

PASTORAL SECTION

HOMILETICS

Fourth Sunday of the year (Jan. 31)

Year III: Lk. 4, 21-30: Jesus rejected at Nazareth.

No Wonder

People have a penchant for the wonderful, the thrilling, the bizarre, the dramatic. The Mass Media know this very well and exploit it to the full. When Pope Paul VI came to the Philippines, the newspapers, radio and television focused on the great number of people who gathered to see and hear him, on the emotional reaction of the crowds, on the attempt to assassinate him. Amid all this fuss the message of the Pope was almost overlooked.

Today, as in the past, people prefer wonder and thrill to doctrine, involvement and commitment. The people of Nazareth were ready to accept Jesus as a wonder-worker, but were hostile to him when he presented himself as a prophet or teacher. They were eager to gape at his miracles — to say ohhhh, ahhhh, or hurrah! — but they refused to accept his message, they refused to say, "I repent", "I believe", or "I will follow you."

No wonder, no cheers. This was the attitude of the people of Nazareth. No wonder they rejected Christ, who did not want cheers but charity. No wonder they were not saved. Are we still like the people of Nazareth? Shall we, too, hustle Jesus out of town and intend to throw him down a cliff? It is useless to do this, as the Gospel story has shown.

Let us, rather, accept Jesus the Teacher. Let us follow his teachings. Concretely, let us listen to him speaking through the Pope. So

today, let us resolve to follow what Pope Paul VI said when he addressed the Asian Bishops' Conference at the University of Santo Tomas:

"We cannot keep silent. We must not lose the truth and unity of the faith. We must strive to make the faith the fundamental driving principle of the Christian life of our communities.

To this plea for the affirmation and the orthodoxy of the faith permit us to add a plea for prayer. In our day we are witnessing the decline of prayer, and you know the causes of this. Yet in favor of prayer we have two great — though different — resources: the first is the liturgical reform promoted by the recent Council . . .

The second resource of prayer is the natural inclination of the Asiatic spirit. We must honor and cultivate this deep and innate religious sense, which is the hallmark of the soul of the Eastern world. We must defend the spirituality proper to these peoples and ensure that their contact with materialistic modern secular civilization does not suffocate this spirituality."

Pope Paul VI did not perform miracles but he taught many wonderful things. Let us accept him as a teacher and prophet. In doing so, we shall accept not only the Vicar of Christ on earth, but also Jesus Christ himself.

Fifth Sunday of the year (Feb. 7)

Lk. 5, 1-11: Jesus calls the first disciples.

From Frustration To Success

Are you a frustrated lover? a frustrated businessman? a frustrated politician? a frustrated movie actor? a frustrated student leader? I do

not know what kind of frustrated person you are, but I am sure that all of us, at one time or another, have been frustrated. So we can all sympathize with Simon Peter. He was a frustrated fisherman.

All night long, Peter and his companions worked, casting their nets time and again. Each time they hauled the nets back, there were no fishes inside. It was a dejected group that washed their nets by the shore of Lake Galilee that morning when a man called Jesus got into one of the boats and taught the crowd that had gathered.

When Jesus finished teaching, he told Simon: "Push the boat out further to the deep water and you and your partners let your nets down for a catch." We who have been frustrated understand Simon very well when he answered: "We worked hard all night long, and caught nothing." However, Peter added something else. He said, "If you say so, I will let down the nets." You know the rest of the story. Peter was a frustrated fisherman, but he became a very successful fisher of men.

From frustration to success through faith. This, in brief is the Gospel story for today. It has a very important lesson for us. Many of our people are seriously frustrated in their search for a better life. Discontentment gnaws at their hearts like a cancer. Life has become more and more difficult. Promises of politicians have piled up but nothing ever came out of them. Graft and corruption have become more and more rampant. In their frustration, many people talk seriously about revolution. They mean violent, bloody revolution. They say it is the only solution to our problems.

Bloody revolution is not a Christian solution. But more and more people are inclined to favor it, because many Christians just fold their hands. Worse yet, even Christian leaders have joined the frustrated, revolution-oriented camp — if not actively, at least in spirit and attitude. This is bad. What we should do as Christians is to follow the example of Simon Peter. Christ is telling us: "Push your boat out further to the deep water . . ." Like Simon Peter, a true Christian should say: "We worked hard all night long, and caught nothing. But if you say so, I will let down the nets."

Let us have great faith in Christ and in the transforming power of the Catholic religion. Let us work hard for reforms without violence by ensuring the success of the Constitutional Convention, but if we work hard and pray, it will be like the casting down of the net at the word of Christ. It will turn our frustration into success.

Sixth Sunday of the year (Feb. 14)

Lk. 6, 17, 20-26: The Beatitudes

The Church of the Poor

There are two versions of the Beatitudes: the religion-oriented version in the gospel according to St. Matthew (5, 3-12), and the social action-oriented version that we have just read. Both versions are Christian and stress valid points. But in choosing Luke's version for today's gospel reading, the Church wants us to commit ourselves to Christian Social Action. Luke's version, not Matthew's was quoted by Pope Paul VI when he visited Tondo, the heartland of Manila's slums: "*Mapapalad ang mahirap sapagka't sa kanila ang kaharian ng langit.*"

The Pope expressed his love for the poor on the very first day of his visit to the Philippines, when he addressed the Asian Bishops' Conference. He said:

"The Church must support as best as she can the struggle against ignorance, hunger, disease and social insecurity. Taking her place in the vanguard of social action, she must bend all her efforts to support, encourage and push forward initiatives working for the full promotion of man. Since she is the witness of human conscience and of divine love for men, she must take up the defence of the poor and the weak against every form of social injustice."

