

HOMILETICS

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SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT (March 2) BEING INVOLVED

As we get nearer to Holy Week, the reading at today's Mass recalls the transfiguration of Our Lord. The passing glimpse of Who Jesus really was prepared the Apostles for the shock of seeing Him crucified. Moses and Elias, the leading persons of the Old Testament discussed with Him the trial He would undergo in Jerusalem before His glorification in the Resurrection.

Before joining Christ in glory we must pass the test of this life. We will be judged on our charity. Charity means loving men with God's own love. Charity is the love of God, come to live in a man's heart, enlarging it, ennobling it, giving it an unexpected power and capacity. It is God Who comes to live in us and wants to love through us.

The more room we make for him, the less we resist, the more will Christ, living in us, be enabled to love Himself in others.

How do we judge if our charity is Christian? Jesus told us that friendliness and natural kindness are not sufficient. "Will not the heathen do as much?" He asked. It is not until we find ourselves thinking in a way that cannot be explained naturally, or doing actions that cannot be explained in human terms, it is only then that we can say we are on the right road, and the love of God is at work in us. Charity goes beyond the obligations of family ties, beyond 'utang na loob', it includes everybody. We should love as God loves.

How does God love? Relentlessly, doggedly, unceasingly. He loves us, whether or not we are aware of it, whether or not we react to it. Even if, here and now, we couldn't care less, God loves us, awaiting a return of love from us. Never forget, He loved us first. "It is not as though we first loved God, but God first loved us." If we love men with God's love, we'll

love men first, whether or not they have qualities we like, even if naturally they are quite unattractive to us. Someone once said to Father Libermann: "If only you knew how much I hate you!" He gently replied: "If only you knew how much I love you."

Charity means much more than giving alms. It is much more than concern about individuals. It means having a heart as large as God's, taking society under your wing to reduce its inequalities, and make life more livable. This is the picture of true Christian Charity.

You've heard of the River Jordan. Jesus was baptized in it. It flows through the Holy Land. Two seas are fed by its waters. One sea is so stagnant and sulphurous that nothing lives in it or around it. It is called the Dead Sea. . . . Further back along the Jordan is another sea teeming with life. Fishermen live all round it, getting food and life from its waters. Sea-birds of all kinds get their living from it. Jesus walked by its shores, on one occasion He walked right on top of its waters. He loved this sea. He used its water as a picture of the life He came to give. He spoke of it in His parables. It is called the Sea of Galilee.

Now, what is the difference between these two seas? The Dead Sea is also fed by the Jordan. The same water as fills the Sea of Galilee pours into it. However, it does not have an outlet — no outlet at all. Its water is so stagnant that no living thing can survive in it. Nobody can derive any use or profit from that Dead Sea.

On the other hand, the Sea of Galilee, fed from the same Jordan, has an outlet. This is the only most important difference. What it receives it pours out, so its waters are always fresh, and life abounds in it.

In the world today, there are two kinds of people. There are people like the Dead Sea and people like the Sea of Galilee. Who are the Dead Sea types? These who grab and take everything they can, and give nothing. Selfish people, who only think of themselves. They are spiritually dead, no use to everyone else, not even to themselves, they will only benefit the world when they leave it. It will be a happier world after they are gone.

On the other hand, we have truly Christian people, typified by the Sea of Galilee. Be it much or little they have. They share it. They are generous, not just with those they like, but with everyone they can help. A kind word here, a good deed wherever they can, a reverence for the inherent dignity of all men, as children of God and brothers in Christ. These are the people that give life and dignity to the world, these are the people who have happiness and spread it all around. If you try to keep your happiness to yourself,

it will perish and so will you. But, give it away, spread it around and it will come back to you in rich dividends, a thousand-fold.

There are such true Christians. May I be another one added to their number.

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT (March 9)

COMMUNION—SOURCE OF CHARITY

"Walk in love, as Christ has loved us and delivered Himself for us. — EP.

"No man is an island. This is truer now than even before. We live in society. As Vat. II reminds us, we can neither live nor develop our gifts except in relationship with others. It's easy to forget our need of others, of our food, our transportation, our health needs. Imagine if you were suddenly left all alone on a desert island — how much you would have to learn in order to survive — I wonder how many of us would survive. Sure, that very thought of being alone like that makes us shudder. God meant us to live with others to give our help to others, to receive help from them. It's this way that we become truly human.

