

Giving a Reason for our Hope

The following is the text of the homily given by Bishop Rhoades in a live-streamed Mass on May 17th, the Sixth Sunday of Easter:

We're in the midst of graduation season. I feel sorry for our college and high school graduates who aren't able to celebrate their graduation ceremonies, unable to gather with their classmates and receive their diplomas together because of the pandemic. Our four Catholic high schools hope to celebrate these ceremonies in late July, if it is possible. I miss celebrating their Baccalaureate Masses, but hopefully it will be possible at that time. In any event, let's be sure to congratulate our young men and women on their graduations. To the graduates who are watching this Mass, we are proud of you!

In the Gospel today, Jesus speaks of the Advocate that He will give to His disciples to be with them always. He is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows him. So I'm praying that the Holy Spirit will be with our graduates as they go into the world, a world where many do not believe or can even be hostile to believers, especially Catholics. I pray that our young graduates will stay firm in the faith.

I hope we have prepared our graduates well, to go forth not with fear, but with hope and courage. I pray that their faith will remain strong and will grow, not become weak or disappear. I hope that when they sit in a class where a professor is attacking religion or Christianity and particularly Catholicism (a favorite target today), that their faith will not only not be shaken, but that they will be able to stand up for our faith. This brings me to today's second reading, the wonderful passage we heard from the first letter of our first pope. Saint Peter wrote: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope."

Are we able to give an explanation for the hope that is within us, the hope that springs from faith? Of course, our hope is Christ. Are we ready to give a good, articulate, and intelligent explanation of our beliefs? Are our young people able to do so? I hope so – that's why our Catholic high schools and our parish youth ministry programs must be excellent in catechesis. And that's why

it's so important that parents are practicing and living the faith, giving good witness to their children. Parents need to be able to give a reason for their hope and be able to explain the faith to their children. This is effective only when parents are authentically living the faith, living in a way that is consistent with the faith.

Saint Peter doesn't say that we should be ready "now and then" to give an explanation of our faith or reason for our hope. He doesn't say "sometimes." He says: "Always" be ready to do so! I invite you to ponder these questions:

Are you ready and able to explain why you believe and hope in Jesus Christ and why you are His disciple?

Are you able to intelligently speak to an atheist why it is reasonable to believe in God or to a Muslim or Jewish friend why you believe that Jesus is God or why you believe that God is a Trinity of three Divine Persons?

Are you ready and able to explain to a Protestant friend why you believe that the Catholic Church was founded by Jesus and has preserved the fullness of the apostolic faith?

Are you ready and able to explain the importance of the seven sacraments and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist?

Are you ready and able to explain why we confess our sins to a priest, why we venerate the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints, why we believe in the authority of the Pope and bishops, and why we believe in the doctrine of purgatory?

Are you able to explain and defend our belief in the sanctity of all human life, in the dignity of the child in the womb, of immigrants and refugees, of the sick and the dying, and, therefore, why we oppose abortion, xenophobia, and euthanasia?

Are you able to explain and defend why marriage is a union between one man and one woman, why some reproductive technologies are harmful to human dignity, and why sex should only be within marriage?

Are you ready and able to explain why the option to follow Christ in the Catholic Church is a positive option, one that brings joy and human fulfillment, "a yes" to life and love, and a path to true freedom?

Are you able to articulate why you believe that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and how this belief has given meaning and purpose to your life?

I get a lot of questions on my weekly show on Redeemer Radio. I love trying to answer the questions people call in about many teachings of the Church, questions about doctrines like the Holy Trinity and other mysteries of the faith, questions about moral issues, about prayer, and about the Christian life. I'm happy to receive the questions. They show me how people are truly seeking to better know and understand our faith. If we're going to be able and ready to give an explanation to others of the reasons for our hope, we must know our faith. If you feel you're not able to explain some aspects of our faith or to answer some of the questions I've proposed, I encourage you to study the question, to seek answers, to delve more deeply into the what and the why of what the Church teaches.

There's something else very important that Saint Peter wrote that we find at the end of the sentence I've been talking about. He says: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear...". I can't emphasize enough the importance of the latter part of this sentence. In explaining our faith and the reason for our hope, we must never do so in an uncharitable way. So much harm is done by Catholics who claim to be orthodox or even super-orthodox in their faith, but they turn people off, even away from Catholicism, because of their self-righteousness, their anger, judgmentalism, or pride. We must not be modern-day pharisees. If we're not proclaiming the truth in charity, we're not really orthodox, we're not really proclaiming the truth, because love is central to the truth of Christianity and Catholicism. We must always treat others with love and respect, "with gentleness and reverence," as Saint Peter teaches us.

When we share or defend our faith, it's not about just winning arguments. Good apologetics is not polemical. It's not trying to pick a fight. Yes, there may be arguments, but debates and arguments should not degenerate into attacks on people or lack of respect for those who disagree with us. Our purpose, after all, in bearing witness to the truths of our faith, is not to win an argument. It's to win souls for Christ, to bring them to the peace, joy, and fulfillment that is found in Christ and His Body, the Church.

Back to our graduates! I am often edified when I see and get to talk to some of our young people when they are home from college. I'll ask them how

it's going and about their faith life. Some will share with me the challenge of forming good relationships and friendships in the midst of a hook-up culture or an alcohol-centered social milieu. Some share the challenges they encounter in some classes where they might be the only practicing Catholic, the only one who challenges a professor putting down Catholicism or Catholic teaching. Some tell me it's sometimes hard to do. Some say they feel support from other like-minded students through their involvement in Catholic campus ministry. Some tell me that the challenges and questions they get have made them better Catholics, made them study and delve more deeply into the faith. That's such good news. We sometimes become better Catholics when our faith is ridiculed, challenged, or attacked.

A final word to parents with sons and daughters in college or going to college: try not to worry too much. My advice: pray every day for your children. Entrust them to the Lord; ask the Holy Spirit to guide them and our Blessed Mother to protect them.

To all who are watching this Mass and especially to our graduates, may you take to heart the challenge from Saint Peter: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear."