The LITURGICAL SPIRIT of LENT

By the Rev. W. R. Bonniwell, O.P.

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The Liturgical Spirit of Lent

A SERIES OF SERMONS FOR THE SUNDAYS OF LENT, ASH WEDNESDAY, GOOD FRIDAY, AND EASTER SUNDAY

By the Reverend
W. R. BONNIWELL, O.P.

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CHARLES J. CALLAN, O.P., S.T.M.
JOHN A. McHUGH, O.P., S.T.M.

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ASH WEDNESDAY

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Mortification Emphasized in the Lenten Liturgy

"Remember, O man, that thou art dust, and into dust thou shalt return" (Gen., iii. 19).

SYNOPSIS: (1) *The spirit of penance in the early Church.*
(2) *Necessity of penance just as great to-day.*
(3) *Imposition of ashes an invitation to do penance.*
(4) *The prophecy in the Mass urges us to penance.*
(5) *The Gospel cautions us on the nature of penance.*
(6) *The assurance of forgiveness.*

There are few things which show us more emphatically how weakened our faith has become and how soft our age has grown than the Liturgy for Ash Wednesday. In the early days of the Church, they who had sinned seriously were given on Ash Wednesday a rough hair-cloth sprinkled with ashes; they were then publicly expelled from the church and required to retire to some nearby monastery to do severe penance for the duration of Lent. Only on Maundy Thursday, if the bishop deemed they had by then performed sufficient penance, were they re-admitted to the church. In those days, men had strong, virile faith; they were willing to make the greatest sacrifices—even that of life itself—for the faith; and

so, it is not surprising that the comparative few who, under the stress of severe temptation, fell into serious sin, would willingly pay any price to be reconciled with God. And because many of the faithful felt that they had committed sins as great as those of the public penitents, they too approached the bishop on this day and received ashes on their heads as a token of their sinfulness and of their intention of doing penance. At the present day practically all the faithful, it is true, approach to receive the ashes; but alas, what an enormous difference there is between the spirit of modern Christians and that of the early members of the Church! I cannot help wondering if there is even one person here present who would willingly undergo the penances and public humiliations of the early penitents in order to be reconciled with God!

Yet, God has not changed. Nor has sin changed. Sin to-day is just as horrible, just as repulsive, just as loathsome, in the sight of God as it was then. The only change is in us. We have grown soft and our faith has become weak. To-day we perform much of the ancient ceremony of the Church. Would that we performed it with the same spirit that animated our ancestors in the faith!

Necessity of Penance Just As Great To-Day

This situation should provoke us to serious thought. There is no easy road to heaven. The conditions for eternal salvation have not changed one iota. If it was necessary for the early Christians to perform harsh penances and to undergo rigorous fasts in order to be saved, then we who refuse to fast,

we who refuse to perform serious penances, have every reason to be alarmed, for we are not travelling along the road that the Church for twenty centuries has declared to be the road to salvation. Let us reflect on the liturgical prayers of the Church for to-day, in the hope that we may realize something of the spirit which should be ours during this holy season.

The Sacred Liturgy opens this holy season with the most urgent pleas to God for mercy: "Hear me, O Lord, for Thy mercy is kind unto me. . . . Save me, O Lord, for the waters have come in unto my very soul." It implores the almighty, eternal God, "who desires not the death, but the repentance of sinners . . . who is moved by humiliation and appeased by satisfaction," benignly to "look down upon the frailty of human nature" and to grant that we who receive the ashes as a sign of humiliation "may deserve to obtain . . . the pardon of all sins." The whole meaning of Lent is summed up in the prayer:

> "Almighty and eternal God, who didst grant the remedy of Thy pardon to the Ninivites doing penance in ashes and sackcloth, mercifully grant us so to imitate their conduct that we may be like them in obtaining forgiveness."

And as the Church places the ashes on our heads, she uses the solemn words: "Remember, O man, that thou art dust, and into dust thou shalt return." It is a solemn admonition to us to lay aside all ostentatious display and to put on sackcloth and ashes; to correct our sins, "lest suddenly overtaken by the day of death, we seek space for penance, and are not able to find it."

