of our children, our nation and in our own faith lives. There are many of people reading this who are very upset because you did everything you could to raise your children in the faith. However, your children stopped practicing the faith when they left for college. Then they got married, outside of the Church, and now you have grandchildren who haven't even been baptized. So you ask, "Where did I go wrong?" Well, you did not go wrong. The world got to them. You need to continue to pray that your children will be open to the faith. That seed that you planted may spring into a marvelous tree, but only after a long period of time. I have witnessed many people in their forties and fifties returning to the faith of their youth and then becoming devoted Catholics. Ask their parents, "How did this happen?" They would respond, "We planted, but God gave the growth." Dom Hubdert von Zeller, an English spiritual writer, wrote, "The problem is, we want everything settled at once. We want God to do what we would do if we were God." But God works his wonders in His time, not our time. *"In the fullness of time, God sent His Son."* That means that He waited until the time was right to send Him.

Many people are upset by the recent survey that showed a decline in the number of Catholics in the United States. Well, first of all, the report fails to consider the continual impact of migrants to our country from the Catholic countries of Latin America. That mistake aside, we should be concerned, but our concern should be tempered by the large number of young Catholics devoted to the faith. Our Diocese sends our best young priests to the University of South Florida because the campus ministries there has grown so much. There are also wonderful groups of young adult Catholics at Florida State, the University of Florida, and the University of Central Florida, just to name a few flourishing campus ministries in our state. With all this said, it is not the campus ministries themselves that cause the faith to grow. Nor is it the young priests sent to minister at the various college campuses. Their ministry is to

provide the environment for growth. It is God who gives the growth.

We also need to recognize the wonders of God's hand in our own lives. Does our faith mean more to us today than it did twenty years ago, or even ten years ago? I think most of us would say, "Yes" to that question. Well, how does it happen that we are more determined to live our faith now than we had been? It happens because God continues to give growth to the faith.

We are members of the greatest society the world has ever seen. We are members of the Kingdom of God. We are members of the Church. No matter what the media may say, we are part of the only truly relevant organization in the world. We give meaning to the whole purpose of existence. The Church continues to grow; for the Lord, not people, gives the growth.

When we are confronted with those who compare the numbers of priests and priest-less parishes and the numbers of Catholics to figures of sixty years ago, we need to remember that the Church will exist until the Second Coming of the Lord. The Church will adjust and flourish in the future just as it has in the past. And it will grow, for God gives it growth.

And when we are confronted with immorality on all sides, when we are convinced that the world will soon be coming to an end because so many people are behaving so poorly, we need to remember that the Church not only lives on through the muddle and the mire of the world, it actually grows. You and I also grow as long as we do everything we can to stay united to the Church. For in the face of turmoil, outside us and within us, God gives his Church growth.

St. Paul wrote in today's second reading: we walk by faith, not by sight. We need to be strong members of the Church, and God will work the miracle of His growth.