

Homily for the 5th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

February 8, 2026

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Isaiah 58:7-10 (Then your light shall break forth like the dawn.)

Responsory: Psalm 112 (The just man is a light in darkness to the upright.)

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 (Paul's proclamation rests on the power of God, not human wisdom.)

Gospel: Matthew 5:13-16 (Your light must shine before others.)

We Christians should always pay special attention to gospel passages like this, in which Jesus speaks to his disciples about what role they should play in the world and how they should carry out their mission as disciples and apostles. We should recognize that everything he says to *them* also applies to *us*. So, in this case, his exhortation to them should motivate us, and his warnings to them should give us pause.

Jesus begins his instruction by telling his disciples that they are “the salt of the earth.” That sounds encouraging, doesn’t it? I think all of us strive to be a positive influence in the world. We certainly want to be a force for good, and not for evil, for all the people with whom we come in contact. That seems to be what Jesus is implying by that phrase, “salt of the earth.” Salt, when used properly to season food, doesn’t stand out as a distinct flavor, but it makes all the other flavors come alive. So it should be with us. We shouldn’t seek to be the center of attention, but rather, we should want to be facilitators who lift up others and help them to be the best that they can be. All of us are capable of being “salt of the earth” in that sense. We just need to be consistently *other*-centered, rather than *self*-centered.

On the other hand, Jesus’ warning about salt going flat is a bit disconcerting. None of us wants to think of ourselves as so useless to the Lord that we will be “thrown out and trampled underfoot.” Even more troubling, salt that has gone flat *was* useful at one time. This is not an image to describe one who was never really committed to the Lord. The salt that goes flat is a disciple who starts out highly motivated and then loses interest somewhere along the way. In other words, Jesus appears to be pointing out the danger of *complacency* in the Christian life. This is the perfect week for us to confront that issue, as the Synod theme for this week is our “spiritual and liturgical life.” Personal prayer, liturgical prayer, and the sacraments of the Church are some of our most powerful tools to ward off complacency and maintain an active spirit of Christian charity. There is no reason for our salt to lose its flavor, so long as we remain attentive to the things that keep us spiritually grounded and engaged with our faith community.

Jesus also tells his disciples that they are the “light of the world.” That sounds quite similar to the salt metaphor. Both images clearly imply that Jesus means for us to have a positive impact on other people. But, the light metaphor can convey a wider array of meanings, because light can serve so many different functions. It can reveal, inspire, guide or expose. Most of us are more comfortable being certain types of light, and far less comfortable being other types.

The Prophet Isaiah makes it sound very easy. He says, “If you remove from your midst oppression, false accusation and malicious speech; if you bestow your bread on the hungry and satisfy the afflicted; then light shall rise for you in the darkness, and the gloom shall become for you like midday.” So, according to Isaiah, our light will shine primarily through *acts of mercy and kindness*, and through *avoidance of injustice and malice*. Being that sort of light seems within the reach of every Christian. But other types are not so simple.

For example, the Synod theme last week was “catechesis.” All of us were encouraged to think about how we teach and live the Catholic faith, and how our words and actions contribute to the faith development of people of all ages. Faith formation is a process of *enlightenment*. Those who have the light of faith — as well as the light of knowledge and wisdom and experience — must find ways to share their light with those who are searching for it. It can be a daunting challenge for Catholic parents trying to raise their children in the faith, or godparents trying to have a positive influence on their godchildren, or sponsors trying to guide and accompany adult catechumens or candidates for full communion. Sometimes we might feel inadequate for the task. We might wonder, “Do I really have anything worth sharing?” The answer is, “Yes, we all do.” We must find the confidence to speak about our relationship with God and what it means to us. Our light *must shine*.

However, being a light of the world carries with it a danger that is not implied in the salt metaphor. Salt is meant to be inconspicuous; light is meant to stand out and be noticed. As Jesus said, you don’t light a lamp and then hide it under a bushel basket. You put it on a lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. But, if people see our light, won’t they also see our *defects*, which we would rather keep hidden? How can we serve as role models of the Christian faith when we know that there are many things about ourselves that are *not* worthy of imitation? We want to uplift and inspire others, not disappoint or even scandalize them. The knowledge of our own hypocrisy can sometimes cause us to hunker down under that bushel basket and hide. We must have the humility to accept our shortcomings, while also acknowledging the light that is within us.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of being the light of the world is our call to be a *prophetic voice*, which promotes truth and justice. It’s easier, and much safer, just to demonstrate our values by the way we live. But, sometimes the Lord calls us to be a light that exposes the darkness to scrutiny, pointing out what is wrong in our politics, in our government’s policies, in the conduct of our public officials, in our culture, etc. We all know how unpopular prophets have been throughout history, especially when God commanded them to speak hard truths to their own people, to open their eyes and expose the error of their ways. At times, we must summon the courage to proclaim the truth, whether it is convenient or inconvenient, but always with love and humility.

If we really want to be an effective “light of the world,” we need to remember who the *true source* of that light is. When people look at us and see the light of truth, justice, wisdom and virtue, they are seeing the *light of Christ* shining in us and through us. May we give glory to God by letting *his light* shine for all to see!