GOSPEL READING – MT 13:44-52
Jesus said to his disciples:
“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field,
which a person finds and hides again,
and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.
Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls.
When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it.
Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea,
which collects fish of every kind.
When it is full they haul it ashore and sit down to put what is good into buckets.
What is bad they throw away. Thus it will be at the end of the age.
The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous
and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.

“Do you understand all these things?” They answered, “Yes.”
And he replied, “Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven
is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.”

HOMILY

“Do you understand all these things?” And they answered, “Yes.”

In case you haven’t heard, the Bills are back in town. You know, back at St. John Fisher
for summer training camp. If you were around back in 2000, when the Bills moved their
training camp to the Rochester area, and in particular, to the Fisher campus, you might
remember that it was a really big occasion around here – the local companies went along with
the hype, and many played it up as much as they could. My company had a raffle where 50 or
so entrants were selected to go to the camp for an afternoon – it was a workday afternoon, so
naturally, almost everybody entered their name. I put my name in, I had a glimmer of interest
in football, and my name was selected, so I went and had a great time, meeting some of the
players, getting autographs, freebie paraphernalia … like this hat – for those of you in the back,
it says here, “Bills Training Camp 2000.” I became more of a Bills’ fan after that experience,
and I even know just a little bit more about football now. Now, one thing I do know is that
football players, like those in every other sport, require knowledge and understanding of the
game, knowledge and understanding of the strengths and weaknesses for themselves, their
teammates and their opponents, to be competitive, to even have a chance of winning. They
have to live football, breathe football, even love football, and sacrifice a lot in their lives for
several months, in order to even have a chance at that yearly goal, that pearl of great price in sports, the Super Bowl ring. Can you imagine missing practice to go play golf, or partying too much, or just sleeping in? Can you imagine after a day of hard practice recently, Coach Doug Marrone saying to his players, “Do you understand this sport, do you understand the playbook, do you understand where you need to improve, and help others on your team improve, and what you need to do when you play the Giants in that first pre-season game, which, by the way, is only one week away?” Can you imagine Marcell or another player saying, “maybe,” … or, even worse … “no.”

“Do you understand all these things?” And they answered, “Yes.”

A week or so ago, I received a form letter in my parish mailbox that I’d like to tell you about. Because of its format, I know I’m not breaking any confidence in telling you about it. It was actually called a Resource Guide, consisting of a one page intro accompanied by a seven-page list of books which essentially compared Roman Catholicism with Biblical Christianity, and not in a favorable manner. It came from “ex-Catholic for Christ” – and I have to say that term unsettled me for a few moments, in more ways than one. The term reminded me that “former Catholics” are considered to be the 2nd largest religious group in the nation. It brought to mind some co-workers, some friends, and even some relatives who no longer call themselves Catholic – maybe you could say the same thing about some people that you know. And it also brought to mind the many parents and grandparents who have commented and raised the question, both at public gatherings and directly to me, what can they do to bring their children or grandchildren back to their faith? Returning to this letter I received, what could someone say to “ex-Catholic for Christ” to bring him or her back to the faith? Well, the intro to the letter was basically a few comments about how Catholics got it all wrong – how we believe in the wrong things – and it highlighted what it called the biggest offense, what the Catholic Church teaches about salvation. Salvation, you know, entry into the Kingdom of heaven, this pearl of great price, and this treasure that Jesus explicitly refers to in the first two parables in today’s Gospel reading. The letter then referenced several passages from St. Paul to back up its claims. But, as is often the case, there’s more to the story. After all, Catholics also read those same passages and believe in them. And if “ex-Catholic for Christ” had truly searched further for the Catholic answer, if he or she truly understood what the Catholic faith teaches, and why … if
“ex-Catholic” sacrificed just a bit more time to look for that pearl of great price, then maybe he or she might not have left the faith.

“Do you understand all these things?” And they answered, “Yes.”