You workers don't work alone. You don't relax alone either. You students don't learn all by yourselves. You are taught along with others. To try and live our lives all alone is impossible, and the effort makes us less and less human. We become human, because Christ-like, only when we take His special commandment seriously: "This is my Commandment that you love one another as I have loved you." We'll be reminded how high that standard is when Holy Week comes. "Greater love than this no man has that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Our Saviour summed up the 10 Commandments in these two: Love God all the way, love our neighbor as He did. This is Christianity, if we don't learn this from our Sunday Mass, then we're not offering Mass properly, we can ever say that the celebration has passed us by as if it never happened.

Maybe you think I'm exaggerating. I'm not. St. Paul told the Christians of Corinth that their gathering for Mass was voided because of their lack of charity. When you gather, it is no longer to eat the Body of the Lord. For there are dissensions among you." At the Lord's Table, one thing is asked outright of those present—that they be filled with love. (Needless to say,

this does not mean emotions or feelings, we're not asked to like people, but to want to love them, as Christ did). Lack of love cannot be tolerated around the Holy Table. In a home a child who quarrels at mealtime is sent away from the table. How often we have noticed that we just cannot eat when there is contention during a meal. Doctors tell us not to eat when we are disturbed — to wait till the tension is over.

King David was being wounded by his enemies, and had to hide in caves for fear of his life. One of his Psalms tells God how great was his grief. And the part he felt most intensely was that the one persecuting him was actually one who had eaten with him. The Bible speaks with horror of any one daring to share a meal with someone whom he deliberately hates.

Our Lord showed the same sentiments — a horror of sharing a meal without sharing love. At the Last Supper, referring to Judas' treachery, He said: "One of you will betray me, one of you who is eating with me."

The Sacred Banquet produces love, but it also presupposes love. Our Lord chose the first Mass as the time to announce His special commandments of love. Love is the apex of all commandments, and the Mass is the apex of worship. Here we see the necessary connection between our worship of God and our dedicated service of Him in others. It is only in this way that unity among men will be perfected.

We know only too well the problems oppressing us and calling for urgent action. The uneven distribution of wealth, the gap between rich and poor, subhuman living conditions, corruption in high places, squandering of natural resources. All these are screaming for speedy action, for immediate solutions, before it is too late. But let's not rush into action without properly understanding what it is all about. To join clean government leagues, to join and actively support organizations for the relief of poverty and inequality is to be encouraged in every way. But, remember what Christ said: "Without Me, you can do nothing."

Our efforts to remove misery will certainly not do any lasting good, they could even do more harm than good, unless we keep a Christian balance. We love our neighbour effectively, precisely because we love God. This Commandment we have from God, that he who loves God love also his brother. Only if we love God with all our hearts will we look unceasingly for ways and means to help all, even those who are ungrateful, grasping, selfish. We will become involved, we will become Christ-like in the degree that we realize that God is our Father and Christ our brother, that we are all, without any exception, brothers and sisters in Christ. If any man say he loves God and hates his brother, he is a liar.

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (March 16)

"The bread I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." — GOSPEL

A gift is a token, a sign of our love for someone. It is a sign of self-giving. A mother, dying, gives a remembrance to each of her children—something of her love is contained in this gift. When we invite guests to a meal, in some way we give ourselves in the food we offer those guests. But, of course, in actual practice we can never identify ourselves fully with the food, we can't actually become food.

In the Mass, this imperfection has been removed. Here we really have the past made present. As realistically as possible, Jesus tells us that His flesh is really food, His Blood really drink. Those who found it hard to believe were given a clear choice: "Unless they would eat His flesh and drink His Blood, they would have no share in His life. Some went away—He let them go. He even asked those who remained would they also go away.

The night before He died, He fulfilled this promise. Taking the bread on the table and breaking it, He said: "Take this and eat it, all of you. This is My Body, which will be given for you. This parting gift was the ultimate in gift-giving even though he is God as well as man, he could not give us any greater token of love.

Now the very idea of a gift includes the readiness of the other to accept it. Suppose you've given a child a toy he wanted. How you enjoy seeing him forget everything around him as he gives all his attention to that gift of yours. We rejoice when our gift is accepted and appreciated. But, if it is ignored, or taken for granted, we are hurt. And, should it be refused or rejected, it leaves a wound that nothing can heal. Nothing is more painful than a rejected gift, because it is rejected love.

We see Him only with the eye of faith. We see now, says St. Paul as in a reflection, but the day will soon come when we will see Him face to face. Communion is precisely the guarantee of that. "He who eats my flesh . . . abides in Me and I in him, and I will raise him up on the last day. He that eats this bread, the same shall live forever.

An aspect of Communion that we easily forget is this — in it we achieve union with the whole Christ, as He is now, Head and members. That is why mutual charity and forgiveness of enemies is an essential preparation for communion. And, (please God we'll come more and more to realize this,) charity, a truly effective concern for others, is the first and best result of

our communions. So, let's not think of Communion in an individualistic way—just Jesus and myself. It's a family meal, and its effect must be to make us realize our oneness as God's family, as Christ's brothers and sisters, really concerned for the spiritual and temporal plight of others.

