

Deacon Bob Homily – Divine Mercy Sunday, April 7, 2024

Just a few days ago, I visited a movie theater and saw the movie called...*Cabrini*. The movie is about Frances Xavier Cabrini, a Catholic sister who was the first American to be canonized a saint.

A movie reviewer called her one of the most powerful, influential, and inspirational women...ever. But what about this? She had some personal...doubts. Other people around her had doubts about her. But she overcame those doubts.

In the end, she established schools, orphanages, and hospitals on all the inhabited continents of the world. Most of the hospitals and schools and third-world orphanages are in operation today. Every year on the Second Sunday of our 50-day Easter Season--each year for us, the greatest celebration season of our faith--we encounter the four gospel's most famous story about doubt, and the overcoming of that doubt. It is the account of Thomas, who demands proof before he will believe.

We live in an age when we are surrounded by Thomases--not only doubters like him, but out-and-out disbelievers--like atheists, agnostics, and secularists. The so-called "New Atheists" like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris are often seen on TV. More and more, atheists are seeking to challenge believers, and are making their voices heard in the public sphere.

One that I read about recently was a man named Patrick Greene. Greene was an avowed atheist. He lives in Henderson County, Texas, and he complained, often bitterly, about the hostility he experienced from his neighbors who were Christian.

Some time ago, he gained notoriety when he joined the fight against a Nativity scene set up outside the courthouse in the nearby town of Athens, Texas. Greene was angry that such an open display of religion was allowed on public property. He threatened a lawsuit to have the scene dismantled and removed.

However, shortly after making the threat, he learned his eyesight was deteriorating. Doctors found he is suffering from a variety of serious problems, including glaucoma and detached retina.

Greene had a job that required good eyesight, and soon he had to give it up. Meanwhile, his legal battle began to sap his time and his money. Finally, he decided he could not go forward with the lawsuit if he were blind, so he withdrew his threats and waited for the darkness to descend.

One of his neighbors, Jessica Cree, an active member of a church in Athens, learned about Greene's illness. "I knew about his lawsuits," she told a local newspaper. "I thought he must have never felt the love of God through Christians, so this would be a great opportunity to turn the other cheek and to show God's love."

She asked her pastor if there were something they could do. There was. But the results were not what anyone expected.

Several churches got involved. They decided to do a fundraiser so that one of the most notorious atheists around could have an operation and, maybe, recover his sight.

But Greene refused the money, saying the surgery might fail. Undeterred, the churches asked him if there were anything else they COULD do. Greene said that, since he could no longer work, he could use help with his household expenses. He expected he might get a couple checks for ten or twenty bucks. A few days later, he got the first check. It was for...\$400.

As time went on, the checks and the support and the prayers continued. Patrick Greene was

overwhelmed. To his amazement, he found that his faith in his own disbelief was being shaken. Just before Easter, he gave an interview to a paper called...*The Christian Post*. Greene said the outpouring of love had changed him. "I realized," he said, "the questions I was asking you just have to accept on faith without doubting every period and every comma."

Greene has now joined a local church. And...get ready for this! He recently said he is thinking of studying to become...a Christian minister.

Like St. Thomas in today's gospel--like St. Frances Xavier Cabrini...Mother Cabrini--confronted with something thought to be impossible--Patrick Greene could only say: "My Lord and my God."

Greene's story reminds us that the experience of God's love--an encounter with Jesus--does not depend on physical evidence. It is something beyond what can be touched, or heard, or seen. It is an offering poured out. It is...love.

The apostle Thomas experienced that. And this is something to remember about him. After he adamantly, even angrily, expressed his doubt, Jesus did not dismiss him. He did not write him off. Jesus came back. He gave Thomas another chance. He offered him the gift of faith, and Thomas, overwhelmed and awed, accepted.

Jesus does that with all of us. When we least expect it, he can break through our locked doors and into our human hearts. He will find us, in our fear and our uncertainty. He understands our misgivings--our hurts--our infirmities--and our weaknesses. He knows only too well the human condition. As Thomas discovered: He has the wounds to show for it.

And he wants to give us more opportunities. That, too, is part of our message for today. This is a time for seizing second chances--and more.

This Sunday, we also mark Divine Mercy Sunday when we embrace the power and beauty of God's forgiveness. It is the weekend when we remind ourselves of God's tender mercies--when we strive, more than ever, to keep up our ever-ongoing process of unlocking the locked doors of our hearts.

It is a time for fulfilling the promise of the Resurrection, and the glorious hope of Easter. Jesus has left his tomb. If we choose to, we may be able to leave ours. We can step out of our tomb of selfishness, resentments, and compulsive behaviors--out of our knee-jerk thoughts, emotions, and attitudes. We can see and feel the healing light of God's care. We can take that second chance, and third chance...and more. God's mercy--Divine Mercy--assures it. The Sacrament of Reconciliation enables it. We can be made new.

The Texas newspapers report that, in gratitude, Patrick Greene bought a star to go atop the tree that is part of the Athens, Texas Nativity display--the very display he tried to outlaw. Given his condition, he cannot be certain he will ever actually see that star next Christmas. But I think he would agree: He has seen something far more wondrous. And he has seen it with the eyes of faith.

As we gather around the table of the Lord today, and as we prepare to receive him in the Eucharist, we can invite Jesus into our own locked upper rooms. We can also pray that he will break through all our barriers that might be keeping him out of our lives.

We can pray to be open to God's tender mercies, so that we might say with the joy of Easter discovery, and with the wonder of St. Thomas, and of St. Frances Cabrini: "*My Lord and my God!*"

Plz give it some thought....