

PASTORAL SECTION

HOMILETICS

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October 5

19TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

THE WEDDING GARMENT

Today's Gospel tells us how important it is that we live with the Divine Life Christ earned for us. It is a matter of life and death, a matter of heaven or hell. So it is for our own eternal interest to consider what is involved.

To begin with, our salvation is not something we achieve by ourselves. Not at all. All the initiative, all the doing comes from God, and our only contribution is to place no obstacle. To think we earn heaven by our own good works was the mistake of the pharisees. Our Lord described one of them as counting up his good works as though, alone and unaided, he was lifting himself up to heaven. Salvation cannot be claimed as a right due to us—it is a pure gift.

An example might help here. Suppose a man's auto gets hopelessly stuck in the mud. And suppose a bulldozer with towing equipment goes by. The driver of the bulldozer offers to haul the auto out of the mud. If the rescue takes place, it is entirely due to the bulldozer; but it will never have happened unless the driver of the auto, realizing his helplessness and his need, consented and asked to be helped.

This is exactly how we stand in relation to God. He has done everything. He even sent His Son to make our rescue possible. All we have to do is say "Yes", never to take it back and keep on saying it till we die, with ever-increasing surrender.

This is one of the main doctrines stressed in the new formulas of the Eucharistic Prayer. True, it was present in the old Roman Canon, for example, when we begged the "God who saves" that we be delivered from final damnation and counted among those He had chosen; or when we protested that we did not trust in our own merits, but implored our Father for forgiveness, through Christ Our Lord. But it is possible that having heard the formula over and over again, the words lost

some of their convincing power, like a razor that gets blunt from repeated use.

Now, with the new formulas, it will be hard to escape the truth that our salvation is all God's doing, and our only contribution is our permitting God to play His part. The second of these prayers begins: "Lord, You are holy indeed, the fountain of all holiness." There is no question here concerning our role in our own salvation and sanctification.

The third formula tells us how to achieve salvation. "All life, all holiness comes from You, through Your Son Jesus Christ our Lord, by the working of the Holy Spirit. We call on God our Father to gaze on the "Victim who has reconciled us to Himself." "The sacrifice which has made our peace with Him". These reminders of who God is and what He has done, should, if constantly recalled, remove any foolish complacent thought that we save ourselves, that our contribution is anything more than consenting that it be worked out in us.

But it is in the fourth of these prayers that we see very clearly that our salvation comes entirely from God: "Father, we acknowledge Your greatness. All Your actions show Your wisdom and love. You formed man in Your own likeness and set him over the whole world to serve You, his Creator. Even when he disobeyed You and lost Your friendship, You did not abandon him." The prayer goes on to enumerate God's offering and re-offering of the Covenant, His sending Prophets and lastly His own Son, in the fullness of time, to be our Saviour. There follows a synopsis of the life of Our Lord, His Death and Resurrection, and the sending of the Holy Spirit "to complete His work on earth and bring us to the fulness of peace."

Yes, our salvation comes from God. When we attend Mass, it is not to deserve heaven or escape hell, but to deepen our union with Him Who alone can save us. We approach Him in the Sacraments, not to enhance our own persons, but to show him our sincere surrender. We see and serve Him in others, not for the sake of reward or fear of punishment, but because, having been redeemed not in isolation, but in oneness with Him, it is in togetherness (gathered together into the one Body of Christ by the Holy Spirit" *Prex Euch.* IV) that we find our Salvation in Him.

October 12

20th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

THE CHRISTIAN CALENDAR

It is surely no news to you that, along with the exciting changes in the format of the Mass, there will be a complete revamping of the Liturgical Year.

Maybe you have heard sensational reports that some saints, like St. Christopher or St. Valentine, have been "demoted." No such thing happened, of course. It is simply a matter of correcting certain cluttering up of the year with celebrations that did not mean so much, at least on a worldwide scale. Beginning with this coming Advent, the celebration of such saints' feastdays will become optional. No saint has been demoted. Let us not take the daily papers or weekly magazines as a reliable source of information about our religion.

Here in brief, is the reformed Liturgical Calendar. From now on, New Year's will be the Solemnity of the Mother of God. It will remain, along with Christmas and the Immaculate Conception, a Holiday of obligation. The reason for giving Mary this prominence is surely the unique role she plays, especially during the liturgical period. She is the first Christian, the model of all aspects of Christian living. She is our Mother — the Mother of the whole Christ, nor Jesus separated from his members, but all of us along with Him.

