

5th Sunday of Easter, Year B

O Lord, assure my heart that whatever You bring me to, You will see me through. Please gift me with the grace of final perseverance.

Acts 9:26-31

26When Saul arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple.

27Then Barnabas This Christian descended from the tribe of Levi was born on the Island of Cyprus in the Mediterranean Sea. He was first mentioned in Acts for selling his property and giving the money for the disposal of the apostles. Although not a disciple of Christ during the Lord's earthly ministry, like Paul, he was considered an apostle and he undertook missionary trips with Paul and later with John Mark, who was his cousin. He was called "Son of Consolation." **took charge of him and brought him to the apostles,** The Apostles knew that Paul had been an agent of the council of Jerusalem in its attack upon the Christians. He was involved in the murder of Stephen and had gone house to house arresting Christians and throwing them into prison. **and he reported to them how he had seen the Lord,** The conversion of Paul occurred as a result of his experience on the road to Damascus; Jesus appeared to him and Paul was ill and blinded for several days until he was cured and baptized by Ananias. After that it appears that he went to Arabia for three years. This is understood as a time of retirement to the desert like the retirements of Moses, Elijah and Jesus himself. When he returned, he preached Jesus in Damascus. **and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus.**

28He moved about freely with them in Jerusalem, and spoke out boldly in the name of the Lord.

29He also spoke and debated with the Hellenists, but they tried to kill him. These were the same Greek-speaking Jews who had argued with Stephen before they stirred up the people against him and took him before the council, which led to his being stoned to death.

30And when the brothers The idea of the new community as a brotherhood and the mutual address of "brother" are frequent (28 times) in Acts. **learned of this, they took him down to Caesarea** This was a town built on the coast of Palestine south of Mt. Carmel. **and sent him on his way to Tarsus.** This was Paul's hometown. St. John Chrysostom explains that, in addition to grace, human resourcefulness has a part to play in apostolic activity. The disciples were afraid that the Jews would do to Saul what they had done to St. Stephen. This may be why they sent him to preach the Gospel in his homeland, where he would be safer.

31The church throughout all Judea, Galilee and Samaria was at peace. It was being built up and walked in the fear of the Lord, and with the consolation of the Holy Spirit This peace was a consolation of the Holy Spirit and so was the sharing, participation in community life and partaking in Communion. Long before the Holy Spirit was a doctrine, He was a fact in the experience of the community. **it grew in numbers.** St. Luke gives us an over-view of the steady progress of the Church as a whole and of the various communities that had grown up as a result of the Christians' flight from Jerusalem.

1 John 3:18-24

18Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. Once we become children of God, we must learn to act like it! Our creed calls us to a particular way of living. We learn this from first, the things Jesus taught and second, by his example. *A concrete act of charity in a minor matter may be a more valid proof of His love than a lofty idea never acted upon.* The true test of love is action.

¹⁹Now this is how we shall know that we belong to the truth and reassure our hearts before him
²⁰in whatever our hearts condemn, for God is greater than our hearts and knows everything. God knows our sins and our frailties, our most craven doubts and painful remorse, our most bitter resentments and paralyzing scruples as well as our repentance and our good desires. He fully understands and forgives us. If our conscience tells us we have done wrong, we can seek forgiveness and strengthen our hope in God. Pope John Paul II reminds us, “When we realize that God’s love for us does not cease in the face of our sin or recoil before our offences, but becomes even more attentive and generous; when we realize that this love went so far as to cause the Passion and Death of the Word made flesh who consented to redeem us at the price of his own blood, then we exclaim in gratitude: ‘Yes, the Lord is rich in mercy.’” This confidence in God makes for confidence in prayer.

²¹Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence in God If we are not conscious of having sinned, we can be even more confident of God’s favor!

²²and receive from him whatever we ask, because we keep his commandments and do

We are called to a way of living and not just a way of thinking! what pleases him. St. John insists that faith will necessarily express itself in obedience to the commandments of God and still more in love of God and neighbor.

²³And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us. As St. Bede put it, “We cannot rightly love one another unless we believe in Christ; nor can we truly believe in the name of Jesus Christ without brotherly love.” Our Lord himself told us what would mark his disciples: THEIR LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER. Only by acts of sacrificial love will we truly love. If you were given a grade on this today, what would it be?

²⁴Those who keep his commandments remain in him, Keeping the commandments confirms to the Christian that he is abiding in God. Moreover, it ensures that God abides in his soul. The Navarre Bible goes on to explain: “May God be your house and you God’s; dwell in God that God may dwell in you. God dwells in you to support you; you dwell in God in order not to fall.” and he in them, and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit he gave us. A further guarantee of the divine presence is the possession of the Holy Spirit, here mentioned explicitly for the first time in the writings of John.

