

HOMILETICS

September 7

15th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Since New Year, you have been hearing, from time to time, that there is to be a new and (for our lifetime surely) final form of Mass. Well, it begins on the first Sunday of Advent — 30th of November — less than three months from now. So today, let's consider some aspects of the new Mass.

THE NEW MASS

After November 30, the Mass will be what the Church has been gradually working up to in the various reforms recently. Mass facing the people, then more and more in the vernacular, and the progressive simplifying of the ceremonies have been leading up to this. Maybe you felt dissatisfied, at times, that the Mass was neither here nor there, but it helped us to endure the hardships of the journey if we know where we are going.

Mass can be described as an encounter with God in Christ. Now, we come to know a person in several ways. First of all, by listening to him, really attentively listening to what he has to say to us. To be thinking about something else while he is speaking to us (even if it is something in some way connected with him) will surely prevent our ever knowing him properly.

Mass is a dialogue, a sacred conversation between God and His people. He speaks to us, really speaks to us, in the first part of the Mass. And, beginning November 30, more so than ever before — we'll hear a much more complete selection of His words. A course covering three years, with three short readings every Sunday — first, His message from the Old Covenant; then, from the inspired writers of the New Covenant; and lastly, from His own Son, the Word Incarnate, speaking to us now. "At this time, Jesus *says*".

Now, in a dialogue or conversation, we listen when the other person is speaking. We don't read while someone we love is talking to us (that would be the height of bad manners). We *listen*. More than that, when we are united by mutual affection for a common friend, we listen *together* to what he has to say. Suppose a group go to a meet a friend at the airport, don't they all listen together? How else can we explain why so many go to the airport to hear the message of the President when he returns from overseas? We could read what he had to say in the newspapers, but somehow it's more personal, more intimate, to listen together than to read alone.

The boy, Samuel, asleep in the temple, was awakened by God's call. The first two times, he didn't realize Who was calling him, and ran to the high priest, Heli. Heli advised him to calmly listen to God's message. At the third call, "Samuel, Samuel", he answered, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening". (1 Sam. 3,10.) We could have no better disposition at the time of the readings at Mass. "Teach me the way I should go". (Ps. 142, 8.)

Now, we don't just listen to a human friend, we respond to what he says. If he suggests an action in common, we eagerly join him in it. Just the same at Mass — we welcome God's word with faith, and we respond to Our Lord's invitation to join Him in His great act of worship. And that means that we commit ourselves, along with Him, to making our whole lives an act of praise to God our Father, and a loving service of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

This will be a result of the new Mass, an intensifying of the life Christ came to give us: "I am come that they may live, and live more intensely". Today's prayer after the Sacred Meal sums it up: "Father, may the working of Holy Communion take hold of us, mind and body, so that what prevails in us will not be our notions and wishes, but its effectiveness. Amen."

September 14

16th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

TRIUMPH OF THE HOLY CROSS

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself."
(Gospel)

One day, during His lifetime, Our Lord Jesus Christ summed up in one sentence His program of Christian living. "I always do the things that please My Father," He said. (Jn, 8, 29.) Let us not be vague about what this means. It means doing, the Father's will, accepting the crosses and trials of life, i.e. not dragging the cross unwillingly or bitterly, but "filling up what is wanting in the sufferings of Christ for the sake of His Body, the Church".

This does not mean that we just accept the ills and injustices of life without doing anything about them. Communists sometimes taunt Christians with having "pie in the sky when you die" attitude. (Pay now, fly later). Christians are sometimes accused of being so interested in the next world that they do nothing about making this one better. The correct attitude is seen in his prayer of a famous theologian; "Give us, Lord, the patience to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we should, and the wisdom to know the difference."

In the spirit of today's celebration, we realize that there can be no resurrection without a cross, and we resolve to live out our Mass by Christ—like patience in unavoidable crosses. But, at the same time, we recall that the cross was the culminating point of a lifetime of

service of man, of "going good". He presented Himself as servant to the world's needs, "I have stood among you as a servant". It was not only by His death on the cross that He redeemed us; His whole life of service saved us. And we, baptized into His death at baptism, continue that work.