The Prophecy in the Mass Urges Us to Penance

Let us then, conscious of our sinfulness and fully aware of the necessity of doing real penance for our sins, approach the Holy Mass; and let us, who have so often and so deeply offended God, listen to this exhortation from the Lord given in this day's Lesson:

> "Thus saith the Lord: 'Be converted to me with all your heart, in fasting and in weeping and in mourning. And rend your hearts and not your garments, and turn to the Lord your God; for He is gracious and merciful.' . . . Blow the trumpet in Sion, sanctify a fast, gather together the people. . . . Between the porch and the altar the priests, the Lord's ministers, shall weep, and shall say: 'Spare, O Lord, spare Thy people.' "

In this touching passage from the Prophet Joel, we are taught the necessity of repentance and the necessity of penance for our sins; at the same time, we are given another example of how we may appease the anger of God. Fasting, penance, and prayer—these must be our principal practices during Lent if we would disarm the divine anger.

The Gospel Cautions Us on the Nature of Penance

Fasting in itself is of little spiritual value. It becomes priceless only when performed with the right motives. Hence, Our Lord in the Gospel warns us not to fast from motives of vanity or ostentation so that our fellow-men may notice we are fasting and think of us as highly mortified. Our Saviour would have us hide, in so far as possible, our mortifications

from the sight of men; we should perform them as it were in secret: "And thy Father, who seeth in secret, will repay thee."

Our Divine Lord gives a second counsel for us to follow: that we accompany our prayers and fasting with almsgiving. Christ urges us not to accumulate "treasures on earth . . . but to lay up treasures in heaven, where neither the rust nor moth doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal." If we are so poor that we have no money to give away, at least we can always perform the spiritual works of mercy. There is none so poor but that he can say a kind word or perform a kind deed.

The Assurance of Forgiveness

If we enter into the holy season of Lent conscious of our sinfulness and fully determined to do all in our power to atone for our sins, then we may plead to God for forgiveness with every assurance that our prayers will be heard. Listen to the encouraging words of to-day's Introit:

> "Thou hast mercy upon all, O Lord, and hatest none of the things which Thou hast made, overlooking the sins of men for the sake of repentance, and sparing them; for Thou art the Lord our God."

This plea for mercy, with its confident expectation of being heard, is repeated in the Gradual; and after it, the Liturgy uses its favorite Lenten Psalm:

> "O Lord, repay us not according to the sins we have com-

mitted. . . . Help us, O God our Saviour . . . and forgive us for Thy name's sake."

If we but persevere in these Lenten penances, and if our works of mortification are accompanied by sentiments such as these, then, no matter how great our sins may be or how numerous they may be, no matter how long we may have been away from God, we may be assured of at last winning divine mercy. This is the hope the Church holds out to us both in the Gradual and in the Offertory; and in her eagerness the Church, looking ahead to the future, visualizes it as already present when she exclaims in the Offertory:

> "I will extol Thee, O Lord, for Thou hast held me up. . . . O Lord, I cried to Thee, and Thou hast healed me."

Let us, then, not be dismayed by the obstacles that lie ahead of us. The road before us, which we are called upon to travel, is indeed a hard and difficult one. But divine grace will not be lacking to help us; for "he who will meditate upon the law of the Lord day and night shall bring forth his fruit in due season" (Communion). We may be confident that God, who is granting us the grace to "begin this venerable season of fasting with suitable piety," will enable us to "continue it with tranquil devotion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen" (Collect).

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

FIRST SUNDAY OF LENT

The Season of Penance and Grace

"Behold now is the acceptable time" (II Cor., vi. 2).

SYNOPSIS: (1) *The Church repeats her call to penance.*
(2) *The excuses alleged for refusing this call.*
(3) *But this call of grace must not be neglected.*
(4) *God will assist us in this difficult task.*

After the impressive ceremonies of Ash Wednesday and the penitential character of the several following days, we might expect that to-day the Liturgy would set before us for our meditation some scene from the Passion of Christ. Instead, she issues another and even more insistent appeal for penance. It is true that in the early Church to-day was the first day of Lent, evidence of this we still see in the Secret of to-day's Mass; nevertheless, despite the later addition of Ash Wednesday, the Church in her profound knowledge of human nature has retained this Mass unchanged because she knows well its vital importance for us.

