

The Call to be “Birthers”

In the late 90’s I had the opportunity to hear Father Bryan Massingale speak at Alverno College about how the Church needed to address clergy sexual abuse. He challenged the women present to be midwives, actively “birthing” a humbler and repentant Catholic Church. This image has stayed with me. It came to mind recently in our parish conversations about the church and societal changes needed in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd under the knee of a police officer, and in light of the second reading from Romans (8:18-23) for this Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time.

In the first reading Isaiah reminds us that with the rain and snow from heaven, creation having been watered and fed from the word going forth from God’s mouth, is to be fertile and fruitful. The birthing process begins as a woman’s water breaks and ends as she bears a child, the fruit of her labor. A quick Google search will show that the scriptures are replete with images having to do with fertility, birth, nurturing, and producing good fruit.

The Gospel reading from Matthew 13:1-23 admonishes us to hear and see and nurture to fruition the seed of the word that God has planted in our hearts. We have been given much and even more will be given to us as we bear the abundant riches of God’s word. In accepting God’s word, we grow with an understanding heart, we come to conversion, and we receive healing. This is God’s “hundredfold” giving that births us into the fullness of life everlasting.

With all that has happened recently, as a Church and as a nation, we are as Father Bryan and St. Paul “groaning in labor pains.” (Rom8:21) At the recent Prayer for Racial Justice Evening Prayer of Lamentation, sponsored by Milwaukee’s Black Catholic Ministry Commission in collaboration with the archdiocesan Office of Worship, Archbishop Jerome ListECKi began his reflection by saying, “I don’t know about you, but I needed this.” He immediately captured our collective need to cry out and loudly lament the tragedy of years, months, and weeks of injustices toward persons of color.

Lamentation and images of laboring through the birth process are images of the common reality of human suffering. However, the difficult period of labor eventually ends in the joyful birth of a child. Father Bryan suggests that before the joy, it is mandatory for us, members of the Body of Christ, to “midwife” hope.

For specific ideas as to what we can do to make our suffering fruitful, check the parish website and the materials from the Human Concerns Commission; but above all, pray that we may nurture and bring forth the Word that comes to us from the mouth of God.