

Thirty-Second Sunday of Ordinary Time
November 12, 2023
Year of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Ark of the New Covenant

“Paul didn’t just say that you may not be saddened, but that you may not be saddened as the heathen are, who do not have any hope. It is unavoidable, after all, that you should be saddened; but when you feel sad, let hope console you.”
(Saint Augustine, Sermons 173.3)

Our second reading, for this weekend, has been taken from the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians. Many are familiar with this passage for it is often used by those who would hold belief in a future “rapture” event. Although I do not want to make this the primary focus of this reflection, I think it wise to remind all present that this idea is not something new. Private revelations, like this one, have often been proposed throughout Christian history. This version, one we are most familiar with, was based upon the teachings of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). Mr. Darby, circa 1830, based his “rapture theology” upon the private revelations of fifteen-year-old Margaret MacDonald, who foresaw a “rapture” event which would affect a certain few Christians. What many may not be familiar with is an earlier individual who claimed, through private revelation, to possess a hidden knowledge. Around the year 156, Montanis claimed that a private revelation was given which foretold the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. He would convince many that this private revelation, given through the prophets of their movement, held greater importance than the teachings of the Apostolic Church. His group would eventually disavow themselves from the Catholic Church and eventually fade into history. Whether it be in the year 156 or 1830, we can safely presume to say that the world has not officially ended with the Second Coming as of the writing or presenting of this reflection. Instead of focusing our efforts upon whether Catholics will be left behind, let us look at the text of Saint Paul and see if we can determine the purpose of this selection.

For much of Saint Paul’s letter, he instructs and reminds these early converts to Christianity of what they were first taught by himself and other Christian witnesses. It is with the arrival of Timothy and the news that he carried where we can see a change in Saint Paul’s writing. Earlier, Saint Paul had instructed the Christians to wait patiently for the Lord’s return. With Timothy’s arrival, Paul is told of a situation which has unfolded within the community. Since Paul’s departure, some of the Christians of the community had died. A great grief had overtaken those who remained. They grieved for they did not believe those who had died would be able to experience the Second Coming of Jesus and receive the reward of their Christian lives. Saint Paul must now propose an answer to an early Christian dilemma: “Are those Christians, who have died BEFORE the Second Coming of Jesus, going to suffer any sort of disadvantage as opposed to those who are still living when Jesus returns again?”

This is truly an interesting point Saint Paul must address. Many, including Saint Paul, had believed that Jesus would come again during their lifetimes. As we, sitting here

today can attest, this was not the case. However, for these first Christians, they did not have the benefit of 2,000 years of accumulated knowledge and experience to address the question as we do. Saint Paul, guided by the Holy Spirit and his own keen intellect, must theorize, propose and explain a first answer.

My family, the conclusion Saint Paul would offer is masterful for it still applies to us today. Saint Paul, first, did not dissuade Christians from expressing grief. He understood that grieving is a necessary process. We grieve not for the person, but more so for ourselves who are left without the beloved deceased person. Our grief should be tempered by the virtue of Hope. We have a hope based upon Our Lord Jesus Christ. The love this hope inspires within us is only a response to God who first loved us. It is precisely because we are loved by God, that the dead will not suffer any form of privation when Jesus returns again. Rather, in His love for them, they will rise first to meet Him in the clouds. With this, allow me to offer a final thought taken from the early Church to explain this meeting. The thought was the dead Christians would be the first to greet the returning Lord as He made His way from Heaven to Earth. Similar to the event of Palm Sunday, they would joyfully greet Him singing and praising His Goodness towards all creation. The living would join in this chorus of praise only afterward. Instead of being a moment of fear, this would be a great moment of rejoicing. The fear, my family, would only be experienced by those who had lived a life centered upon this world, a life without Hope of the next with Jesus.