

Reflection for the 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Mt 18:20

This quote taken from the last verse of our Gospel reading this Sunday is a gentle but powerful reminder that Christ has given us a community of believers to journey with in this world and in the next. We are not solitary figures of faith taking a lonely journey of faith in this world misunderstood by all we meet. More often than not we might as true followers of Christ feel alone and isolated in a world that is calling us to compromise our beliefs for the comfort of the community at large. May we be true to the example of our fore-fathers in faith who were faith filled believers that would not compromise their beliefs even if it meant certain death.

For the first 300 years of the Catholic faith, we as followers of the Son of God were persecuted by the Roman Empire. Just professing faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God could result in prison and death. The early Church did not just survive this challenging time it thrived. The Church was of course affected by the 300 years of persecution. We can see it in the fact the adult baptism was more common in the early Church than infant baptism. Also, the fact that the early Christians used the catacombs not only to bury the dead but also to celebrate Mass in relative safety, helped develop an appreciation of the relics of the Saints.

In the year 312 when the Roman Emperor Constantine rose to power after the victory of Milvian Bridge, the relationship of the Catholic Church and the Roman Empire changed forever. Emperor Constantine claimed that before the battle he had seen a cross in the sky with the words, *“in this sign you shall conquer.”* He took control of the Western Roman Empire and with the Emperor of the East; Constantine published the Edict of Milan, in 313, which granted Catholics the freedom to worship. St. Helena the mother of Emperor Constantine is credited with having many Catholic Churches built in Rome including St. Peter’s. St. Helena was Catholic before the Edict of Milan; Emperor Constantine is believed to have been baptized Catholic on his death-bed.

All those who embraced the Catholic faith and followed Christ in the first 3 centuries of faith were not alone, Christ walked with them and they had a faith community of two or three and more that also walked with them. Today with the pandemic, and the practice of self-isolation and social-distancing we can feel like that solitary figure on a lonely journey of faith. But we are not alone we too like the early Church walk with Christ and our faith community. Our masks, self-isolation and social-distancing might cause us to feel alone but may we as people of faith break through the feelings of isolation and despair and embrace our Lord and our community of faith. The early Church not only survived 3 centuries of persecution by the Roman Empire it thrived, so may it be the same for you and I in this challenging time may we just not survive but may we thrive. Our thriving will be possible because where two or three are gathered in Christ’s name He is present. We might not be able to gather in the same way we use to. Our gathering might be with a mask and social-distancing, or our gathering might be on the phone or on zoom, but we are still gathering and Christ is still present, and our Church and faith will not just survive with God’s blessing our Church will continue to thrive.