

Beginning of the Bicentennial Celebration for the Diocese of Richmond
January 18-19, 2020
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

Here's a newsflash:

Sources are reporting that the Short Pump area will have important new residents by February 1st. Yes, Short Pump will become the new home of Prince Harry and Duchess Meghan! They will use new titles once they move to America. From now on, they will be called the "Royal Governor and Governess of Goochland!"

I know, there have been many stories in the news recently: volcanos, wildfires, the Martin Luther King holiday, impeachment, tensions at our state capital. But many news outlets are fixated on 'what will happen to Harry and Meghan' as they 'step back' from Royal Life. (By the way, are they looking for volunteers to 'step into Royal Life?' I'll sign up!)

The other day, someone said, "Why can't the royal family get its act together? They are born into fabulous wealth. Their only job is to cut ribbons, help charities, and speak with that cool British accent. They are born into a perfect situation. Why don't they have a perfect family?"

That made me think about lots of families - families who *appear* to "have it all together." Families where the parents seem great, everyone went to cotillion, the children get good grades, their teeth are straight. And, according to their Facebook page, *they live a perfect life...*

But then, you hear the news: a member of the family was arrested! A member of the family is dealing with addiction. The parents separated. Someone got fired for unethical behavior.

The perfect façade falls apart.

When I was a teenager, a local family seemed to be the 'perfect family.' Then some shocking news trickled through the neighborhood. I said to my mom, "I don't understand! I thought they had a perfect family!" And mom said, "No. Not a *perfect* family. A HUMAN family."

And she was right.

Today's scripture readings (which were especially chosen by Bishop Knestout for this weekend) might be confusing at first. As you listen to the description of the Christian community in Acts, you might get the impression that the early church was *perfect*.

Listen to this summary of how the Acts of the Apostles describes this perfect family of faith:

Every believer was attentive to the teaching of the apostles and prayed together. No one needed anything, because everyone shared everything. No one argued. God was happy with them. Their neighbors loved them.

They sound... *perfect!*

(Sounds like every church everywhere, right?)

(Sounds like every human family and every nation, right?)

Now, I'm not suggesting that the Acts of the Apostles is fibbing to us. Maybe it *has* been possible at times for Christians to behave like – I don't know – CHRISTIANS!

But before you conclude that everything was perfect in the early Church, remember what Jesus says in today's Gospel. He tells the early Christians – and us – what to do when another Christian hurts us, or harms us, or scandalizes us.

And here's my point: Jesus would not have to give us these instructions unless he knew that early Christians - and modern Christians – *would be* imperfect, sinful, and - what's the word my mom used? - *human!*

In Acts, we hear a description what our families, and what our churches, CAN look like, WILL look like if we commit ourselves to living the Gospel. In the Gospel, Jesus tells us what to do when we find that members of our families & parishes turn out to be... not perfect, but *human*.

This weekend, all over Southern Virginia, we are beginning the celebration of our Diocesan Bicentennial. In 1820, the Vatican officially formed the Diocese of Richmond to serve Catholics who lived in Virginia.

There are so many things about our early Catholic ancestors which are inspiring and beautiful. Back in 1570, Jesuit missionaries sailed up from Florida and landed near what is now Williamsburg. They sought to live peacefully with native peoples, and started to teach them in many ways. Some natives were hospitable, others suggested that the Catholics should flee back to Florida. But the missionaries felt a calling to stay. They were later martyred.

When Virginia was a British Colony, the Anglican church was the official religion. So, it was illegal for the Catholic church to own property here. It was illegal to celebrate the sacraments or *be* a Catholic.

But the Catholics who *did* come here refused to abandon their faith. Some were arrested, and told to give up their faith. They refused. Despite the legal obstacles, parishes were established. The first parish in Virginia was St. Mary's in Alexandria. Then St. Patrick's in Norfolk.

I read about the courage and commitment of those early Catholics in Virginia and I am *inspired*.

(I also wonder if I would have the same courage and generosity if I faced the same challenges!)

But then I read how a dispute broke out in Norfolk in 1817 between the pastor and the parishioners. The parishioners announced that they, not the parish, owned the church buildings, and that they would decide who could use them and how. It was called the “Norfolk Schism.”

Eventually, the Vatican sent a priest from Ireland named Patrick Kelly to be the first bishop of Richmond. He landed in Norfolk, and the rambunctious parishioners there were not hospitable. In effect, they said that if they needed a bishop they would choose someone themselves! Bishop Kelly received almost no support from local Catholics. In order to feed himself, he opened a school and taught local children.

Here’s a little piece of trivia for you: the first Bishop of Richmond never actually came to Richmond! He stayed in Norfolk. And after two hard years, he went home to Ireland, convinced that most local Catholics were trying to start their own religion!

So let’s review: our early Catholic ancestors in Virginia were courageous, generous, brave. They faced a colonial government that outlawed Catholic sacraments...

... AND, our Catholic ancestors were rambunctious, hostile to church leaders, and they were so mean to their first bishop that he went back to Ireland.

Were Virginia’s first Catholics holy, or sinful? *Yes.*

Were they inspiring, or divisive? *Yes.*

They were not perfect. They were human.

We will hear more about our Virginia Catholic family of faith in the year ahead. And you will notice a pattern. Virginia’s Catholic have always been imperfect, sinful, human. But God, who is merciful, keeps working through our imperfect church family to do amazing things: to change the lives of our neighbors for the better.

Jesus knows the human heart, and he knows how we behave. So in this Gospel passage, he says, “If someone hurts you, or if someone in your family or parish or community harms you, your first responsibility is to ... *talk with them.* Talk with them *one on one.*”

Notice, Jesus does *not* say, “If someone hurts you, post something negative about them on Facebook.” Jesus does *not* say, “If someone frustrates you, gossip about them in the neighborhood.” Jesus does *not* say, “If someone hurts you, send them some anonymous hate mail, complain to the bishop, tell the world why that person is a jerk.”

No.

Jesus says that Christians are called to speak *with* one another, not *about* one another. We must love each other enough to have conversations. (Maybe those Christians in the Acts of the Apostles got along well because put down their cell phones long enough to speak with one another!)

When we are baptized, we become members of a family of faith that strives to be holy, but is humble enough to admit that every member of the family is human. We are imperfect people, serving a God who loves us perfectly.

God loves you, with all your messy humanity. With that as our starting point, we can strive to serve and love others, with all their messy humanity. Even the new Governor and Governess of Goochland.

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