

2nd Sunday of Easter

5-1-11

Isn't the Sunday after Easter wonderful? The flowers still look terrific—but parking is a lot easier! And, at most churches, there's more room in the pews a week after Easter...lots more. Too bad, because people would meet Thomas the Apostle. And Thomas is a reminder of how difficult it is to believe in Jesus if we haven't seen him with our own eyes. "Blessed are they who have not seen and have believed." "Although you have not seen him, you love him."

(pause) When I grew up, it would have been difficult not to believe. My parents were Catholic, three out of four grand-parents were Catholic, the neighborhood was Catholic, and I went to Catholic school, played with Catholic kids. Even the President was Catholic. 75% of Catholics attended Mass weekly. Believing was as natural as breathing. I inherited faith, just like blue eyes and being vertically challenged.

Those days are long gone. Faith is not inherited; it is not guaranteed, just because a parent is Catholic. Now, faith is a choice. For all the accountants in the assembly, here are some numbers:

++one in ten Americans is a former Catholic

++of people raised Catholic in the US, 30% have left the faith completely, and another 30% almost never take part in the life of the Church.

++the number of Catholics in our country remains the same—about 62 million—only because of the Catholic faith of Latino immigrants.

++the number of Catholics in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati decreases by a few thousand every year.

In fairness, I should add two things: most Protestant and other Christian churches have fared even worse. And, almost 20% of Americans now say they are completely secular, have no religious affiliation at all, or are atheist. And St. Bernadette Parish right now bucks the trend: the number of registered households here continues to rise, and now are 680.

Believing is now a smorgasbord. New, independent churches spring up, some of them with coffee bars, live bands, and multimedia presentations. I Googled "religions" and got 40,500,000 results. Google "spirituality" if you have the desire to visit 63,400,000 sites.

One of them will be something called "Sheilaism." Sheila was a woman interviewed for a 1985 book called *Habits of the Heart*. She says,

"I believe in God. I am not a fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way." It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice...My own Sheilaism...is just trying to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other."

Jesus does not condemn Thomas for his struggles to believe, because Thomas is a symbol of all the generations to come: we are trying to believe in Jesus and follow him, even though we don't see either. And there are plenty of religious choices. So I don't judge people too harshly either. What is clear is this: It's no longer adequate simply to say "I'm a Catholic." We have to do some thinking, some reading, and some praying to have an adult faith of

our own. Religion that is simply a habit will be swept away, like a shed in a tornado.

And we need this final word: God loves all people, including those who are elsewhere or nowhere on Sunday morning; and Jesus is with them.