Excuses for Not Doing Penance

For the thought of penance is irksome to us all. Even good people respond slowly to this call to surrender innocent pleasures and amusements and to enter upon a period of con

tinued abstinence, if not of complete fasting. Many claim that they cannot fast; that their health, while not delicate, is not robust; moreover, they have hard work to perform every day, and they need all the nourishment and rest they can get. Others claim their lot in life is very hard, and so they surely cannot be expected to give up the few pleasures they have—smoking, an occasional drink, candy, the movies, and the like. As for any special almsgiving throughout Lent, people will tell you that is utterly out of the question; for while their wages or incomes are higher than ever, yet they can barely meet their expenses! And so for these people Lent means not a time of fasting, prayer, and penance; it is merely a time of *modified* pleasure.

If this is the language of Christians who lead a fairly blameless life, what response can we expect from worldlings and from those living in sin? To ask a man whose very rule of conduct is self-indulgence to enter upon a prolonged period of self-denial, is asking him to transform himself into another being. And these people use the very difficulty of such an attempt as an excuse for not even trying! They insist that the Church is asking what is almost impossible.

But This Call of Grace Must Not Be Neglected

But whether the effort to enter fully into the spirit of the Lenten season costs you little or much, Holy Mother the Church insists that you make that effort. Make no mistake about it: Lent is not merely a time of restricted pleasure, a time of trifling self-denials, a time of shallow sentimentality

over the literary beauty of the Lenten Liturgy, a season in which our thoughts are slightly tinged with melancholy over the sufferings and death of Christ. In the eyes of God's Church Lent is a very serious season; and what God's Church is asking—nay, demanding—of you is an "all-out" effort in this spiritual battle. "Be converted to Me," cries the Almighty, "with all your heart" (Joel, ii. 12). With *all* your heart—not just a part of it.

To arouse you from your dangerous lethargy, the Sacred Liturgy of to-day's Mass repeats to you the earnest warning of the Apostle in the Epistle:

> "Brethren: We do exhort that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. For He saith: 'In an acceptable time I have heard thee, and in the day of salvation I have helped thee.' Behold now is the acceptable time, behold now is the day of salvation."

Not some vague time in the future, but *now, to-day,* God is calling you. He is calling you and offering you the necessary grace to lead a better life. Perhaps He has every reason to be angry with you, to punish you most severely; but, instead, He is offering you one of His most priceless gifts. And woe to you, if it is offered in vain!

Try to arouse yourselves to the seriousness of this matter. Place before your eyes the example of Christ fasting in the desert for forty days and nights, fasting till He was completely exhausted, as related in to-day's Gospel. Do you think that our Divine Lord underwent that prolonged torture and the deep humiliation of being tempted by a being He loathed, as a merely theatrical gesture? Our Saviour acted

only from the highest and weightiest motives. He did not need that terrible torture and humiliation for Himself, for He was spotless. But, as St. Thomas observes, "Christ is set as an example to all through faith," and "His action is our instruction." If then the Son of God considered that the agony of a forty days' fast was not too great a price to pay for the lesson which He wanted you to learn, then that lesson must be of the highest importance to you. It is an example that you can disregard only at your greatest peril.

God Will Assist Us in This Difficult Task

If this summons to wage a relentless and vigorous warfare against your spiritual enemies seems to you to be too arduous an undertaking, involving as it does so many hardships and sacrifices; and if the chances of victory appear most remote, if not well-nigh negligible, then bear this in mind: today's Liturgy not only calls on you to fight, but it also brings you a heartening message—you will not fight that battle alone. It is God who is calling you to battle, and God is almighty. God in His mercy promises you, sinner though you may be, His all-powerful assistance. To-day's Mass begins with this glorious promise of divine help; it is repeated in varying words over and over again—in the Gradual, in the Tract, in the Offertory, and in the Communion of the Mass!