John 15:1-8

The metaphor of the vine underscores Jesus’ union with the disciples and their absolute dependency on him for life and growth. It assumes that because the vinedresser (the Father) seeks an abundant harvest, he trims back the vine stock (Jesus) to rid it of fruitless branches (those who have defected from the Faith) and to invigorate the other branches (disciples) to become even more fruitful.

Jesus said to his disciples:

¹“I am This “I am” statement is another reference to the name which God revealed to Moses from the burning bush on Mt. Sinai. the true “True” is a characteristic of the divine order distinguished from the deception and illusion of the order of sinful man. vine, and my Father is the vine grower. Several times the OT depicts Israel as a vineyard planted and tended by the Lord. The gates of the temple were forged in Greece, floated across the sea, brought to Jerusalem and placed in Herod’s temple. 82 feet high and 30 feet wide, they were made of bronze and wrought into them was a

golden vine with clusters of grapes as tall as a man's height. It symbolized the nation Israel. The carving of a bunch of grapes often adorned the front of Jewish synagogues.

2He takes away every branch (disciple) in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes The Father must trim away our selfishness to increase our growth in love. Pruning probably refers to the trials and fatherly discipline we experience in this life. Hebrews 12 tells us how we should receive this discipline: "Endure your trials as the discipline of God, who deals with you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you do not know the discipline of sons, you are not sons but bastards. If we respected our earthly fathers who corrected us, should we not all the more submit to the Father of spirits, and live? They disciplined us as seemed right to them, to prepare us for the short span of mortal life; but God does so for our true profit, that we may share his holiness. At the time it is administered, all discipline seems a cause for grief and not for joy, but later it brings forth the fruit of peace and justice to those who are trained in its school. **so that it bears more fruit.** St. Teresa of Avilla commented that "What the Lord desires is works! True love expresses itself in action. Anyone who closes his heart when he sees another's need does not truly love."

3You are already pruned (just as at the washing of the feet when Jesus said that they were already clean -except for Judas) **because of the word** This refers to the whole of revelation, the message of eternal life. **that I spoke to you.**

4Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. The delivery of this sermon during the Last Supper gives it a sacramental coloring. Note how the invitation to "remain" in Christ recalls the same notion in the Bread of Life discourse (6:56 "The man who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.) and how Matthew, Mark and Luke similarly speak of the "fruit of the vine" as a reference to the Eucharistic Meal: "I solemnly assure you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the reign of God." In the new Encyclical on the Eucharist that was released on Holy Thursday this year, 2003, Pope John Paul II tells us that "Incorporation into Christ, which is brought about by Baptism, is constantly renewed and consolidated by sharing in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, especially by that full sharing which takes place in sacramental communion. We can say not only that each of us receives Christ, but also that Christ receives each of us. He enters into friendship with us (John 15:14). Eucharistic communion brings about in a sublime way the mutual 'abiding' of Christ and each of his followers: 'Abide in me, and I in you...'"

5I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, Union with Christ is not only the condition of bearing fruit, it also demands it. The life of union with Christ has to be focused on the good of others and if this happens, a fruitful apostolate is the result. The Catechism comments that "the Holy Spirit is like the sap of the Father's vine which bears fruit on its branches." **because without me you can do nothing.** This isn't a threat, it is a fact. It applies in a special way to prayer. Just as a body will grow lifeless and cold if its blood is drained away so will the Christian soul grow lifeless and cold without prayer.

6Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned. Damnation awaits every branch that withers away from Christ and becomes worthless. This tells us that coming to the faith is not enough. We must persevere in it! While fire is used to describe hell, the chief punishment is eternal separation from God. Ezekiel described the residents of Jerusalem as vine branches that failed to

yield fruit and so became fuel for the fires of divine judgment. Vines, the prophet reasoned, are useless to the craftsman as wood and thus have no value apart from the grapes they bear.

7If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. This implies a harmony of will with God and obedience to his commandments, which are the necessary conditions for effective prayer.

8By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. The Father is glorified in the works of the Son's disciples.

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from "The Founding of Christendom," by Warren H. Carroll, "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Acts of the Apostles," the "Dictionary of the Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., The Commentary Notes of Tim Grey, "The Navarre Bible: Acts of the Apostles," "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of John," and the "Catholic Bible Study: John" by Stephen K. Ray.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.