So, the New Year begins with Our Lady. The Church could hardly have chosen a more dramatic way of stressing her importance. And what, you would ask, is the last feast of the liturgical year? The final Sunday on the liturgical cycle will be the Solemnity of the Holy Family. Here again, something of immense import is highlighted. It is through us Christians that Christ has decided to continue His presense in the world; and first and foremost in our own family circle. Granted that charity, to be Christian, must include the world and exclude no one, it has to begin at home. When the Lord tells you mothers on the last day that you clothed Him when He was naked, to whom will He be referring? Who, I ask, comes naked into your home, except your own babies? Your daily preparation of the food for your household — that is feeding the hungry Christ for which you will be rewarded. You minister to the sick Christ when you tend to a sick member of your family. Yes, there's wisdom in making the Holy Family the last feast of the year.

What about the period in-between the first and the last days of the year? On an average, there will be one or more solemnities every month, of our Lord or His Mother, St. Joseph, St. John the Baptist, an Apostle. The other saints will be honored in places where their feast day has a special importance — say the patron saint of a Church or locality.

There is need to tell you that Mass is never offered to Our Lady or any other saint to God. But, Mass can be offered in thanksgiving for God's having given us a brother or sister who is an outstanding example on some aspects of Christian living.

What therefore, will be the best form of devotion to a saint? To honour, to ask for intercession, and best of all to imitate. Any saint can tell us what St. Paul said: "Be ye imitators of me, as I am of Christ." That is the reason why these brothers and sisters of ours were canonized in the first place — to exemplify some aspects of being Christ to others.

Of course, the main thing in the reformed calendar will be what it always was — the celebration of the various elements of our Redemption.

There was only one such feast in the early Church — the feast of Easter — the commemoration of God's intervention in man's history, sending His Son to be one of us, and to reunite us to Him as His Children. Every Sunday was a little Easter, stressing a special aspect of Redemption, since we could not possibly take everything at once.

This is what we should try to recall at Mass, that we should make present again the glorious moment when Christ comes to us and we joyfully await Him. So, if any smart alec starts talking about some saints being now jobless, you know how to answer. We come to Mass to honor God our Father, to Whom Christ our Brother is united. If a saint is remembered on that occasion, it is only to remind us that we, like they, should live out our Mass by bringing Christ to others. In this way, we will become saints ourselves, and that is what God wants us to be.

October 19

21th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

THE SIGN OF PEACE

Our Lord insisted on one preparation for Mass and Communion that we be at peace with one another. "If you are offering a gift at the altar and then remember that you have something against your brother, leave your gift at the altar and go and be reconciled first with our brother, and then come and offer your gift." In today's Gospel we do not live at peace with one another. Vat. II tells us this reason for taking part in Mass: "to be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with one another, so that finally God may be all in all" (Const. on the Lit.). To grow in closeness with one another and therefore with God the Author of unity is what the Mass is all about. It presupposes that we exert effort to be of one heart and one mind, and to foster in our daily lives that unity for which Jesus prayed at the first Mass, "That all may be one, even as You, Father and I are one."

So we are to be at peace with one another before Mass begins, and even more so as Communion time approaches. Peace here means much more than freedom from actual quarrels. For us Christians, as St. Paul says, "Jesus Christ is our peace." He took away our estrangement from God. He brought us to God, secured our unity with God, and with one another in Him.

When we are greeted before Communion, "The peace of the Lord be always with you," what is desired is not just absence of hatred or rivalry, but a perfect communion of spirit with one another at Mass, and a readiness to foster the "peace which surpasses all understanding" in our homes, our places of work and recreation, our country and the world.

In the past, if we ever noticed it at all, we perhaps took this greeting as something that concerned us only individually. Maybe we thought that what was being expected was the personal contentment that we sometimes experience at Mass and Communion. To remove that impression and make us realize just what is wished, an ancient ceremony will be reintroduced into the Mass beginning next month. It is called the sign of peace. Don't think of it as just a gimmick. It is an outward gesture of our desire to be more and more one with our fellow Christians, our brother and sisters gathered together at Mass, precisely because of our unity in Christ.

