

Thoughts on the Readings for Septuagesima Sunday - Our Enemies

The Church is beginning to change her mood. In fact, the change comes rather suddenly. Christmas and all its heavenly joy are not gone from our minds yet; but things are different today. The Church is getting us ready for Lent: preparing our minds for suffering, struggle against hidden enemies. But Christmas was not all joy, and today is not all sorrow. Historically, the Mass we say today was written when the Church was frightened. When Pope St. Gregory first celebrated it, he was afraid the barbarians might break into Rome during the week. Things looked very bad. But Rome was saved, somehow. Perhaps because of the prayers at this Mass!

Sorrow and Despair

The Introit says that the groaning of death is all around us; but we have called on the name of the Lord in His holy temple and He has heard us. Of course, that text is from the Psalms. But we can see that sorrow is very different from despair. God will take care of us and lead us out of present sorrow; He is our strength when we are weak, and where would we get strength if not from Him? So, while the Church seems to grieve, her hope is never more evident and her trust is boundless. There are signs of sorrow, indeed. The flowers are gone from the altar, the somber violet vestments are on the priest's shoulders -the vestments of death, for a priest is dressed like this when he is about to be carried forth to his grave. It is a sobering atmosphere for all of us today. The *Gloria* and the *Alleluia* are gone from the Church's lips, and the *Alleluia* won't be heard again until it bursts from her heart on Holy Saturday morning.

But the prayer of the Church today is against our enemies. Oh, the Church has many human enemies; we have always had them and we always will. Sometimes we become too conscious of them, and sometimes we deserved the punishment they gave us. But today, in spite of the fact that strong forces are arrayed against the Church, we have to consider enemies who are far more subtle and less clearly defined. These are the enemies of our salvation; the enemies that do not destroy the body but kill the soul: in fact, they cleverly advise us to concentrate on our body so that we will forget our soul. The chief of those enemies is our own love of pleasure, our forgetfulness of the reason for which we were born. That is why the Church today is busy getting us in the mood for Lent and for a season of thoroughgoing self-sacrifice. And even if there are signs of sorrow about us, we have no reason to be discouraged because once we have captured the Church's mood, God comes quickly with help and strength to overcome the enemies that are so hard to detect.

The Balance of Good and Evil

The Oration this morning reminds us that our sins have created a debt. That must be paid; and the Church does not ask primarily that we get out of the debt, but that we get away from sin. Our chief enemy, self-love, has made sinners of us. It led us into sin with all sorts of promises and excuses: our own way would seem like freedom; the pleasure would be

enormous and it would last. After all, we are human, and religion is difficult; why not be good to ourselves, forget God for a while and return to Him sometime when we are in a religious mood? This is the preparation of the mind for sin, and the enemy does a good and thorough job. So, the Church is trying to change us and prepare our mind for penance. Therefore, she makes it clear this morning that we have to get into the struggle against ourselves and fight hard.

A Violent Game

St. Paul's Letter to the Corinthians makes the struggle towards heaven like one of their games: they were fond of athletics. A champion runner in those days was idolized like a football star in our day. He took good care of himself, was vigorous in his exercise and rigorous in his routine; he saw to it that he got a rub-down with oil regularly, and that his body was kept in prime condition for the race. Then, when the big day came, he put all his acquired energy into winning the prize some sort of wreath. Well, St. Paul says, if they'll go to all that trouble just to get a trophy that will wither in a day or two, what a struggle we should put up to get a crown that would glisten forever! So, he says, I run and I fight and I beat my body and make it obey. And nobody is free from the necessity of penance, either. Because even after I have preached to you, says the Apostle, I might be lost myself. There is no assurance of salvation without a struggle. He tells us the Jews thought they were safe because the Lord lit up a cloud for them so that they could find their way across the dry passage He had made for them in the Red Sea. That certainly was a special favor from God, and they might get the idea that because they were the favored children they could do what they pleased. He fed them in the desert too, or they would have starved to death. That also was a favor; but with most of them God was displeased mainly because they were selfish and forgot God in spite of all the reminders they had.

Don't you often think some Catholics are like that? They think that, because God has given them the grace of faith, everything is bound to be all right; no further effort is needed. Now, when even St. Paul, the zealous preacher of the Gospel, is not going to assume his salvation, we ought to realize that it takes more than mere belief in the truths God has revealed to bring us to the goal and win for us the incorruptible crown. This is a good argument against the people who still believe that good works aren't necessary-just faith. And you would be surprised at the number who think that. Luther tried to teach it, but most Lutherans today don't believe it; they know they must produce acts of virtue, that they cannot be saved by doing what they please. We know it much better, and the Church is reminding us today that we must fight laziness and indifference and love of pleasure as the real enemies of our souls.

God, Our Helper

The Gradual reminds us that if we are humble enough, God will give us all the strength we need to overcome self and the enemies of our souls. The Church tries to make us humble by having us say the words of the Gradual; and you can see that, if we call ourselves poor and helpless (as the text does), we will get to realize that we are poor and

helpless, that we need God and cannot depend on self, because self is our enemy most of the time. So, the verses go on: "Out of the depths I have cried unto Thee, O Lord; let Thine ears be attentive to my prayer, because with Thee is mercy and redemption."

Our Work

Many people are puzzled by this Gospel. They wonder how it is that everybody who worked for that man got the same reward in spite of the different scale of hours. But we must not miss the point Our Lord is making: we cannot be idle; just as soon as He finds us loafing, He sends us to work. We cannot sit back and still make a living; we have to work for it. Now, when it comes time to grant eternal salvation, God will decide what the reward of each is to be: as a matter of fact, God will be the reward of all-the same reward for all. Perhaps there will be a difference in our capacity for enjoying God in heaven, but we will all enjoy Him to our own perfect satisfaction. But that part of it is in His hands; our part is to get busy now. We cannot look upon ourselves as a favored people who will be saved only because God has been good to us. We must work in the vineyard-produce, get something done, not just dream. Naturally we abhor work, but with God's grace and encouragement it can become pleasant. As long as we are still living, there is a chance for eternal life; some realize that only at the last minute, but at least they realize it. And that is a further lesson in this Gospel: the minute we realize we have to get busy and serve God, we have received the call to work and we must get down to work. All of this is another way of presenting the idea of struggle against the enemies of our salvation: we have to do something to be saved. And once we are willing, God becomes a loving Master and Helper.

Hope in God's Mercy

The grand conclusion, then, is that the Church does not change her mood to discourage us. On the contrary, she is trying to teach us to fight self by not depending on self. Pride is so dangerous! God is our refuge. And the Communion of the Mass leaves us with a loving and a hopeful prayer: "Let Thy face shine upon us and save us in Thy mercy, because we have called upon Thee." Our human nature will not drag us away from God if we let Him help us; we conquer ourselves by joining with Him, and then the prospect of true penance is easy and the hope of salvation very high.

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The readings for today are:

INTROIT *Ps 18 (17)*

FIRST READING

1 Corinthians 9:24-10:5a

GRADUAL

Ps 9:10-11,19-20;

Ps 129 (130):1-4

GOSPEL

Matthew 20:1-16

OFFERTORY *Ps 91 (92)*

COMMUNION *Ps 30 (31)*

