

11th Sunday in Ordinary Time, June 17, 2018

When I was a child one of the things we look for in summer months in India was mangoes. They are very sweet and delicious fruit. I had one of the sweetest mangoes one day and I did not want to throw away the seed after eating it. I asked my mother if I can plant the seed. My mother said, “yes”. My sister helped me to dry the seed and when it was ready, we planted it in the ground. I was happy when I saw it sprout, grow into a plant and later a tree. My sisters, brothers and I were very happy to see it grow. I went to seminary and every time I came home for vacation I was so thrilled to see it grow so tall. By the time I was a priest it was one of the tallest trees in our street and it produced sweet mangoes. I used to wonder, “How did my Mother and sisters get that tree to grow like that?” Well, we planted it and watered it, but God gave the growth.

The ancient Hebrews understood agriculture. Their lives were dependent on the crops they cultivated and the animals they raised. Yet, they knew that the wonder of growth belonged to the Lord. When Ezekiel prophesied in today's first reading that the Lord would take a tender shoot from a tree and turn it into a noble cedar, the people recognized in this prophecy that growth is always in God's hands. He would do more for them than they could imagine. Israel, a nation in exile at the time of this prophecy, would become the nation that the whole world would look to with respect. For from Israel would come the Savior. Every kind of bird, all the nations, would live under the tree of Israel.

In today's Gospel, Jesus compares the growth of the Kingdom of God to the germination of a wheat seed and that of a tiny mustard seed. Both have very small beginnings. The wheat seeds, by gradual but steady growth, give the farmer a bumper crop. In the same way, the life principle in a tiny mustard seed enables it to grow into a large bush. The reign of God in human hearts and the growth of the Church in the world also have small beginnings. But the Source of all life, God the Holy Spirit, gives to both a steady, persistent and gigantic growth, provided we cooperate with His grace.

The people who heard Jesus tell the parable of the farmer's life also shared the wonder of the soil. The farmer works hard during the day, but he can't make the seed grow into a plant, and the plant produce fruit. God causes the growth. Jesus' point is that like the plants the Kingdom of God is in God's hands. The

workers in the Lord's fields must do their best to create the proper environment for growth, but God causes the growth. The parable comforted the people of the early Church in face of discouragement when their efforts didn't seem to be getting them anywhere. Remember, early Christianity grew as a development of the Jewish faith, but the Christians were rejected by the Jews. Persecuted on every side, the early Christians had to trust God to give growth to his kingdom.

And He did. And He still does. The Church lives on despite the persecution from the Romans, and despite two thousand years of martyrdom aimed at destroying the faith, the Church still lives on, and grows. God gives the growth. He does wonders with our feeble efforts. He turns that which is insignificant into that which is substantial.

We need to recognize God's work in the faith lives of our children and in our own faith lives. There are many of you here who are very upset because you did everything you could to raise your children in the faith, but they stopped practicing the faith when they left for college. Then they got married, outside of the Church, and now you have grandchildren who haven't even been baptized. So you ask, "Where did I go wrong?" Well, you didn't go wrong. You need to continue to pray that your children will be open to the faith. That seed that you planted may spring into a marvelous tree, but only after a long period of time. We have examples of many people in their forties and fifties returning to the faith of their youth and then becoming devoted Catholics. Ask their parents, "How did this happen?" They would respond, "We planted, but God gave the growth."

We really need to recognize the wonders of God's hand in our own lives. Does our faith mean more to us today than it did twenty years ago, or even ten years ago? I think most of us would say, "Yes" to that question. Well, how does it happen that we are more determined to live our faith now than we had been? It happens because God continues to give growth to the faith.

We are members of the greatest society the world has ever seen. We are members of the Kingdom of God. We are members of the Church. No matter what the media may comment, we are part of the only truly relevant organization in the world. We give meaning to the whole purpose of existence. The Church continues to grow; for the Lord gives the growth.