

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Sunday, April 17, 2016

Fourth Sunday of Easter

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on one or more of the scripture readings for the coming Sunday. It prepares readers to hear God's Word at Mass and it offers a point of reflection to consider in the days leading to Sunday. Looking to Sunday is written by Father Tom Iwanowski.

NOT EVERYONE GETS A TROPHY

You do not have to look at statistics or study research papers from organizations like the *Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate* to know that the number of people attending Sunday Mass has significantly declined over the past 50 years and the number of people who have distanced themselves from their Catholic Church has increased.

We know that from the empty pews at Mass and the closing of parishes, from the decrease in weddings and baptisms and the lower enrollment in programs of religious education, from the teenagers who regard Confirmation as graduation from church, and from our relatives and friends who have taken a "sabbatical" from their Catholic Faith.

Many reasons have been given to explain this exodus from the Church. For example, the increasing secularism and materialism of our society, the media's hostility to religion, the sex abuse scandal, homilies and liturgies that seem disconnected from life, poor experiences with religious authorities, and the list could go on.

But perhaps there is another reason. By our preaching, our teaching, and our speaking about God we may have conveyed the idea that being part of Church, attending Sunday Mass, receiving the Sacraments, trying to live the Gospel are not necessary for salvation and for eternal life.

We say that God loves everyone. God is all merciful. God knows our human weakness. God understands our situation. God forgives every sin. We portray God as too good to deny salvation to anyone.

If that is only what people hear, then they can easily conclude that what a person does or does not do is of little consequence. We are all blessed with eternal life and a place in God's kingdom, so why bother with Church, with Mass, or trying to live according to the Gospel? We are like children on a sports team where win or lose, good player or bad, cooperative or not, at the end of the season, the coach gives everyone a trophy!

While that may be how many people see things in this day and age, that is certainly not the impression given in this Sunday's Readings.

In the Gospel (John 10:27-30) Jesus says, "My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life." Those who are blessed with eternal life are those who hear and obey the words of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and make them the guide for their lives.

In our First Reading (Acts 13:14, 43-52), Paul and Barnabas speak of the consequences that await those who reject the word they preach. "It was necessary that the word of God be

spoken to you first, but since you reject it and condemn yourselves as unworthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.”

In our Second Reading (Revelation 7:9, 14b-17), John has a vision where he learns that those in glory are the ones who have remained faithful to God despite persecution, “who have survived the time of great distress.”

Those readings indicate that gaining eternal life is not automatic, but rather is something given to those who strive to faithfully follow the word of God announced by Jesus.

How we live as followers of Christ, as members of his Church, does make a difference, an eternal difference. To put it another way, not everyone gets a trophy!

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Happy Easter Season!