

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A – May 3, 2026 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of Saint Paul, Birmingham, AL – 7:15, 8:30, and 11:00am Sunday Masses – 925 words

We are used to hearing this gospel read at funerals – and the Lord’s image of the many rooms or dwelling places of his Father’s house, then, is usually interpreted in a way that favors the deceased, indicating that Christ has prepared a room for him or her in heaven, too. Read in this way, it is a hopeful passage and certainly opportune for a funeral setting. But that does not seem to be the context in which the Church gives us this passage for reflection today.

Indeed, we are challenged to consider the meaning of the phrase, “Father’s house”. And our mind goes back to the scene of the finding of the Child Jesus in the temple (the fifth Joyful Mystery). Luke’s gospel tells us that Christ, aged 12, said to Mary and Joseph when they found him, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” The temple was the center of right worship for God’s chosen people. And Jesus further identifies it as the house of the Father.

But from there, the gospels teach us that Christ himself is the new temple. All the physical realities of the Old Testament find their spiritual fulfillment in him. Whereas there once was a great temple in Jerusalem, impressive and imposing, decorated with costly votive offerings and a source of national pride, now his own body – and those united to it – would form a temple or *locus* of divine worship built of “living stones”, holy and acceptable to God the Father.

Saint Peter alluded to this in the second reading, and to cement the connection with worship, he speaks of the concept of priesthood. In fact, he said that all of us, through Christ, are priests. He is teaching on the common “priesthood of believers” that we all share through baptism. Priesthood, in God’s plan, is connected with true worship and with sacrifice. We know that in Christ, we offer to God not something external to us, but our very selves.

But something else we learn about in the scriptures is that worship is not accepted by God except from approved sources. In the book of Leviticus, the sons of Aaron, in a moment of zeal, went to offer incense at the altar – and were struck dead. They were not approved by God to do so; they had overstepped their bounds. Whereas through baptism, we are all “qualified” by God to offer him fitting worship through union with Christ and his acceptable self-offering.

Yes, through Jesus and in union with his own self-offering, we offer ourselves to the Father. So when Christ says that in his Father’s house there are many dwelling places, he is speaking not of a future reality in heaven only – although that interpretation has its place and, we could say, its “use” in terms of funerals and the like. No, he speaks of a present reality, which is of the Church. In the Church, God’s assembly of chosen people, there is a place for all.

This is why we Catholics go to church every Sunday and Holy Day, regardless of where we are: because in each Catholic church, we are at home in the house of God our Father. Our worship is not limited to our local congregation or even to our local language. Baptism overcomes these divisions and is effectively a passport to right worship even when we are otherwise a guest or know not what is being said: we always have access to the Father’s house.

The first reading, then, puts a fine point on our considerations, for we know that the formal worship of Christ’s Church is not unstructured or unregulated – as was the case with the two poor men, whom I mentioned before, who ultimately died for approaching the altar in a disorderly way. No, Christ’s Church has a hierarchy that directs and guides the right worship of God in fulfillment of his plan, so that all who are qualified to approach him may do so fittingly.

This consideration gives nuance to the concept of the sacrament of “Holy Orders”, which is comprised of bishops, priests, and deacons. While all the baptized may worship the Father through Christ, yet those who are in Holy Orders have the task of bringing a right and godly order to that endeavor. Each, according to his rank, whether having the oversight of a bishop, the sanctifying office of a priest, or the service of charity of a deacon, is part of a “hierarchy”.

That word “hierarchy” itself is meaningful, for in its original sense, it means, in fact, “a holy order”. Those in Holy Orders bring order to the Father’s house. We are all, through baptism, able to approach him fittingly. But we do so in cooperation with and guided by those who have been specifically set apart for this task: the bishops, priests, and deacons of the Church. Yes, we all offer ourselves to God. But we do not do so indiscriminately or in a disorderly way.

Therefore, in a few moments, I, standing at the altar, will say, “Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father”. And each prayer at this Holy Mass is effectively addressed to God the Father, through Christ our Lord – or through him in the unity of the Holy Spirit. For we are in the Father’s house, where he has prepared a place for everyone. Which is to say that, through baptism, we are united with Jesus Christ in the true worship of God the Father.