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St. Charles Retreat Center, Lake Charles, LA
Presbyteral Retreat for the Diocese of Lake Charles
Feast of SS. Simon and Jude, Apostles
October 28, 2014
Eph 2:19-22, Ps 19, Lk 6:12-16

- St. Paul in today's first reading tells the Ephesians and us that our Christian existence is "built upon the foundation of the Apostles." Today's feast of the apostles SS. Simon and Jude gives us a chance to ponder several aspects of our Christian and priestly life and how to strengthen it by grounding it more firmly in what the Lord has done and continues to do through the apostles.
- The first thing we can examine is the theme of our vocation. The apostles' vocation, we see, was born from Christ's prayer. Jesus had pulled an all-nighter praying to his Father praying about whom he should choose and praying for those he would choose. His prayer was not just an invocation, but a persevering one. That prayer would continue. During the ordination rite of the Last Supper we would see how fervently Jesus would pray to the Father. "I pray for them," he said aloud, "I do not pray for the world but for the ones you have given me because they are yours. ... Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one just as we are. ... I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one. ... Consecrate them in the truth. ... I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth." And then he prayed for the apostles' work to be fruitful, for all "those who will believe in me through their word," and prayed for their salvation, "I wish that where I am they also may be with me, that they may see my glory that you gave me, ... that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them." Jesus' ongoing prayer would take on a very specific form, as we would see in Jesus' Holy Thursday dialogue with St. Peter, "Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your [singular] own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers."
- On this retreat, it's important for us to take the time to recall with gratitude and wonder that our vocation, likewise, has its beginning in Jesus' prayer. He has prayed for each of us, to keep us in the Father's name, to unite us to God and to each other, to consecrate us in the truth of God's word, in the truth of Jesus' own consecration to the Father. Jesus has prayed for us that our faith may not fail and that we will not only strengthen the faith of our parishioners, so that they may build their lives on the sturdy rock of our apostolic faith. Jesus continues to pray for us still. He's praying for us on this retreat, that it will be a time of genuine renewal in the graces of our priestly ordination, the graces of our baptism, a rebirth in our "first love." His persevering prayer for us on this retreat is an example for us to persevere in prayer together with him during it as well.
- The second theme is our discipleship. When Jesus came down the mountain, St. Luke tells us, he chose the twelve from among the "disciples," from among those who were already as the Greek word *disciple* means Jesus' "students," who were zealously following him, who were living by faith, who were hearing his words and seeking to put them into practice. Together with Jesus' prayer, that was the crucial job qualification. Jesus didn't raid the rabbinical schools for the greatest young Scriptural scholars of the day who could more easily preach and teach. He didn't turn to the ascetical Pharisees whose whole life was dedicated to trying to live the Mosaic law to its perfection, to those who were already praying, tithing, fasting far more than was explicitly required. He turned to common, ordinary folk. He raided wharves and tax offices, he found people under fig trees and those who were lousy private investigators tailing him to find out where he lived. For the most part, that's always been Jesus' way. St. Paul would say to the Corinthians, "Consider your own calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God."
- The saints we celebrate today are, in many ways, the least of the apostles. St. Luke put them at the very end of the list, named just before the notorious traitor Judas Iscariot. In some ways, they're still the least. The tomb of any apostle — not to mention two apostles — would ordinarily be expected to be noteworthy,

but the two of their remains, brought to Rome by Crusaders lest their tombs be destroyed by Muslims, rests quietly in the southern transept of St. Peter's Basilica, at the altar of St. Joseph, underneath the Blessed Sacrament. Whereas St. Peter has a 70-ton bronze baldachino sculpted by Bernini and a massive dome-shaped tiara designed by Michelangelo over his remains, SS. Simon's and Jude's tomb remains such that most visitors to St. Peter's have no idea where it is. But there's a beauty here, all the same, because as disciples called by Jesus, it was never truly about them, but about him. Jesus called them because of their faith, because they knew how much they needed him and needed to learn from him. The criterion of discipleship even overcame human differences. Simon is labeled a "zealot," from the Hebrew verb *qana*, which means that he was from among those most opposed to the Romans and the one whose first reaction, for example, to the calling of the tax collector Matthew, should have been fisticuffs. But as Pope Benedict said back in 2006, in Jesus' calling the first apostles, "It was people who interested him, not social classes and labels." He added, "This is clearly a lesson for us who are often inclined to accentuate differences and even contrasts, forgetting that in Jesus Christ we are given the strength to get the better of our continual conflicts."

