

## Homily for the Wednesday in the Seventh Week of Easter

May 27, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Acts 20:28–38; Psalm 68:28–36; John 17:11b–19*

Yesterday, today, and tomorrow, we are hearing John’s account of Jesus alone, praying to the Father, before he gathers his friends to go across the Kidron Valley to a garden. The beginning of today’s appointed passage can be understood as the point of Jesus’ prayer. He says, “Holy Father, keep them in your name which you have given to me, in order that they may be one just as we.”<sup>1</sup> That’s a very big ask. In other words, he asks that believers should have the relationship with each other that God the Son has with God the Father.

This verse is the only time in the Bible that God is addressed—proclaimed—as the “Holy Father.” (The internet was down in the rectory study this morning so I couldn’t easily look up when bishops of Rome adopted that title.) Jesus is asking that believers be kept in the holiness which is given to them when Jesus hands over his spirit to those who are with him at the cross.<sup>2</sup> There’s no Lord’s Prayer in John, but there is a

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<sup>1</sup> John 17:11b

<sup>2</sup> John 19:30. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, 2 vols. (Doubleday: New York, 1994), II:1082–83.

Holy One whom Jesus petitions to keep his friends from evil. I like the way John's Jesus speaks of evil as if it is a separate place.

In sacramental theology course that Father Louis Weil taught during our third and final seminary year, he told about meeting a Dominican scholar one summer when he was teaching in Washington or Philadelphia, who was writing about evil. The scholar was closely supervised by his community, not because he was not trusted, but his subject was considered dangerous in every way to one who approached it. In the rule of Saint Benedict, monks are urged to take hold of any evil thought that comes to mind and quickly dash "them against Christ."<sup>3</sup> That said, the realm of belief is not without its challenges. We may be in the world but not of the world; we are in it enough to stumble. Unity, being one, remains a challenge for us.

I am beginning to read some of the planning notes that church communities are making to reopen—but not to worry too much about the details. Our understanding of the disease seems to be increasing. We know more today about how the pandemic virus spreads than we did in January and February. Innocent

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<sup>3</sup> RB 1980: *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981), Prologue, verse 28, 163.

as doves and wise as serpents is a phrase I like to keep handy when my own anxiety starts to work against clearheaded thinking.

We've ordered hand sanitizer stands that are battery operated so one doesn't have to touch it to use it. I'm thinking about putting in an order for the offering baskets on sticks that I've seen only in Roman Catholic churches. I presume that when we open we will have extra masks available for those who need them. During these Masses here in this chapel, I've learned that it's almost impossible to put on a latex glove to distribute communion if one's hand is wet from ritual washing.

Another thing. The common cup. I will never forget the impression it made on me as teenager when I attended an Episcopal service where everyone who received Communion was drinking from the same cup—didn't happen in my Baptist Church; didn't happen in my grandparents' Roman Catholic Church when I was growing up. Right now, the anxiety about the cup is very high. I will not be surprised if it turns out that, just as one cannot get HIV from drinking after someone, one cannot get COVID-19 either—I really hope so.

There are times in life when one can feel separated from God and others. I know that some memories of things done and left undone, things said and not said, can follow us all the days of our lives. In very hard times, the grace and light of faith seems to find its way into the darkness that comes one's way. For me, the moments when I feel God is very close, present, are very rare, but I remember them. Being able to recall not just in my mind but physically those moments, is also a grace of faith, perhaps a glimpse of eternal life.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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