> "He shall call upon Me, and I will hear him; I will deliver him and glorify him. . . . Because he has hoped in Me, I will deliver him. . . . He shall cry to Me, and I will hear him."

The inspired writer confidently predicts that the soul which places itself under the protection of the Most High "shall abide under the protection of the God of heaven. . . . It shall say unto the Lord: 'Thou art my protector, and my refuge, and my God.' "

Have courage, then. Almighty God stands ready to help you. Despite past sins, despite numerous failures in the past, despite broken promises of a better life, despite the almost insurmountable difficulties that lie ahead, your God is waiting to help you. Under His wing you will conquer; because you have hoped in Him, He will deliver you. It is true the road is a hard one, the difficulties are perhaps immense; but "the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence and the violent bear it away" (Matt., ii. 12). Penance that is easy ceases to be penance. There is no *pleasant* suffering; suffering means *pain.* But if we have the faith and courage to enter wholeheartedly into the spirit of Lent, we shall discover that this voluntary privation of worldly pleasures will not render us destitute, nor dejected, nor will it kill us. We shall begin to learn the paradox of the Saints: that the loss of all these things means little, very little, when the peace of God reigns in our hearts. That peace and happiness will be ours just in proportion to our courage and our faith.

To the uncomprehending world, we shall appear to be almost dying, yet we shall be living a truer and a fuller life. The world will not understand how we can give up all its pleasures without being sorrowful; yet, we shall be always rejoicing. The world will think that in surrendering so many things we have become poor; and yet, in gaining Christ, we

shall have gained all! These are some of the Christian paradoxes enumerated by St. Paul in to-day's Epistle.

Let us then resolutely begin the fight. And while we perform the necessary acts of physical mortification, let us implore God for the necessary grace that "we may also restrain our minds from guilty pleasures" (Secret). And as we offer up the Holy Sacrifice this morning, let us unite ourselves with the priest and say with him from the very bottom of our hearts (Postcommunion):

> "May we be restored, O Lord, by partaking of Thy holy Sacrament! May it purify us from vices, and give us our part in the mystery of salvation! Through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen."

SECOND SUNDAY OF LENT

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The Guilt of Sin

"Remember us, O Lord; visit us with Thy salvation" (Ps. cv. 4).

SYNOPSIS: (1) *Penance awakens consciousness of the enormity of sin.*
(2) *The soul becomes frightened at its guilt.*
(3) *The Apostle especially warns against impurity.*
(4) *For our encouragement the Gospel reminds us of the reward in heaven.*

During the past week you have bravely responded to the call of the Church to a penitential manner of life. You have spent time in earnest prayer, in at least a modified form of fasting, and in the performance of many works of self-denial. You have reflected on the sinfulness of your past life, and you have recalled the many wasted opportunities you have had for doing good. These salutary exercises are bound to engender fear as to the ultimate outcome of your life; so you have wisely determined to trifle no longer with God's grace.

Fervent prayer accompanied by serious mortifications, with sincere repentance for the mistakes of the past and a firm determination to do better in the future, all these things can have only one effect, namely, to draw you closer to God. But none can draw closer to God without developing at the same time a deepening consciousness of the holiness of God

and of the enormity of sin, particularly, of one's own sins. Faults which you had hitherto lightly considered, now begin to appear in a more serious light. Sins which you had looked upon as pardonable or natural human weaknesses, are now beginning to assume in your eyes a terrifying gravity. And so your soul begins to be filled with apprehension and even fear at the thought of divine justice.

The Soul Becomes Frightened at Its Guilt

Nor is this uneasiness diminished by your realizing more and more how utterly weak you are spiritually. With this awareness of your weakness and of your guilt, your soul cries aloud to God, pleading for His mercy and for spiritual strength. These are the thoughts with which the Liturgy begins to-day's Mass (Introit and Collect):

> "Remember, O Lord, Thy compassions and Thy mercies. . . . Deliver us, O God, from all our tribulations. . . . In Thee I put my trust; let me not be disappointed!
>
> "O God, who seest that we have no power of ourselves, keep us both inwardly and outwardly. . . ."