We naturally tend to show outwardly what is going on in our minds. For instance, if we are worried, we pace back and forth, if we recognize a friend, we greet him. And if we feel affection for others, naturally we want to show it. This should go for Mass too. It is high time we stop behaving like real people — that Mass is separate from our ordinary lives. To behave like a human being at Mass will result in a continuation in our everyday lives of the togetherness we learn at the same Mass.

The early Christians used to give one another a fraternal embrace before Communion. Even today we see vestiges of this at a solemn or a concelebrated Mass when a formal and stylized peace-greeting is given until anyone in the sanctuary is greeted. Since this particular form of gesture seems artificial, the various episcopal conferences of each country decided on what form this gesture of peace should be.

Here in the Philippines particularly, before Communion time, we will be exhorted: "Be at peace with one another." Then each will turn to the one nearest him or her, and with hands folded, bow slightly and say: "Peace be with you." The answer is: "And with you also." It will seem strange at the beginning, naturally. In the first few tries, we will act awkwardly or even feel a bit shy.

But remember this — we are all brothers and sisters in the family of God. The person next to you at Mass may be a complete stranger, but in truth, you are more closely related to each other as children of God, than would be natural brothers and sisters in a human family. So, look each other in the eye, smile at one another, pronounce the greeting with all your heart. If you are acquainted, use each others' names: "Peace be with you, Juana." "And with you also, Juan."

Even if this ceremony may jolt us out of our isolation, it will make us realize that we are, after all, brothers and sisters, because we are children of a common Father, one in Christ through the activity of the Holy Spirit. If it puts an end to the awful hypocrisy, the horrible inconsistency, the actual blasphemy of people denying all through the week what their gathering here on Sunday stands for, it will have achieved a tremendous result. If nothing else were coming up at the end of next month except this gesture of peace, it would still be a million times worthwhile.

October 26

CHRIST THE KING

Many heads of nations visiting their people like to travel incognito. One such was the last king Spain, Alfonso XIII. One day he came unaccompanied and in disguise to a small town and registered under an assumed name at the local hotel. In the morning, he called for a mirror for shaving. The bell-boy who brought it said: "You are not an ordinary traveller, are you?" "Why do you say that?," asked the King. "Well, you act differently, I'm sure you belong to the royal court at Madrid." "As a matter of fact, I do," said Alfonso. "Maybe you serve his Majesty himself." "Yes, that is so." "What do you do for him?" "Oh, a number of things. Right now, I'm shaving him."

Christ the King came to us also in disguise. One day while St. John the Baptist was in prison, Jesus sent him a message. The last words were: "Fortunate is the man whose faith is not shattered because of Me." What did He mean?? Just this — he is a lucky man who is not fooled because Christ seems ordinary. We have to penetrate into His disguise. We have to see beyond His appearance.

Maybe you will ask: with the new calendar, will there still be a feast of Christ the King? The answer is, Yes. It won't be in October, though, but on the last Sunday after Pentecost which is the last Sunday of the Church's Year. King or kingship may not be very familiar terms nowadays, but the importance of Christ as head of creation, as the most important person who ever walked on earth, can never be over-stressed or over-preached. Christ the King is the reality of all times, and faith in Him, loyalty to Him, is the only thing that should matter. If we could realize that He does talk to us, enters into our personal lives, then we'd perhaps give Him the response of a loving loyalty. We'd discover One Who has been with us all along but Whom we failed to recognize. "How long have you been with Me, and you do not know Me."

When Jesus hung on the cross with a sign mocking His claim to kingship, a bandit named Dismas was also hung on a cross at His side. At first he reviled Jesus: "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us." But afterwards, seeing the truly royal courage of the Saviour, his heart was changed. And instead of cursing, he uttered a prayer, maybe the first real prayer of his lifetime: "Lord, remember me when You enter into Your kingdom." Kingdom! Kingdom! What could he see but a man nailed to a cross like himself. Crowned, yes, but with thorns. What could he hear except mocking blasphemies? But he penetrated the disguise and recognized the King and there and then he was canonized: "This day you will be with Me in Paradise."

Let us see Christ our King in His words, in His Eucharist, and in those around us, our neighbor. Let us become aware of His presence, and then we'll be able to respond with heartfelt loyalty to his royal call.