So, while patiently carrying unavoidable crosses, we strive might and main to remove suffering and misery, hatred and injustice, from the world. Our union with Christ demands that we be concerned and forces us to be actively concerned. Here is the main fruit to be expected from the form of Mass coming up in November.

If we enter wholeheartedly into this new way of celebrating, we will just have to leave selfishness and self-centered individualism behind. We will become more and more aware that "we are a family—children of a common rather, brothers and sisters in Christ. The togetherness we feel at a successful family re-union, realizing that all present are united in mutual love and ready to work for the good of the family; that and much more, is what we should carry from Sunday Mass in the future.

But, remember, none of these things will happen unless we are enthusiastically open to this important development. To say, "I'll just wait and see how the new Mass affects me" would not be nearly enough; still less to say, "If it's coming I'll have to accept it, but don't expect me to get involved." We've been passive too long. We've regarded Mass as a private affair far too long. The Eucharist has infinite power to bring us closer to one another because it brings us closer to Christ; to form into "one body, all who partake of the one bread". This power is frustrated if we deliberately cut ourselves off from one another and refuse to take an active part in the Mass.

By getting right into this holiest of all activities, singing with the voices God gave us, listening eagerly with open hearts to God's plans for us, responding generously by joining Christ's sacrifice, striving to have His attitude as described in today's Epistle, and making our life an extension, a living out of one Mass, then we'll see results.

We'll come from Mass renewed and refreshed, (we could even say 'recreated'), for another week of Christian living; loving and serving God by striving to make His world a better place.

September 21

17th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

LOVE IS THE FULFILLMENT OF THE LAW

"On these two commandments hang the whole law and the prophets."
(Gospel)

The first Council of the Church was held in Jerusalem in the time of the Apostles. Its purpose was to preserve unity in the Church, to make sure that converts from the Jewish religion and those from paganism would

live in peace and harmony together. (Acts 15). The very same purpose inspired the most recent of the Councils — Vatican II. And we'll see one of the most important means the Council availed itself of once we have the finalized form of Mass next November. Its chief purpose could well be described as the forming and deepening of our awareness that we are a family, not just the human family, because of sharing the same nature, but God's family, because in and through Christ we share His life so intimately and marvelously that we become one with Christ and one with each other.

We are really one at Mass—one in and with Christ. The Mass is the source of unity. We take part as brothers and equals in the celebration. We share the Divine Source of life with one another at Communion. If we don't see our oneness at the time of Mass, when else shall we possibly see it?

In the past, maybe, there was some excuse for rugged individualism. Nothing more, we thought, was expected of us than to put in an appearance at Mass, busy ourselves with anything pious, no matter how remotely connected with the sacred action going on. Even if we couldn't see the altar or hear anything at all, we fulfilled our obligation, we need not be afraid of going to Hell, at least on that score.

But now, its different. If taking part in the Mass is to be a living force in our lives, connected with our daily living, we just must use our human powers at Mass. Sunday Mass is meant to be the focus of our lives, not something apart, cut off from life. The whole week should be a follow up of the last Sunday's Mass, and a lead up to the next.

So we're not to turn off our listening powers during the readings and the sermon. The new Mass will help us here, because the three-year cycle of readings and the inclusion of Old Testament selections, will remove the impression: "We heard all that last year, and the year before, and the year before that". But it's not just to relieve boredom—it's to give us God's complete message. If we stir up our faith, realize that it is Christ speaking and that He is speaking to us—"He that has ears to hear, let him hear". Then we will be wholehearted in answering the responses, and especially the singing. We all know from experience how joining in community singing removes loneliness and isolation. We will realize we are a community, and are on our way to building up that community spirit which is at the heart of our religion, if we force ourselves out of our shells, and clear the air with song. Singing unites persons in action, action involving their whole selves. Community singing has a very large place in the new Mass. Let us see to it that it is not ragged. One need not be a Mario Lanza—use the voice God gave you. "Sing to the Lord a new canticle, for He has some wonderful things."