I want to put a thought before you at this Mass. The union we achieve with Christ is more than a sacramental confirming of a union that lasts all the time, it is more than a further guarantee of the union that will last forever. We achieve union, here and now, with all our loved ones, including those who have passed out of this life, and are now perfectly united with the whole Christ, the Total Christ. In Him we are united with all who are His.

Surely these thoughts should force us to see the fittingness, the correctness of accepting the gift of Himself, so perfectly contained here. Not just at Easter, dear God no, not just once a month, but every time we are at Mass. Surely we will no longer be indifferent, or coldly ungrateful. God forbid that any of us be of the pitiable number who are at Mass every Sunday and Communion once a year because they must, because it is an obligation. Let our Mass and Communion be approached out of sheer gratitude, with a joyful eagerness, with a glad realization that here we are most especially one with the Lord and with each other.

There's a picture of Our Lord which I'm sure you've all seen. Its title is His own words: "Behold I stand at the gate and knock." Jesus is depicted, holding a lamp, standing at a door knocking on it. A strange feature is that there is no handle, no knob to the door, no way of opening it from outside. Someone pointed out this lack to the painter. His answer was profound. "Yes," he said, "there is a handle, but you don't see it in the picture. It's on the inside. The door of our heart cannot be forced open, it can only be opened by ourselves.

Christianity is not automatic salvation. God has done everything He could, left nothing undone. But will not save us in spite of ourselves. Let's tell Him we'll respond, we'll open the door of our heart to Him. And then we'll see our selfishness melt like ice in the sun, and our Christian concern for others will flourish and grow.

PASSION SUNDAY (March 23)

MASS OFFERS MUCH NEEDED SECURITY

This Cup is the New Covenant in My Blood.—Comm.

This new optional Eucharistic Prayers for Mass stress the fact that the Mass is covenant, and alianor, an agreement between God and His people.

We often meet the idea of a covenant in the Bible. When Abraham, old and childless, was told he would be the father of God's First people, he felt afraid, he felt insecure, he asked a sign. The sign given was a covenant, the Old Covenant, a guarantee that put an end to all insecurity.

This covenant was renewed on Mt Sinai. "I will be your God and you will be My people. Such was the sacredness of a covenant once made that it could not be undone. When Josue was conquering the Promised Land, the people of Gideon were afraid. They saw themselves threatened, and decided to trick Josue. They pretended to be people from a far country, and asked for a covenant. Josue actually made a covenant with them. And then, when he was absent to attack their city, they revealed that it was with them he had made the covenant. Josue could do nothing about it. He had to spare them, a covenant cannot be broken. (Jos. 9.1-15)

Today, more than ever before, we need security, we need assurance that God cares, that no matter what happens in the world, we have the great living God Who loves us and has guaranteed our ultimate safety. How much He cares we are told in the Bible. He describes us as an unwanted, rejected child, discarded, naked and unwashed, at birth. But He our loving Father, seeing us abandoned, cared for us, brought us up. (Ez. 166). This is God's side of the covenant, described by Himself.

When a young man finds the girl whom God means to be his partner for life and the mother of his children, how concerned he becomes about her. How jealous he is in regard to her. And she feels the same way in his regard. God describes His part in the Covenant in terms of a lover's jealousy. We are His personal possession, and He loves us as the pupil of His eye. (Ps. 90).

Needless to say, there are two partners to every alliance. Life would be impossible if we could not mutually trust one another. Imagine how intolerable a man's life would be if he was not sure that his wife would be there, when he got home from work. The fatal results of insecurity in children from a broken home are too well known. A child needs assurance that his parents love him, and will care for him. We just must be able to rely on each other.

God understands this, and that is why He gave us a Covenant, a new and everlasting Covenant. It began at the first Mass when Our Saviour took the cup of wine and said: "This is the new Covenant in my Blood." His words recalled the Old Covenant, sealed in sacrificial blood. God's guarantee in this Covenant is nothing less than the Blood of the Son He had sent to become one of us, the Blood which would be poured out on the Cross. Let's deepen our awareness of this, specially now that Passiontide is upon us.

And while remembering the part played by God in delivering up His Son as a pledge, a guarantee of His side, let's remember the part we must play.

Scripture compares a Covenant to a marriage for which the mutual love of both parties is vital. In marriage, freely given love must come from both sides.

