

"You are witnesses": Parishes without Borders

3rd Sunday of Easter, St. Thomas the Apostle Parish, Naperville, April 17/18, 2021

By Tom Cordaro

Tom Cordaro has served as the Justice & Outreach Minister at St. Margaret Mary Parish in Naperville for almost 24 years. This involves providing social justice education and advocacy opportunities for parishioners supported by Catholic Social Teaching. He also co-founded Naperville CARES (now merged with Loaves & Fishes Community Services), which provides cars and emergency assistance to those in need in the Naperville area. Tom has also been instrumental in fostering inter-faith collaboration and cooperation throughout DuPage County, including organizing annual World Peace Day Interfaith Prayer Services on the first Sundays in January.

I want to thank Fr. Danaher, Mike Ryder and Anne Schultz for the invitation to speak to you today as part of your Outreach and Social Justice Weekend. Since coming to Naperville in 1997 to begin serving as the Justice and Outreach Minister at St. Margaret Mary Parish, I have always admired the witness of your parish community.

When I arrived in Naperville I remember the powerful witness to social justice and peace given by your former pastor Fr. Don Kenney and former staff person Sr. Marlene Schemmel. I also remember the powerful example of parishioners like John & Rose Bagley.

I am awe-inspired by the decade's long commitment your community has made to the people of Haiti. When I see all that you have been able to do for and with community of Ste. Marie-Madeleine I am astounded. Likewise your work with St. Agnes Parish on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation is an example to all of us.

Your witness to the Gospel has not ONLY included those who are far away geographically but includes those who are far removed from your everyday experiences. Your advocacy for those on Death Row during the time when Illinois still had a death penalty was inspirational; as well as your current prison ministry. Your courageous and prophetic efforts to address racism and the call to racial justice help set a standard for the rest of the Catholic Community of Naperville.

Your monetary and volunteer support for the many social service agencies in Naperville and DuPage County have made you one of the most dependable sources of hope in our community. In my experience at Naperville CARES and latter at Loaves & Fishes trying to provide emergency financial assistance for people facing the threat of homelessness I found that St. Thomas the Apostle Parish was one of those faith communities willing to stretch themselves to meet the needs of as many people as possible— even for those who did not live within your parish boundaries.

In fact, if I were to characterize St. Thomas the Apostle parish in one phrase it would be: a parish without borders. Representing the best of what it means to be "catholic" (which means universal), your parish exemplifies what Pope Francis meant when he wrote in encyclical on evangelization that a Church that goes forth is a Church whose doors are always open.

And as Pope Francis reminds us, “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”

Our lectionary readings during the Easter Season include excerpts from the Book of Acts, which describes the story of the early Christian Community and the struggles and challenges they faced. (I have always thought that the Book of Acts would make a great TV mini-series. It has it all: miraculous displays of power, courageous acts of faith, and plenty of conflicts ... and even a prison break.)

But the major theme of the Acts of the Apostles is the story of how a small Jewish sect became an emerging world religion. The narrative of this incredible story moves from Jerusalem towards Rome as the Jesus movement is continually challenged by the Holy Spirit to widen its circle of concern and break down barriers of exclusion in order to become a place where all are welcome: Jew & Gentile, Male & Female, Slave & Free.

In today's Gospel reading we have another post-resurrection story of Jesus appearing to his disciples. In the midst of their joy at seeing him, Jesus waste no time in reminding them of what they are called to do. Jesus opened their minds to understand the Scriptures and instructs them that “repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, should be preached to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem. And then, as if to put an exclamation point on it he concludes: “You are witnesses of these things.”

The Book of Acts portrays the early Christian Community running to catch up to the work of the Holy Spirit which blows like the wind and spreads like fire throughout the entire world breaking through all barriers and borders: not just physical borders, but borders of race, nationality and ideology.

Today we need parish communities that are willing it move out of their comfort zones in order to embrace a world that has been fractured by the hatred, ignorance and fear of demagogues who seek adulation and worship from their followers without regard to the damage that they do. The world desperately needs the witness of parish communities that are willing to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit in breaking down barriers and creating unity without insisting on uniformity.

Jesuit writer, Fr. James Martin, reminds us that Jesus never said, “Feed the hungry only if they have papers.” “Clothe the naked only if they are from your country.” “Welcome the stranger only if there is zero risk.” Jesus never said: “Help the poor only if it is convenient.” “Love your neighbor only if they look like you.”

Thomas Merton, Trappist Monk and one of the great spiritual giants of the 20th Century warns us about the temptation to sort people in those we deem worthy and those who are not. He wrote: “Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy.”