September 23, 2013

Mass of Commissioning for *Arise Together in Christ!* Group Leaders

I heard a story about a young woman who wanted to go to college, but her heart sank when she read the question on the application form that asked, "Are you a leader?"

Being both honest and conscientious, she wrote, "No," and returned the application, expecting the worst.

About a month later she received a letter from the college. It said, "Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower."

As I look around the chapel today, I see that almost all those new leaders are here. Wow!

If the one follower is here and you feel a little overwhelmed, we would understand if you want to leave.

I’m sorry Sister Linda, you have to stay!

Seriously, I am truly in awe of you who are here for this gathering. Sister Linda told me that all of you have volunteered for a leadership role for our upcoming *Arise Together in Christ!* Program.

Not only that, but I have spoken with persons who have offered to host and facilitate more than one small group.

The response across the diocese has been truly amazing. And the anticipation of people in their desire to participate in is growing as we get closer to the start-up date for Arise!

I’m sure that all of you would agree that this opportunity for us to come together to share our faith with each other could not come at a better time, when are faced with so many challenges in our diocese and throughout the Church.

With that in mind, let’s pause for a moment and pray for all victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and their families.

I am mindful that many people don’t know what to think of, but I can tell you in my meetings with victims and survivors and their families, many of them are struggling to find their faith.

And many have told me that they welcome prayers, and understanding from all of us.

So let me make this suggestion. We all know a lot more people who should be part of the spiritual and pastoral renewal that we can experience as we *Arise Together in Christ!*

As leaders of this process, I am asking and suggesting that whenever you prepare for or participate in one of the Arise activities, say a prayer for those who struggle to have faith at this time.

Maybe you know a person or family that is directly impacted. Maybe you know a person or a family who are struggling with their faith because they are angry, disappointed, and confused. Keep them close to you in prayer during this time.

Which brings me to a reflection that I want to share with you, especially in view of today’s Scripture readings, especially Mark’s Gospel.

The Gospel reading contains a story within a story. The larger story is that the disciples were accompanying Jesus on a journey through Galilee.

Jesus initiated the journey for two reasons, to continue teaching the disciples about the Gospel, which literally means Good News. Jesus also wanted to prepare them for the ultimate destination for this journey.

That ultimate destination is the Kingdom of Heaven. That’s good news for sure.

But the way to get there is the way of the cross. That is really bad news.

But there is more good news. Jesus tells the disciples, including us that after he is put to death, he will *Arise!*

And there is even more good news. Everyone who has faith in him will *Arise!*

But, there is more bad news. St. Mark tells us in the Gospel reading they did not understand what Jesus was saying, and they were afraid to question him.

As I already mentioned, there are so many who do not believe, do not understand, and who are afraid or otherwise unable to ask Jesus to help them understand and experience the truth, the great mystery of our faith.

Which brings us to the story within the story.

It often happens when people find themselves in a situation where they feel lost, afraid, lacking knowledge and insight to guide them, for some strange reason, they will talk about it only with other people who feel lost, afraid, and lacking in insight.

St. Mark tells us that’s exactly what happened to the disciples after they heard Jesus speaking about the mission that includes his passion, death and resurrection. They did not understand the good news part.

The only thing that registered was Jesus was going to die, so they began to ask who is going to be first? Who is going to be the leader to take over after Jesus is gone?

It sounds so callous. Jesus is not even dead and they are discussing, perhaps even arguing over who is going to take over.

It’s reassuring to learn in Mark’s Gospel today, that Jesus was listening in on that conversation. And it should be a source of hope for all of us to be mindful that the Lord Jesus is listening in on all the conversations going on right now.

These conversations have gone on in every time and place since Jesus was in Galilee with the disciples. They are conversations about faith.

Did you notice that the disciples’ had lots of questions and they struggled for answers, even though the answer to all their questions was right there in front of them?

It’s none other than Jesus, who is the eternal God made flesh. He became fully human in all things but sin. That means even Jesus knows what it means to have questions, to search for answers, to be afraid if there is no one to lead.

As we are about to begin the journey to *Arise Together in Christ!*, Jesus offers to all of us the same model of leadership that he shared with the 12 apostles.

He says, “If anyone wishes to be first, if anyone wishes to be a leader, he or shall be the last of all and the servant of all.”

Jesus says that a leader will have the courage and conviction of an apostle and the innocence of a child who is open to seeking the truth without filtering it through other preoccupations which can prevent us from recognizing the truth that will truly set us free.

Jesus did not criticize the apostles for a discussion. He corrected their thinking that they needed to come up with the answers on their own.

Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, is the way, the truth, and the life, which means eternal life.

In our small groups we are journeying together along the way in the Arise process, with the Lord Jesus always present before us.

During the *Arise* process in our small groups we have the opportunity to share the truth, which includes the honest questions and answers about our Catholic faith.

Just wait until we begin to share our faith. Like today’s Gospel message, there will be plenty of stories within the story.

And during the *Arise* process in our small groups we encounter in each other the life that we share in Christ.

It is refreshing to hear the Lord Jesus explain to the 12 disciples that he is not abandoning them. The same Jesus will be present to all of you and those who gather with you in small groups all over the diocese.

It is the same Jesus whom we encounter in the sacraments, including this celebration of the Holy Eucharist in which we give praise and thanks to God for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who never stops leading us on the path to eternal life.

Thank you for being part of this opportunity and gift from God!

Please know that I continue to pray for you and for everyone who is participating and all those who will be impacted one by one as they hear from you and the others what is going on in this journey of faith.

One college applicant was honest in saying that she was a follower. We are all followers and we are all leaders as we walk together without worrying about who is in charge.

It was, is, and always will be the Lord Jesus who takes the lead. He loves us so much that he works through us to accomplish so much good, as we *Arise Together in Christ!*