

Fifth Sunday of Ordinary Time
February 4, 2024
Year of the Most Holy Eucharist
Reflection #6

“Brothers, because of the love I have for you, I wish I were able to reassure you with the prospect of eternal happiness by saying to each of you: You are certain to go to paradise; the greater number of Christians is saved, so you also will be saved. But how can I give you this sweet assurance if you revolt against God's decrees as though you were your own worst enemies? I observe in God a sincere desire to save you, but I find in you a decided inclination to be damned. So what will I be doing today if I speak clearly? I will be displeasing to you. But if I do not speak, I will be displeasing to God.”

(Saint Leonard of Port Maurice, The Little Number of Those Who Are Saved)

Last weekend, you may recall, I mentioned a homily given by Saint Leonard of Port Maurice. Found within a homily of his entitled The Little Number of Those Who are Saved, Saint Leonard highlights the Old Testament figure of Noah. He said: “In the time of Noah, the entire human race was submerged by the Deluge, and only eight people were saved in the Ark. Saint Peter says, ‘*This ark was the figure of the Church*,’ while Saint Augustine adds, ‘*And these eight people who were saved signify that very few Christians are saved, **because there are very few who sincerely renounce the world**, and those who renounce it only in words do not belong to the mystery represented by that ark.*”

For centuries, the minds of men have been fascinated with the story of the flood, Noah and the ark. Various expeditions have scoured the countryside of Turkey looking for the location of Mount Ararat and the final resting place of the ark. Even in our own time, one may travel to Williamstown, Kentucky, halfway between Cincinnati and Lexington on I-75, to experience the famous “Ark Encounter.” As it relates to our study of the Eucharist, our focus will not center upon the historical event of the flood, nor the physical location of the ark. Rather, we will reflect, with the guidance of the Fathers of the Church, who saw in the story of Noah a symbolic representation of our faith and church.

Beginning in the Garden, the gulf between God and man has steadily widened due to man’s sinful behavior. Whereas archaeological records from ancient peoples offer telltale stories of cataclysmic events, the story of Noah differs in its context. The Fathers concluded the flood was a direct result of the sins of mankind which have steadily increased. Sullied by sin, man must be washed in the waters of purification, not punishment. Secondly, these purifying waters are not meant for man alone. With the inclusion of the animals, the story harkens back to the Garden reminding us of the link between man and creation. The actions of man, be they good or evil, affect the created world. Lastly, the animals and the family of Noah are saved because Noah is deemed a righteous man.

The Fathers of the Church, as I mentioned earlier, saw in this story a symbolic representation of God’s holy church. They first acknowledged how man’s sin had led us back to the beginning when the waters of chaos ruled over creation. The sin of disobedient pride, acted upon by man, destroys God’s reasoned order guiding all creation. Man, in the person of Noah, is able to save himself, the poor animals and those he loves only through faithful obedience to what God requires of him. This is understood as Noah builds the ark to the designs and specifications laid out by God. Furthermore, God gives seven days notice of the coming rains (Genesis 7:4), which allow for reconciliation and penance before the

coming destruction. And yet with all of this, an ark, the procession of animals and the first droplets of the impending rain, the sacred author tells us very few are saved from the flood.

The Church operates, as the ark would do in its day, as a means to offer man salvation. She does this by offering man God's grace through all the means available to her. It is these graces which buoy man as he traverses a world flooded with the chaos of sin. And, similar to Noah, man is offered salvation through humble obedience. One final thought before we conclude this day. On the ark, Noah and his family had to eat the food provided to sustain their lives. For you and I to sustain our own lives (spiritual and physical), we too must eat of the food provided by the ark of the church. And, as the Fathers of the Church acknowledged, this food is Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, fully present Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity within the Eucharist.