Although certainly not the only reason, many Catholics sadly leave the faith because they don’t understand it. So, why should we care what “ex-Catholic for Christ” and others like him or her do? Why not just let them go on with their lives, maybe they’ll be better Christians – well, I’ve heard some people actually say that, and maybe you have also heard that said. After all, since Vatican 2, we have a greater appreciation for the similarities between us Catholics and our Protestant brothers and sisters in Christ. Many of us try to look more for what unites us as Christians, and less for what divides us. That’s really great – we pray, as Jesus did, “that all may be one,” and there are many steps being taken along that ecumenical path. And we’re not getting into a discussion about what Catholics and Protestants believe, consider that to be part of your homework. There are many reasons that the divide is there between us, and among all of the Protestant faith traditions. But, there are many misconceptions about what the Church teaches, about what we Catholics believe – misconceptions even among Catholics! I believe that the best word to describe all of this is – confusion! Confusion that may be brought about by misinterpretation, by ignorance, by pride, maybe even by sloth – my good brothers and sisters in Christ, these are NOT gifts of the Holy Spirit. Can you even imagine what Coach Marrone would say if his players come up to him just before next week’s game and said that they’re confused, that they don’t know the plays from the playbook, for whatever reason, and they don’t have the ambition to put their heart into the game?

“Do you understand all these things?” And they answered, “Yes.”

As Catholics, we believe that we have the fullness of faith – the path that Christ laid out for us, and continues to lay out for us through the Church He founded, to find that treasure, that pearl of great price, the Kingdom of Heaven. A path that comprises both the old and the new. A path that we believe is continually guided by the Holy Spirit over the many potholes and bumps encountered along the way. In his Apostolic Exhortation, The Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis reminds us that “the joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew.” And, he then encourages the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, to share it
with others. That’s our role, our vocation, in a nutshell, as Catholics, to get that pearl, which is infinitely more valuable than a super bowl ring: **to understand, to accept, to share.**

And so, my brothers and sisters in Christ, please consider the following three actions – some may sound like broken records from some of my past homilies, but they are just that important! Of the three, try to act on one this week – maybe set it as a goal. First, **understand** your faith. Learning about your faith doesn’t end at Confirmation, doesn’t end as a teen or twenty-something. It never ends – there are always areas to learn more about. Football players always have new plays to learn, new faces to deal with. A doctor, or anyone, doesn’t stop learning when he or she gets their degree or certificate – it’s a constant and never-ending learning process. Pray to the Holy Spirit to help you discern an area of your faith that you need to know more about, or don’t fully agree with, and pursue it. Look on the Lighthouse CD rack in the Narthex for suggestions – I understand that in just the past year, several hundred CD’s have been taken. They are great for car travels. Listen to the Catholic Radio Station during their late afternoon call-in times. Find and read some good Catholic books – check out the bulletin in the next week or two for suggestions. Second – **accept** your faith and try to live it. Set a good example. Football players are always practicing – some of them even outside of game time … (that’s a joke). The practice of your faith doesn’t end at the church door. It won’t always be easy, and there will be sacrifices – remember that the merchant sold all that he had to obtain the pearl of great price. Go to church weekly, if you don’t already. Volunteer for one or more of the church ministries – there’s a variety of liturgical and service ones here, and the coordinators are always looking for help. Third – **share** your faith with others. Football players are part of a team. Be a member of Christ’s team. Coax a family member or a neighbor to come to Bible Study or a Mass with you. I got a free bus ride to the Bills camp – offer to drive the person you invite. Encourage others around you to learn more. I got a football cap to remind me of my experience, and I’ll never forget it. Hand someone a CD or a book, but be ready to answer any questions coming your way. Remember that you don’t have to have the answers, but you might want to know where to look for them.

“Do you understand all these things?” Jesus asked His disciples this question, and they answered, “Yes.” He asks us this question today – how would we answer it? How important, how valuable is this pearl of great price, this ultimate super bowl ring, to us?