

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time 2021 B

I met Patrick about 15 years ago, a regular at weekday Mass. Some of you probably know him as well. He was obviously from India, a bit hard of hearing, and a housepainter by trade – not an artist, but the kind with rollers and brushes. There is much that is remarkable about his apparently simple life, but among the most striking things is the fact that he was literally picked up off the streets of Bombay as an infant by a woman that he is certain was none other than Mother Teresa, years before she became world-famous. Left behind perhaps by a desperate parent who could not provide for him, ***Mother Teresa saw in that helpless bundle a fragile life who was a child of God.*** Patrick stayed with the Sisters for some years, but they also stayed with him. He was raised and educated by the Missionaries of Charity and eventually adopted and brought to the United States, where tomorrow you can call him to have your house painted.

Patrick had decades of life that would otherwise have been lost. Of course, many of those Mother Teresa cared for had only days or even hours left in their lives, also left on the streets because there was no one to care for their needs. For them, being with the Sisters was the first time in years that they had received a word of kindness, a gesture of compassion, even a human touch. They knew themselves at the end of life as valued and loved. They stayed with the Missionaries of Charity; but the nuns also stayed with them. ***To human eyes, perhaps it seems like that kindness came too late. But we can also see it as maybe just a little early, an anticipation of living forever in the perfect Love of God.***

We have been listening to John's Discourse on the Bread of Life for these five weekends, and it ends with this controversy about staying with Jesus or walking away. In this moment of decision, Jesus asks the Apostles that haunting question: "Do you also want to leave?" Staying with Jesus is always a choice; He never constrains us but instead desires to set us free. The world and its troubles pull us in many directions, and Christ's promises can seem empty next to the problems that plague us in pandemics and politics; natural disasters; and all those sorrow wrought by human greed and ambition, war and social turmoil.

Sometimes we might be tempted to stomp away from the Lord in anger, disillusionment, or disappointment. More often, though, the relationship with Jesus just gradually erodes and slips away as other things seem more important or pressing than His sometimes confusing ways.

When we stay with Jesus, we come to understand how He also stays with us in the Eucharist. Receiving the Body of Christ, we become the Body of Christ – *not as a possession to be kept but a life to be shared, love to be passed on to others*. We do want to remain with Jesus in prayer, in sacrament, in our spiritual lives, letting our friendship with Him take stable root so it can grow. *But we also need to remain with Him in what Mother Teresa often called His distressing disguise* ... in the weakness and suffering of lives like Patrick's and those many unnamed poor taken off the street and gently eased into God's love.

Today, this week, we will encounter those who need a human word or gesture that, even in their suffering, anticipates a share in God's perfect love. *As Mother Teresa knew, Jesus visits us, not always as we would choose, but as He chooses*. When we are tempted to rush off to our own chores and errands and interests, may the Holy Spirit help us to slow down, and stay with Jesus, present in each person we meet, for He tells us that whatever we do for the least, we do for Him. He stays with us, that we might always stay with Him, Who is our Way, God's Truth, and eternal Life.