Our Lord's whole moral teaching is summed up in the command to love, to preserve unity. Love God as much as we possibly can and our neighbour as ourself. All our duties to one another are covered by this. The prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, etc., are all included in the single command to love our neighbour—to preserve unity.

More is asked of us than to refrain from hurting others—we must show positive love for all people. There will be no holding back once the meaning of the Mass is so clear that we cannot help seeing it.

Either we give up Mass, or become more involved in an active concern for our brothers.

The Mass is the great means God uses to help us to love more. Everything He has done for us is contained in the Mass. Recalling and making present the death and resurrection of Our Lord, it sums up all the love God has for man. And, when it's meaning is so obvious as to need no explanation, we will return love for love. From the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of unity, that occurs during the Mass, we'll love our Father and each one of our brothers with the very Love of God Himself. "He that loves the brotherhood, the love of God has come to complete growth in him." (1 Jn. 2, 16.)

September 28

18th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

COMMUNAL ADMISSION OF SINFULNESS

"Courage, son, your sins are forgiven" (Gospel)

We associate this gospel story with the sacrament of forgiveness, where we lay our sins and burdens at the feet of the merciful Christ, and are reconciled with Him and the Church, which our sinfulness has harmed. Our meeting with Christ is a real and as personal as that of the paralytic carried in on his bed. He is as 'simpatico', as approachable and forgiving now as He was then. And our wondering amazement that God "has given such power to men" should make us as grateful as Jesus' contemporaries.

But it is not only in connection with the Sacrament of repentance that this lesson applies. A Christian's life should be one of continual repentance. Our sinfulness, our selfish coldness and heartless indifference to others, our apathy and refusal to do what we can to alleviate human misery — these do not affect me alone, they harm the whole Christ, Jesus and all those joined to Him, the community of the baptized. Our life of friendship with Him is not somehow separated from His brothers and ours. He needs us to reach out to others, and our refusal to let Him do so calls for constant and communal repentance.

So, do not be surprised to hear that a feature of the new Mass is a penitential act done together by priest and laity. We are already accustomed to the idea from the prayers at the foot of the altar. They will no longer be said, but communal repentance will have a place. Mass will begin with a procession, and during it there will hymn greeting Christ, our invisible Priest, and telling God how glad we are to be at Mass. He has gathered us together and He is in our midst. After greeting the altar and the congregation the priest will call on us all publicly — at the same time, along with himself — to acknowledge our sinfulness, our failure to show all the love that God and our brothers deserve.

The chief reason for this silent reflection on our shortcomings, and public admission that they have lessened Christ's effectiveness in the Community, is to seek public reconciliation in a community setting. We admit our failure in love, and our desire to be reconciled to the whole

Christ. With heads bowed, and in a deep common silence where one could hear a pin drop, it's easier to pray and to face up honestly to our sinfulness, and then with one heart to ask God for forgiveness, and sincerely promise to strive harder to see and serve Christ in our neighbour, to love to serve others as Christ did.

A helpful by-product of this feature of the new Mass will be a more mature and grown-up approach to our sacramental meeting with Christ. We will not think of it as a kind of magic wash-cloth for wiping sins away. We will really examine our conscience, not just to see if we have broken any of the ten commandments, or neglected some obligation, (religion is a lot more than doing certain things or avoiding certain things — it is striving to be perfect in love, as our heavenly Father is perfect). No, we will get down to the selfishness and pride of the root of our sins. And we'll resolve that others will no longer suffer, nor will the Church be the loser, from anything we have done or neglected to do.

Best of all, we will see our confessor as the representative of the Christian community which we have harmed, and as the representative of Jesus, the Head of the community to God directly — the only way God ever contacts us is through other men, or through things that can be seen like a burning bush, a pillar of cloud or fire.

One last remark — this penitential act at the beginning of Mass is a sacramental, and will itself be quite sufficient for forgiving venial sins, or doubtful mortal sins. Sacramental confession is only necessary before Communion if we are quite certain that we have been so wicked as to deserve Hell. then, will the Eucharist be our daily bread, and the Mass that begun with a common admission of sinfulness will be rounded off by all of us partaking of the "one bread that makes us one body."