

Homily for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year B (5 & 6/5/18)

“If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love ... I have told you this so that my own joy may be in you.”

How we would love this parish to grow! People sometimes talk about the “good old days”, when churches were full and you had to stand outside if you didn’t get there in time, and how many more Masses there used to be and more priests and so on. Sometimes I think we can talk ourselves into just accepting things as they are and think there is nothing that we can do. But that rather goes against our faith.

We believe in a God who is all-powerful, who is all-loving, who can perform miracles. We also believe in a God who expects us to get our hands dirty as well. St Paul writes in Romans chapter ten:

“But they will not ask his help unless they believe in him, and they will not believe in him unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless they get a preacher, and they will never have a preacher unless one is sent ... so faith comes from what is preached” (vs 14-15. 17).

So conversions happen, not just by prayer, but also by our preaching, by the things that we think, say and do, and the things we don’t think, say or do. But it can seem a bit of a daunting task. Thankfully though, it’s not a job that we do alone. We all do our part and put in our part of the jigsaw so that someone can see the whole thing.

When Blessed John Henry Newman was still an Anglican, even though he was gradually moving in the direction of becoming a Catholic, he still had reservations. In the Creed we say that we believe in a Church that is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. He realised that the Catholic Church has been one in faith down throughout the ages; he knew that we are catholic or universal, just as in the first reading where Peter recognises that the message of Christ is for all people, not just for the Jews; he recognised that the bishops were descendents of the apostles, making the Catholic Church apostolic. But he couldn’t see that the Catholic Church was holy. He had read about the saints in the early days of the Church, but where were they now? Enter, stage left, Blessed Dominic Barberi.

Blessed Dominic was a Passionist Priest, so he belonged to a religious order, and he was sent by his order, not to preach to the missions in Africa or Asia, but to England. He arrived in 1841, with a strong Italian accent, and went around barefooted in his religious habit, preaching in the industrial centres of this country. People threw stones at him, they cursed him, he had to endure times when he had very little to eat, he was mocked, and more besides. He was a bit like St Paul in 2

Corinthians, where he speaks of all the beatings, shipwrecks, starvation, and other attacks he had endured in the service of the Gospel. Blessed Dominic suffered, but his work also bore great fruit, bringing thousands into the Church.

Blessed John Henry Newman, in his Anglican days, had said, “If they [that is, the Catholics] want to convert England, let them go barefooted into our manufacturing towns – let them preach to the people like St Francis Xavier – let them be pelted and trampled on, and I will own that they do what we cannot. I will confess they are our betters far.” Little did he know that that was exactly what Blessed Dominic and his followers were doing. And it was Blessed Dominic who was the missing piece in the jigsaw for John Henry Newman, and led to his conversion. Blessed Dominic didn’t need to go through deep theological and philosophical arguments with him – that work had already been done. It just needed the witness of someone who was holy and aflame with love for God and for the conversion of souls.

In days gone by, we could grumble that the media seemed to be against us, and that anything on the TV about the Catholic faith seemed to be skewed against us. Today we have Catholic TV stations, and also the internet, which can help prepare some of the groundwork. But people still need to meet real-life Catholics who can help them make sense of the Catholic faith, and who live in 21st century England and yet still give an example of following Christ, keeping His commandments and showing them His love. It may be that for you, things work the other way round to how they did for Blessed John Henry Newman – the fact that you were there for someone, and that you actually cared, means that they then start to think about investigating the Catholic faith. Rather than being the “icing on the cake” like Blessed Dominic, you might be the foundation instead from which they build. Or maybe you might have a different role. When I was on placement some years ago there was someone who wasn’t a Catholic, but came to Mass with his wife and son. At a social event, he said to me that he had questions about religion, but they might weaken my faith. I took him up on the challenge, but they weren’t exactly difficult questions. One of them was that he thought that certain Anglican churches looked more like a church than the Catholic church did, which was a 1960s construction. I said I agreed with him and that I’m sure there are other Catholics who would agree with him too. I don’t know whether those really were his obstacles to belief, or not, but I know that he later on became a Catholic.

So the message about building up this parish is: we’re all in it together, and we all have our piece to add to the jigsaw puzzle of other people’s conversions. If we keep Christ’s commandments and remain in His love, then others will see Christ in us and want to find out more.