Such prayers are most opportune. For the further you advance along the path of penance, the more keenly do you realize that God has not called you to a life of worldliness and sin, but rather that "this is the will of God, your sanctification" (Epistle). Your sanctification! What has this will of God meant to you in the past? Let your memory travel back to your youth and recall, if you can, the multitude of sins you have committed. Perhaps some of them, perhaps many of

them, were mortal sins; and mortal sin is the one, the only, unmixed evil in the world. It is so frightful an evil that even the infinite wisdom of God, according to St. Thomas, could not devise a punishment equal to the offense.

The Apostle Especially Warns against Impurity

Among the many spiritual dangers to which you are exposed, the Church in the Epistle of to-day warns you against one vice in particular—the sin of impurity. It singles out this sin, because judging from the history of the human race this sin appears to be the deadliest enemy of man. It invades all conditions and states of life; it attacks all ages. It creates in the soul a strong aversion and disgust for everything pertaining to religion; it leads only too frequently to apostasy and infidelity; and often it causes final despair at the hour of death. This special warning is all the more necessary because the world attempts to hide the hideousness of this sin by speaking of it in a jesting way and by regarding it as a pardonable and natural manner of acting.

But be not deceived by the misleading language of a sensual world. Be on your guard against these sins, "for the Lord is the avenger of these things." If to your other sins there must be added the guilt of this vice, then truly "the troubles of your heart are multiplied." Humbly ask God to "bring you out of your distresses; to look upon your affliction and your pain, and to forgive you all your sins" (Gradual).

The Gospel Encourages Us with the Thought of Heaven

To encourage and strengthen us in our good resolutions, the Liturgy now sets before us the Transfiguration of Our Lord. It narrates to us how Christ went up on a high mountain with Peter, James, and John, and how "He was transfigured before them. And His face shone as the sun: and His garments became white as snow. . . . And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying: 'Tell the vision to no man, till the Son of Man be risen from the dead.' "

According to St. Thomas, Our Lord underwent this transfiguration "in order to show His glory and to arouse men to a desire of it." So, on this Second Sunday of Lent, when Easter seems so far away and the labor of reformation appears to be so great, the Church would fain have us reflect on the reward which will be ours if we continue in our good resolutions. Penance is indeed hard and irksome; spiritual improvement is a long and difficult process; but what a reward will be ours if we have the courage to persevere! "This is the will of God, your sanctification." God wants us to become sanctified, to become holy, in order that we may become fit one day to behold the Beatific Vision. Often recall to mind this magnificent reward which God has in store for those who are "faithful unto death"—to be forever free from all suffering, secure from all temptation, safe from all violence, our body and mind rid of every defect and blemish, enjoying the companionship of the Saints (those heroes and heroines of God of every age), the dazzling spectacle of the angelic choirs,

but, far above all these delights, the ecstatic glory of seeing God face to face!

So surpassing a reward is well worth the price you are asked to pay. But if you would enter into this life, you must keep the commandments. Gladly then, "O Lord, I will meditate on Thy commandments, and I will lift up my hands," praying for help to observe "the commandments which I love" (Offertory). With this promise of heaven before us, let us redouble our prayers and good works that God may be appeased by our mortifications; that our sacrifices "may be profitable both to our devotion and to our salvation" (Secret); and that we "who are refreshed with His Sacraments, may serve Him by a manner of life pleasing to Him, through Christ our Lord. Amen" (Postcommunion).

THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

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Sin Darkens the Intellect

"For ye were once darkness; but now children of light" (Eph., v. 8).