- To live this retreat well, it's key for us to examine the state of our discipleship, to sit at Jesus the Master's feet as zealous students and let him form us like he formed the Twelve. Many of the issues that plague the priesthood begin when priests forget that they're called, like every one of the baptized, to holiness, to be a faithful follower, to keep all the commandments out of love for God and others, to hang on Jesus' words, to become true Good Samaritans, to practice what the Lord has sent us to preach. Many of the issues also begin when we fail to relate to each other as fellow disciples, strengthening each other's faith by the fire of our own, rejoicing at the other's spiritual gifts given for the building up of the Church, and helping each other stay on the narrow way when we notice that a brother is beginning to drift or is lost. Just like Jesus called the 12 not to be 12 independent students but to form a college, so he's called each of us, at this time, in this place, to be with him and with each other, conscious of the fact that we need each other just as much as our bodies need eyes, hands and feet.
- The third thing we learn from today's feast is about the apostolate. After choosing the 12, Jesus named them "apostles," literally "those sent." They were to become his ambassadors, his envoys, in spreading his kingdom, in heralding the Good News. In the Psalm today, we prayed, "Their message goes out through all the earth," and we know that through 11 of these 12 men, Christ's message did radiate throughout the ancient world. They couldn't keep the message in. They were impelled to share Jesus, and his words, and the joy of the Christian life with others. They would walk for months to far off territories. Imagine what the Lord could do with all of us in this chapel in the much smaller territory of southwestern Louisiana! Imagine what the apostles could have done with the resources we have at our disposal, not just our education, but our cars, our planes, our phones, our media. Today's feast at the beginning of a retreat is a chance for us to be renewed in the apostolic zeal with which SS. Simon and Jude crisscrossed the world.
- The fourth thing to ponder today is the fact that they were martyrs. They were effective in proclaiming the faith because they were willing to die for it, they were willing to proclaim it even when it made others uncomfortable to the point of homicidal rage. They were willing to follow Jesus along the path of the grain of wheat. They were willing to lose their lives so as to save it. They were prepared to pick up their Cross each day and be crucified upon it. They recognized, as Jesus himself taught them, that they were, in the final analysis, not cursed but blessed to be persecuted, reviled and hated because of him. A couple of months ago, Pope Francis went to South Korea where he beatified 124 Korean martyrs and used the occasion to embolden Koreans and the whole world in our Christian faith. He said there, "Soon after the first seeds of faith were planted in this land, the martyrs and the Christian community had to choose between following Jesus or the world. They had heard the Lord's warning that the world would hate them because of him (Jn 17:14); they knew the cost of discipleship. ... They were willing to make great sacrifices and let themselves be stripped of whatever kept them from Christ – possessions and land, prestige and honor – for they knew that Christ alone was their true treasure. So often we today can find our faith challenged by the world, and in countless ways we are asked to compromise our faith, to water down the radical demands of the Gospel and to conform to the spirit of this age. Yet the martyrs call out to us to put Christ first and to see all else in this world in relation to him and his eternal Kingdom. They challenge us to think about what, if anything, we ourselves would be willing to die for." What are we willing to die for? Are we prepared to die to

ourselves, to the old Adam in us, so that Christ may live? Are we prepared to pay the supreme sacrifice for him who paid the supreme sacrifice for us? The apostles effectively preached the Gospel because it was obvious that the words they were proclaiming, they believed, were worth living for and worth dying for. Our apostolic effectiveness is likewise dependent on this type of *martyrion*, this witness, this body language, which is meant to be the most eloquent homily we'll ever preach.

- And the last thing today's feast of the two apostles teaches us is about the power of intercession. St. Jude is most famous among Catholics not because of the letter ascribed to him, not because of any particular apostolic feats. It's because of his prayer as the patron of hopeless causes. This devotion began because pilgrims to his original tomb in Syria, before it was translated to Rome, received answers to their least likely prayers. St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Bridget of Sweden both had experiences in prayer that led them to promote devotion to St. Jude as the patron of the impossible. We'll never know why in God's wisdom St. Jude, and not St. Simon or St. Mary of Bethany or someone else has been the conduit through whose intercession God has worked so many wonders in response to prayer, but the larger point is that God wants all of us to be intercessors. He wants us to pray for people, especially for those entrusted to us and those who entrust to us their prayers. St. John Paul II said that the Christian life is meant to be distinguished above all by the "art of prayer" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*). He instructed us to pray without ceasing, banging on the door of God like the importune widow before the judge or the neighbor seeking bread. This is one of the most beautiful, and most important aspects, of our life as Christians and our ministry as priests, and something that truly gives meaning to our faithful recitation of the liturgy of the hours.
- Pope Benedict said of our patron, St. John Vianney, that he was the example of "an existence made prayer." And St. John Vianney was an incredible intercessor. He knew that if God the Father in a sense obeyed him in the words of consecration bringing God the Son from heaven to earth, if God trusted him enough to give him the ability to loose people from their sins, then everything else he could ask for would be small in comparison. And so he would take his prayers to the altar. "When I am at Mass, I hold the good God," he said. "What can he refuse me?" When people would ask him to pray for them, he would often reply, "Tomorrow after the Mass, maybe I will be able to respond to you," because he would take that intention to the Lord and say it to him as he held him in his hands after the consecration. He would even, on occasion, pray with humble piety when people had asked him to pray for a loved one who had just died, seek to exchange God the Father's Son whom he was holding in his hands for the soul of that person if it be in Purgatory. In a similar way, we are all called with St. Jude, with St. John Vianney, to be intercessors, to bring the petitions of so many to Christ just like Mary brought the needs of the young couple in Cana.
- Today as we prepare together to celebrate Mass, we bring all of the prayers entrusted to us, and we pray also with perseverance for each other, that on this great feast day the Lord will renew each of us in gratitude for his prayerfully calling us, that we will grow in holiness as his disciples, in zeal as his apostles, in courage as martyrs whether white or red, and in constant prayer for the needs of those entrusted to us and of the Church. SS. Simon and Jude were present during the Last Supper when Jesus took bread and wine into his hands and totally changed it into himself. They were present when Jesus said, "Do this in memory of me." And that's precisely what they did, celebrating the Mass in imitation of the reverence with which Jesus celebrated that first Eucharist. Our own ordination, of course, can be traced through the imposition of hands all the way back to the the Upper Room, to Saints Simon and Jude and the other apostles and to what the Lord himself did for them as he consecrated them within his own consecration. We ask that same Lord whose command we're about to follow and whose living memory we're about to embrace to renew us today in the priestly call we've received through the imposition of hands, so that through us, as through the apostles we venerate, his message may go out through all the earth and one day we, with those he has entrusted to us, may come to experience eternal friendship in that kingdom in which SS. Simon and Jude and all the saints now rejoice.