

Homily for 7th Sunday of Easter Year B

By Fr. Jerome Ituah, OCD

Readings: Acts 1:15-17,20-26; Ps 102(103); 1 Jn 4:11-16; Jn 17:11-19

Theme: Consecrated to be Witnesses in the World

The Church gives us fifty days to celebrate the risen Lord, from Easter vigil until Pentecost. Then, within that period, we celebrate the Ascension, when Jesus goes up to heaven in his humanity, after appearing to his disciples, and supporting them with His presence and consoling them. Then, of course, the disciples will face the challenge of fending for themselves and defending the faith after the Ascension. This will become more evident from the day of Pentecost. But the prayer of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete will lead them on.

In the gospel, Jesus prays and consecrates his disciples for the mission that lies ahead of them. He asks his Father to keep those he has given to him true to His name so that their lives will reflect that of Jesus and His Father. Jesus kept and supported his disciples, passed on the word to them. However, the world hated them because they do not belong to the world. For that reason, He asks his Father to protect them from the evil one. At the heart of the request of Jesus is his plea that the Father consecrate them in the truth.

The Greek verb *hagiazō* means ‘to make holy, consecrate or sanctify.’ It could also mean ‘to dedicate or purify, treat as holy or hold something in reverence. Setting apart or making holy goes back to the Old Testament, to the Hebrew root, *qadash*. That is where we get the word *miqdash* or *miqqedash*, sanctuary. The idea of consecrating people, the altar or items used for worship was well rooted in the Jewish religion. For instance, the firstborn is to be set apart and consecrated to the Lord (cf. Exo 13:2). The priests who offer sacrifices on behalf of the people are to be consecrated to the Lord (cf. Exo 29:1; 30:30; Lev 21:8). The altar of sacrifices has to be consecrated (cf. Exo 29:37). The tabernacle and everything in the sanctuary are to be consecrated with anointing oil (cf. Exo 40:9-10). Apart from the priests, other persons could be consecrated to the Lord, for instance, the Nazarites (cf. Num 6:11).

When Jesus asks His Father to consecrate the disciples, he is praying that they be set apart from other worldly things. He wants them to be holy and dedicated for the work for which he has called them. Jesus is also precise in what he wants His Father to consecrate them. Consecrate them in the truth; your word is truth. In this phrase, ‘your word is truth,’ we can see it deeper if we read it in line with the beginning of the gospel of John, ‘in the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was God.’ (Jn 1:1). Jesus is the word of God, and he is saying to his Father to consecrate the disciples in truth. Jesus, the word, is also the truth. Remember Jesus has already said, ‘I am the way, the truth and the life.’ (cf. Jn 14:6). Jesus wants His Father to set the disciples apart for his work in the world. As Christians in the world, we are a people set apart (cf. 1 Pet 2:9). Every Christian is consecrated in baptism and set apart for Jesus.

The first reading underscores how the Christian community, after the example of Jesus, consecrates new members for leadership to continue witnessing in the world. The disciples returned to the upper room from Mount Olivet after the Ascension of Jesus. They gathered together with the women, including Mary, the mother of Jesus. Peter, whom Jesus had given the keys, takes his rightful place among them. His first assignment was to fill the vacuum created by Judas Iscariot. Judas had been among those consecrated, but he allowed the devil to use him. Now someone else must be consecrated as a witness in his place. Jesus prayed and consecrated the disciples to be his witnesses. The disciples must now choose someone ‘to take over this ministry and apostolate, which Judas abandoned to go to his proper place.’ The criterion for replacing Judas was defined: someone who ‘can act with us as a witness to his resurrection.’ This person must have travelled with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry

till his death, resurrection and Ascension. The community was not looking for an eloquent or influential person, but rather one who can witness to the resurrection and defend the faith.

To be a witness, one must acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, as St. John tells us in the second reading. But, above all, the authentic witness must live the life of Jesus, have a personal experience and be able to testify about him. Hence, St. John says, 'we ourselves saw, and we testify that the Father sent his Son as Saviour of the world.'