God's own description of the Old Covenant as a marriage between Himself and His people is dramatically seen in the Book of Hosea. Hosea had a truly tragic experience in his life. His wife Gomer left him for other lovers. This happened after their third child was born. Hosea's heart broke, but his love remained constant. And it finally had the effect of her returning, being forgiven and all forgotten as though nothing had ever happened.

No doubt God chose Hosea, whose tragic personal experience was like an acting out of the part of God to be the prophet who would show the sacredness of God's Covenant, and the sinfulness of our breaking it. Hosea's plea is for us as for his own people, but our Covenant, new and eternal, and renewed in every mass, means more than the former one. God our Father, in the Redemption, has done all that He possibly could to fulfill His part, and Christ, our Representative, has become the second party in the Covenant.

The degree in which it becomes real for each one of us depends on our sincerity in joining Christ at mass. To the degree that we identify ourselves with Christ, to that precise degree does the Covenant, renewed here in His Blood, become real for us. And (it cannot be stressed too often or too forcibly) it becomes actual by our living out our Mass, making a real bond between our worship and our lives.

PALM SUNDAY (March 30)

THE WORLD SANCTIFIED THROUGH THE INCARNATION

"The veil of the temple was rent in two." — Gosp.

Perhaps the most important lesson of the new formulas for the Eucharistic Prayer at Mass is that they remind us that the whole world and everything in it has been sanctified through Christ. The fact that God's Son came into the world, lived in it, used its goods, He has radically changed the world. The fact that He still lives on in His Church, active specially through His Sacraments, and most of all the Eucharist, enables us to say to God, whatever Eucharistic Prayer is selected, that through Christ our Lord, He continues to bless the world, to give everything in it life and goodness, and to make all holy. In a word, the world and the things in it are good.

Maybe we used to regard the world as a wicked place from which we must escape. Maybe our religion was so other-worldly that we forget that we've been put into this world precisely to make it a better place. We must

admit that sometimes our worship of God did not force us to a more earnest concern about the world, no — perhaps to a greater love of our fellow men.

Now, I'm not talking of worldliness, you know that. It's a matter of getting involved in the world, seeing God, like Christ did, through a selfless service of our fellows. Christ did not flee from the world. He came into the world to sanctify and save it. At His prayer for us during the first Mass, He expressly said: "I do not ask to take them out of the world, but to save them from evil."

So, let's not think there is opposition between religious practices and concern for our neighbour. Our Lord saw no such opposition. He did not feel that He had to choose between God and men. He united God and men. He showed His love for God, by enduring for men the Passion that we recall this Holy week.

When the veil of the temple was torn in two at His death, it was God's sign that the Old Covenant was over, and a new, final arrangement had been made. God had identified Himself with men and the world to the extent of Himself becoming a man, and living on earth. The Father had shown such love for the world as to send His only begotten Son, who would after His death, be raised to a new and glorious life, and share that life with His brothers and sisters in an amazing intimacy.

Now, we know that we please a father by loving his child, that the best way to a father's heart is by taking an interest in his children. The link between God and us His children is so much more intimate, that it surely is clear that any Christian service done to God's children or God's world is done to God.

There is indeed a warning in order here. We must be God-regarding; religion is not natural kindness or benevolence, or humanitarianism. To lose sight of God, and forget that service of man is precisely service of God would ruin the idea of Christian charity that Christ came to proclaim. Service of God and neighbour stand or fall together.

We are to take His approach to religion. Learn from Him that we can't serve our Father unless we serve our brothers, we'll never do a favor to our Father unless we include His children.

You'll hear superficial people say: "I don't go to church, but I don't do any harm to anyone." They don't see that love of neighbor that is not founded on love of God is empty and shallow, and will not last long. Only when it is united with love of God does our charity become Christian and effective.

Why is this so? It was God who made us social, it is through Him that we are to be united. Besides, to make this real, He Himself became a man.

He came not to be served, but to serve. It is absurd to think that in our dealings with others we can ignore this central fact of history and religion, as though we had not been redeemed or sanctified by God, or made His own brothers and sisters. To be a Christian means to be aware of our relationship with Christ, and with one another in Christ — on any other basis, our relationships with others become weak and feeble.

The basic law of Christ is love. It must be admitted that sometimes church-going people lack this insight. It is a scandal that there are people who faithfully attend church, but share no concern about their fellowmen. St. James tells us that we may rightly reprove them. "If a brother or sister be in need, hungry or naked and you say to them, Go your way, be you clothed and fed, but do nothing to help them," this is not religion at all, it is a miserable mockery of religion. "He who has it in his power to do good, it is sinful of him not to have done it."

This week we recall all God did to make salvation available for us. Let our response be a redoubled, renewed readiness to allow Him who died and rose from the dead, and is living in us now, to serve Himself in others.