

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday OT (Year A) – January 15, 2017

IS 49:3, 5-6; PS 40:2, 4, 7-8, 8-9, 10; 1 COR 1:1-3; JN 1:29-34

It shouldn't surprise us that **some** of the things that **some** non-Catholic Christians object to in the Catholic faith, are doorways through which a Christian can come to know Jesus most fully.

Why should this *not* surprise us?

Because wherever there is a doorway to Jesus, the Devil will use whatever means he has at his disposal *to keep people from passing through that doorway*. The Devil's worst nightmare is for someone to enter into a *personal relationship* with the LORD. Because when we come to know Jesus **personally**—and *experience* his divine power in our lives—we discover that Jesus was not some hippie from the 60' who walked around the Holy Land spouting niceties to make people feel warm and fuzzy about themselves.

No, when we come to know Jesus *personally*, we discover that he is the all-powerful **Son of God**, the **Second Person** of the **Most Holy Trinity** and our **Savior** and **Redeemer**. The Devil does not **want** us to know this, because it becomes obvious to anyone who *does* know this, just how insignificant and weak is the Devil's **created** power next to the Son of God's **divine** power.

One of the tactics that the Devil uses to keep people from passing through these doorways to Jesus is to create **doubt** *about...* or **resistance** *to...* them. For example, some non-Catholic Christians object to the Catholic use of *Crucifixes* instead of empty crosses. The objection sometimes goes like this:

**“Why do you Catholics want to keep Jesus *on the Cross*—to *re-crucify him*—when he conquered death and rose from the dead?”**

Such a question **should** seem odd to our Catholic sensibilities. But we must acknowledge that it actually comes from a good intention from our non-Catholic Christian friends—their desire to celebrate the Resurrection. And yet, the Church even has this concerned covered—and not only in **symbol**, but in **reality**—the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist. That Eucharist *is* the Risen Lord in our midst!

Aversion to the Crucifix blinds the person to the fact that Jesus' suffering and death is not only a key to understanding *how* our **salvation** was achieved, but it also helps us to deal *in a mature Christian manner* with the reality of human suffering—to make **sense** of, and to make *use* of **suffering**—*in our own Christian lives*.

To grasp this, let's first consider some particular words of **John the Baptist** in today's Gospel—words that will sound very familiar to Catholics because the priest proclaims these same words at **every Mass**.

*Which words?*

***“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”*** (Jn 1:29)

Now, let's recall *how* it was that Jesus' suffering saved us. To understand this, we need to recognize how the reference, “**Lamb of God**”, is rooted in the **Old Testament**...in the **deliverance** of the Israelites from slavery in **Egypt**, which was later expressed in the **Jewish Temple sacrifices**. The **Prophet Isaiah** also spoke of the future **Messiah as an innocent Lamb** to be sacrificed to save God's people.

When God commanded his angel to wipe out all the first-born males in Egypt for enslaving and abusing the Israelites, Moses instructed the Israelites to put the blood of a slaughtered lamb on their doorposts. When the angel flew over and saw the blood, he would **pass over that** house, and the firstborn male in **that** home would be spared from death.

**This Lamb [served as] a substitute for the first-born of the Israelite family that offered the sacrifice.**

<http://catholicexchange.com/behold-lamb-god-3>

For anyone who heard **John the Baptist's** words but who was *not* rooted in Jewish history, hearing the Messiah referred to a “**lamb**” would have struck them as strange. But the deliverance from **slavery in Egypt** in the original Passover was a **foreshadowing** of a **far greater deliverance**—the salvation of God's people from **slavery to sin**. Jesus substituted himself for us—willingly taking on our sins and the punishment they deserved—in order to save us from sin and its eternal consequences.

Seeing a **Crucifix**—as opposed to a **bare cross**, then—reminds a Christian *who has firm knowledge of Salvation History* of the extent of the Father's love for us—in sacrificing his perfect, unblemished Son—like the unblemished lamb in Old Testament sacrifices, in order to purchase our sinful souls with his Son's blood.

But it goes even **further** than that! A Crucifix reminds us of something much more immediate than eternity. It helps us make **sense** of, and to make **use** of suffering, in the **here-and-now reality** of **our** daily lives.

How so?

To understand how, let's consider something that St. Paul wrote to the Colossians:

*Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church...* (Col 1:24)

At first glance, it would seem that Paul is claiming that Jesus' death on the Cross was not enough to save us—that something was missing—because he speaks of himself compensating in some way for what is lacking in Christ's sufferings. He also refers to the **Church** as the **Body of Christ**. To see what this has to do with *us*, recall what happens in Baptism.

**First**, when we are baptized, all sins—**Original Sin and personal sins**—are forgiven, as is the **punishment** associated with sin.

