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October 23, 2011

Mission Sunday

Greece is in the news a lot these days, and not for happy reasons. But Greece was one of the very first countries to accept Christianity, and St. Paul wrote five letters there, among them today's second reading, from a letter to the believers in Thessalonica, which to this day is a city in northern Greece.

In the year 125 AD, there was a pagan philosopher in Athens. His name was Aristides. The Christians in Greece were being persecuted bigtime, and Aristides wrote a letter to Emperor Hadrian to defend the new believers. Listen to what this non-believing observer wrote of these early followers of Jesus:

"Christians love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If one of them has something, he gives freely to the one who has nothing, without boasting. If they see a stranger, Christians take him home and are happy as though he were a real brother. They don't consider themselves brothers in the usual sense, but brothers instead through the Spirit of God. And if they hear that one of them is in jail or persecuted for professing the name of their redeemer, they all give him what he needs and, if it is possible to redeem him, they set him free. And if there is among them any poor or naked and if they have no spare food, they fast two or three days in order to supply the needy...They live with much care, justly and soberly as the Lord their God commanded...and they do not declare in the ears of the multitude the kind deeds they do but are careful that no one should take notice of them...Truly this is a new people and there is something divine in them."

That was the Church in Greece some 75 years after St. Paul preached in cities like Athens, Corinth, and Thessalonica. And that, my friends, is a better way to live! No wonder the Church grew! Aristides himself became a Christian—not because of wonderful

buildings, exciting preaching, or stunning music. He became a believer because *being a Christian was a better way to live*.

No wonder St. Paul could write to the believers in Thessalonica: "you became a model for all the believers [in all of Greece]...in every place your faith in God has gone forth."

And that is why we have Mission Sunday and why the Catholic Church is by its essence missionary: because Christianity offers a better way to live and because every person on earth deserves a chance to accept a Christian way of life.

Few if us will be missionary preachers like St. Paul in Greece, or the Comboni Missionaries in Africa, but we can all be witnesses. Our lives can be a silent homily—on the highway, at work, with our family members, at school....by our patience, by our forgiveness, by our generosity, by our humility. We may be the only Bible someone will ever read, the only church they will ever enter. And perhaps a modern-day Aristides will look at us and say, "Truly *this is a new people and there is something divine in them.*"

But if we plan to try to change the world, the best way to do that is to change ourselves. And so, this Mass—every Mass—is a wonderful time to pray, "Jesus, you are here. Transform my life, whatever that means for me. May I love you with everything I am. And may I love others as You love them. Amen."