The Pope wanted the Mass at the Quezon Memorial Circle to be a People's Mass. He especially wanted the poor and the workers to be near him. His homily was principally directed to them:

"To you, the poor, I have this to say: Remember that you have a supreme friend—Christ who called you blessed, the privileged inheritors of His kingdom. He personified Himself in you . . . yes, strive to raise yourselves: you have a right and duty to do so. Demand the help of a society that wishes to be called civilized. But do not curse either your lot or those who lack sensitivity, for you know that you are rich in the values of Christian patience and redemptive suffering."

To the rich, the Pope repeated Christ's warning:

"Remember how severe Christ was in your regard, when he saw you self-satisfied, inactive and selfish. And on the other hand remember how responsive and grateful he was when he found you thoughtful and generous."

Not only by words but by deeds did Pope Paul VI preach the gospel of Poverty. At the St. Joseph the Worker Foundation in Barrio Rosario, Pasig, where the Pope went after the Mass at the Quezon Circle, he broke protocol by walking among the people and greeting them. His presence there was itself a sermon. He went out of his way to inaugurate a low-cost housing project for the working class. Then, as a climax to his final day, he chose to visit a poor family in Tondo.

Moved by the Pope's words and example, the Asian Bishops resolved "to be more truly the Church of the poor." Solemnly, they said: "We must in our way of life share something of their poverty." They added: "Our own personal lives must give witness to evangelical simplicity, and no man, no matter how lowly or poor, should find it hard to come to us and find in us their brothers." Significantly, they also promised: "We will not tie our hands by compromising entanglements with the rich and the powerful in our respective countries."

With the Pope and our Bishops, let us today resolve to share in the blessedness of the poor.

Seventh Sunday of the Year (Feb. 21)

Lk. 6, 27-38: Love of enemies.

Easy Steps First

All Christians preach love of one's enemy. But how can they really practise this, when they cannot even tolerate one another? It even happens that people of the same faith, let us say, Catholic, cannot tolerate one another. A Catholic Chinese father, for example, may strongly oppose the marriage of his daughter to a Catholic Filipino young man, very well qualified except for not being a Chinese. Religious Sisters who prefer to wear lay clothes sometimes cannot look at another Sister in the proper religious habit without condemning that Sister as "old-fashioned" or "conservative". The opposite, of course, can also be the case, when a habit-wearing Sister condemns a Sister in lay clothes as being "too radical", and decides to have nothing to do with that Sister.

To practise the love of enemies, we must first cultivate certain attitudes. We must first convince ourselves that there can be unity in diversity; that what we want is unity, not uniformity. Pope Paul VI reminded us of this lesson when he told the Bishops of Asia that the Church here need not have a foreign aspect. He said:

"Just as Jesus Christ shared the condition of those who were his own, so the man of Asia can be Catholic and remain fully Asian. As we declared a year ago in Africa, if the Church must above all be Catholic, a pluralism is legitimate and even desirable in the one same Jesus Christ."

Another attitude, or spirit we must cultivate, if we are truly to love our enemies, is the spirit of ecumenism. Again, Pope Paul VI

gave us an example of this during his recent visit here. He told a gathering of non-Catholic Christians at the apostolic nunciature that, "although your communities and the Catholic Church are not as yet linked in bonds of full unity, nevertheless we are brothers." To a non-Christian group, he said: "Placed as we are at the head of a church that is called Catholic and experiences catholicity — that is to say, universality — our thoughts and our concern cannot be halted by any barrier of place, people or religion; they extend to all men.!!

It is by first mastering the easier task that we learn to master the more difficult ones. So, if we are to master the love of our enemies, let us first master open mindedness and ecumenism.

First Sunday of Lent (Feb. 28)

Lk. 4, 1-13: The Temptation of Jesus

Temptations

Temptations are always interesting. This is perhaps one reason why three Evangelists (the Synoptics) have stories about Jesus' temptation. Even the fourth Evangelist narrates temptations very similar in nature to those narrated by the Synoptics (See Jn 6, 26-34; 6,15; 7,14).

When I say "temptation", most probably you think at once of the temptations portrayed in movies and described in novels, that is, temptations to sinful sexual acts. These indeed are serious temptations that we should all strive to avoid. But there are temptations more serious than these. Jesus was never tempted to do immoral acts. But he was tempted to be materialistic, presumptuous, idolatrous and proud. The devil was too wise to even try to tempt Jesus with sins of the flesh. He knew that only people of weak character succumb to such temptations. Jesus had such a formidable character that the devil gave up the thought of attacking him from this side.

But even men of great character succumb to temptations of wealth and power. Indeed, it is materialism and the pride of people who are otherwise good, that makes our society an unchristian society. It is because people exploit their workers, corrupt government officials with their money, and grab all the land they can get, that true Christianity has been shut off from the lives of many.

There is truth in the declaration that the greatest indecency and immorality in our society today are not the "bomba" movies and the shows and happenings in nightclubs, but the exploitation of the poor by the rich and powerful, and the mockery of justice whenever the weak are involved.

As we begin the season of Lent, we are reminded to repent over our sins and ask God's grace in order to be strong against future temptations. When we say "sin" and "temptation", let us not only reject the sins and temptations that appeal to our sensual nature. Let us, even more deeply, repent over our sins of injustice and greed, over our indifference to the lot of our suffering masses, and strongly commit ourselves to the practice of true Christian love.

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