**Secondly**, God the Father **adopts** us into his family, truly making us his sons and daughters.

**Finally**, we become members of the **Church**, which, as we just heard from St. Paul, is the **Body of Christ**. **We actually become *part of Christ*, because the Church is Christ!**

What did Christ do with *his* suffering? He offered his suffering to his Father for the salvation of those he loves—you and me and everyone else. And we are called to do the same.

Now, let's think this through a little more. All human beings suffer. But **without** a connection to Jesus Christ—who offered his sufferings to God for the salvation of mankind—suffering is **meaningless**.

That's why a **Godless culture** is obsessed with *eliminating* suffering at all costs, even to the point of **euthanasia**, or “**mercy killing**”—that is, deliberately putting someone to death *like an animal* in order to end their suffering.

**Without a connection to Christ, suffering must be avoided and eliminated at any cost.**

**But *with* a connection to Christ through Baptism, our suffering becomes something we can offer to God—as Jesus did—for the benefit of those we love.**

So, for example, if a parent is suffering from a serious illness, he or she can offer that suffering to God for their fallen-away adult Catholic children, praying for them to return to

the Church. Catholics participate in a real way *in Christ's redemptive suffering* every time we offer our suffering to God for the good of others.

It was actually a **Methodist** man I met in a summer hospital chaplaincy program more than 10 years ago who made me—a Catholic—understand the beauty and power of the Crucifix. He said, “**I don't agree with much of what you believe, but you Catholics know what to do with suffering!**”

Working with sick and dying people in the hospital, helped *him* recognize how this very Catholic symbol—the **Crucifix**—speaks to the reality of human suffering, and the hope hidden in suffering...a hope that **his bare Methodist cross** didn't offer to him...or to those whom he ministered.

So, the objection to the Crucifix by non-Catholic Christians deprives them of the **meaning** hidden in the **suffering** that is part of every human life. And just as John the Baptist's reference to Jesus as a **lamb** encouraged people who understood the **Old Testament origins** of that reference, so too does a **Crucifix** encourage a person who understands the Christian conception of **redemptive suffering**.

There is another unique element of our Catholic faith that non-Catholic Christians often resist: **confessing to a priest**.

Let's now consider how **John the Baptist's words** in today's Gospel speak to the dynamics of **Sacramental Confession**:

*[John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, ‘A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.’ I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel.”* (Jn 1:29-31)

The Gospels of **Mark** and **Luke** tell us that John's was a “*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*” (cf. Mk 1:4; Lk 3:3).

So, John the Baptist baptized with water so...*that Jesus might be known*...and the baptism was for **repentance for the forgiveness of sins**.

Jesus *could* have made himself known by other means, but he chose to be made known **through a particular action** performed by a **particular minister**—the baptism administered by John. This serves as an appropriate symbol for the **Sacrament of**

**Confession**, insofar as repentance is a prerequisite to coming to know Jesus—particularly to know him as *Mercy itself*—through the **particular actions** of a **particular minister**—the priest in the Sacrament of Confession.

This past week, the diocese co-sponsored the **Truth and Love Conference** put on by **Courage**—a **Roman Catholic Apostolate** which ministers to men and women who experience **same-sex-attraction**. During the Conference, we watched an amazing documentary entitled, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, which chronicles the lives of two Catholic men and one Catholic woman who were active in the homosexual lifestyle for years, and all of whom found their way back to the *peace that only the Lord can give* (cf. Jn 14:27) **principally through the Sacrament of Confession in the Catholic Church**.

All three struggled with their identity, and all three had their **true identity as adopted children of God the Father affirmed** and **renewed** particularly through **repentance** followed by **Sacramental Confession**. All three are now active, faithful Catholics who speak of an intimate **love** for Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist—and a **knowledge** of him that flowed directly from their turning back to Jesus, confessing their sins completely and honestly **to a priest**, and receiving the Mercy of Jesus.

For someone who has never experienced the Sacrament of Confession in the fullness of its beauty and mercy, Confession to a priest is something they resist vehemently. For those who *have* repented and turned honestly and humbly **to** Jesus, *through* the priest he has appointed to **receive** the confession of the penitent, and through whom he **extends** his mercy *personally*, Confession to a priest is the **very means** by which they came to **know**—and to realize how personally they are **known by**—Jesus.

Today’s Gospel holds the clues to two **specific**, and *uniquely Catholic* “doorways” to Jesus—the **Crucifix**, which reveals to us of the extent of Jesus’ **love**; and **Confession**, which conveys to us the extent of Jesus’ **mercy**.

Before repentance we can all say with John the Baptist: *I did not know him* (cf. Jn 1:31).

After repentance—and the mercy we receive as a result—we not only can say, **“I know him”**, but most importantly, we can say—with confidence—**“and he knows me!”**