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OLQP

April 20, 2008, *Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time*

The Easter stories are all about people finally “getting it.” Thomas as he probes the hands and side of Jesus. Peter as he leads his friends out of the upper room and lifts their fear. Philip understanding the relationship between Jesus and his Father. And, the early leaders realizing that the widows were neglected, so they needed helpers to build the Church. The leaders just couldn’t do it themselves. It is consoling to know that these stars of our faith took some time to get it; after all they had the benefit of having Jesus right there with them, a pretty big benefit it seems to me.

I am wondering if we give ourselves the time to get it--when it comes to our faith. I am also wondering whether these past few days of hosting the pope in our neighborhood has helped us to get it, at least when it comes to understanding a few important things about the Church. I would like to highlight three. We are big, we are one, and we need to be stretched to grow.

First things first. Like any growing group of people, problems increase when your numbers increase. We see this in the first reading. A serious problem emerges: Widows are being neglected. I don’t know the size of the Church at that point, but I am pretty sure it wasn’t the one-billion-plus that we now number. Do we have our problems? Absolutely. To think otherwise is worse than naïve. And, to think that there are simple solutions is mindless naivete. I think the example of a young newly-married couple serves here. They do great as it is just the two of them. Then, a child comes, maybe another or two more. Then, the in-laws start showing up. Clearly, life gets a little more complicated when more people come to the table.

Just as the early Church needed to come together to decide how to resolve the problem of the widows of the newer, non-Jewish members members being neglected, we too are called to see how all of our members are being treated. Are some of us eating better than others? Do some of our children get better educations than others? Do some among us have greater influence than others, while others are marginalized or even ignored? As we the Church gets bigger, so do our problems. Yet, this doesn’t mean that we are not healthy or that we lack wisdom. Maybe it means we just lack some collective patience as we move closer to solutions around our growing problems.

We are one. The past few days have seen incredibly different colors of people speaking different languages as we gathered in a baseball park to pray, or to line streets to say, “Welcome,” as our leader came to our home. Our differences could not be more obvious, neither could our unity. My friends with four children frequently report the challenge of getting their four children to Mass on Sunday. Yet, forty-thousand-plus people gathered in an awe-evoking reverence to pray just this Thursday. Something tells me that those gathered weren’t fans of Pope Benedict as much as they were committed to the Gospel and the God who inspires it. I am not certain that they all agree with the pope on every last teaching or opinion, but they all agree that Jesus Christ is Lord, that the Eucharist is

our central identity, that every person has a dignity that must be respected, and that unity is more graced than division.

Yesterday, at my house, I led a retreat day for OLQP's GLFF (Gay, Lesbian, Family, and Friends) group, a collection who frequently struggles with the words of Pope Benedict. Almost to a person, each spoke of their love for the Church, respect for the office of the pope, and a hope that we are indeed moving closer to call of God. They used words like "the Spirit really is leading us," "my faith is larger than anyone teaching or issue," and "I have hope that God will take us where we need to go." They grew more at ease with asking questions TOGETHER, with each other and with Pope Benedict.

Finally, we need to be stretched in order to grow. Like the GLFF members of our parish, were stretched by the pope's visit, I think the pope himself was stretched by visiting with us. His visit with five survivors of priest sexual abuse had to be hard. Sitting with, talking with, and praying with real people who were really violated in the innocence of their youth had to stretch his heart in a way that had not happened when he read about it or was told about it in reports from his staff members in the Vatican. I believe that the pope will be a better pastor for having had the pastoral experience of simply talking and praying with five people who have suffered and survived the cancer of sexual abuse that was caused by priests and covered up by his brother bishops. And, I think we can become better Christians if we let ourselves be challenged and stretched by some of exhortations that the pope offered while he was here:

- To welcome the immigrants into our land
- To be less materialistic
- To be more supportive of family and married life
- To remember Jesus and the poor in our daily lives and our business practices
- To pray
- To forgive

Of course, there are more, and maybe we can take into our lives the challenges that stretch us the most. Like the pope had to experience some unsettling discomfort, where can we experience some unsettling discomfort to grow more fully into the person we are called to be?

I close with a small clip on stretching our lives by an artist, Brian Grazer.

*I was forty-five years old when I decided to learn how to surf.*

*Picture the scene. The North Shore of Oahu. The toughest, most competitive surfing spot on the planet. Fourteen foot swells. Twenty tattooed locals. And me, five feet, eight inches of abject terror. What will get me first, I wondered, the next big wave or the guy to my right with the tattoo on his chest that reads RIP.*

*The say life is tough enough. But I guess I like to make things difficult on myself, because I do that all the time. Every day. On purpose. That's because I believe in disrupting my comfort zone.*

*Over the last thirty years, I've produced more than fifty movies and twenty television series. I'm successful and, in my business pretty well-known. I'm a guy who could retire to the golf course tomorrow, where the worst that could happen is that my Bloody Mary*

*is watered down. So why do I continue to subject myself to this sort of thing? The answer is simple. Disrupting my comfort zone, bombarding myself with challenging people and situations, this is the best way I know to keep growing. And to paraphrase a biologist I once met, if you're not growing, you're dying. So maybe I'm not the best surfer on the North Shore. But that's okay. The discomfort, the uncertainty, the physical and mental challenge I get from it—all the things that too many of us spend our time and energy trying to avoid—they're precisely the things that keep me in the game. (Brian Grazer in *This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women*, Holt Publishing, New York, 2007)*

Church, how are we letting Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life, stretch us?