SYNOPSIS: (1) *On this Sunday formerly began the examination of the candidates for Baptism—"the Sacrament of Light."*
(2) *This ancient Mass has been retained, because Penance is "the second Baptism."*
(3) *Before Christ, the world was in darkness.*
(4) *Christ came to illumine the world.*
(5) *Sin, especially impurity, darkens the intellect.*
(6) *As children of light, we must avoid sin.*

In the early Church, to-day was called "Scrutiny Sunday," because there began this week the scrutinizing or examining of candidates for Easter Baptism. In the Greek Liturgy, this Sacrament was given the expressive title of *illumination* or *light,* because by the faith one professes in Baptism the heart is illuminated. This expression was borrowed by the Roman Liturgy; that is why we find the word *light* occurring over and over again in to-day's Mass, in allusion to the Sacrament of Baptism. The catechumens were warned in the Epistle of one of the greatest dangers against this "light"; and then there was read to them a Gospel telling of Christ exorcizing a demoniac—a subject of the greatest interest to them, as their

own exorcism would occupy a prominent place in the elaborate ceremonial of Easter Baptism.

But, as you are well aware, that impressive custom of the Lenten preparation for Baptism has long since disappeared. Why then has not the Church altered to-day's Liturgy to suit different customs? Why does she retain a Mass whose original significance no longer applies? The reason is easy to find.

In olden times, Baptism was frequently compared to another Sacrament—that of Penance. Indeed, Penance was often called a "second baptism," and sometimes "the laborious baptism." It was called a "second baptism" because the sanctifying grace lost by mortal sin after the first baptism was regained; it was called "the laborious baptism" because of the rigorous penances sinners had to undergo before being granted absolution. On account of this likeness between these two Sacraments, the Church has retained this ancient Mass. She feels that its message, so important to the catechumens, is equally important to those fallen Christians who are now during Lent, by prayer, fasting, and penance, preparing themselves for a "second, a laborious baptism"—the Sacrament of Penance. Using, then, this interpretation of to-day's Liturgy, let us apply the lessons it contains to ourselves.

Before Christ, the World Was in Darkness

Among the many graces we obtain by Baptism, there is the one so often alluded to in to-day's Mass—*light*. St. Thomas declares that "the baptized are illuminated by Christ

concerning the knowledge of truth." Let us consider just one phase of this illumination.

Prior to the coming of Christ, consider how far astray man's intellect had led him. Man who had sinned in our first parents in the presumptuous hope of being like God, sank lower than the level of the beasts. Man was soon plunged into the grossest darkness not only concerning God but even concerning himself, his nature, and his destiny. The world sank into the most shameless and stupid idolatry; so blinded had mankind become that—to use the phrase of Bossuet—man adored everything as God except God Himself. Hopelessly in error concerning God, man's knowledge of himself was equally false; he knew not whence he came nor whither he was going. Even the greatest pagan philosophers were of little avail in this dark night of spiritual blindness.

Then Christ came into the world. "He came into the world," says the Angelic Doctor, "first to make clear the Truth: thus, He says of Himself: 'For this was I born, and for this I came into the world: that I should give testimony to the Truth' (John, xviii. 37)." He came therefore to teach us who and what God is, to teach us the lofty dignity of man whom God has made but a little lower than the angels. He came to teach us our glorious destiny and the means whereby we might attain it. Truly, Christ "enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world" (John, i. 3).

How grateful mankind should be for this great deliverance! How our own hearts should overflow with love and gratitude for being led from the darkness and error of sin, first by the waters of Baptism, and again by the Sacrament of

Penance—our second baptism! For actual sin, when serious, not only separates us from God but it begins to darken divine truths in the soul; it begins to afflict us with spiritual blindness. Alas, how often do we meet some fallen-away Catholic, whose knowledge of God's truths has become so dim as to be almost extinct! We should tremble lest by our carelessness and indifference, having started along the same road, we should end in the same spiritual blindness.

Let us then be on guard for the dangers that lie about us: our own spiritual weakness, the power of our bad habits, temptations, the evil example of those about us, and a hundred other perils and snares.

> "Let our eyes be ever towards the Lord, for He shall pluck our feet out of the snare! He will have mercy on us, for we are weak. Let us place our trust in Him and we shall not be disappointed" (Introit).
>
> "Let us earnestly pray that He will regard our humble prayers and that He will stretch forth His hand to defend us" (Collect).

Sin, Especially Impurity, Darkens the Intellect

All sin is therefore dangerous to us; but there is one in particular against which the Epistle warns us in to-day's Mass. The catechumens were warned against it last Sunday and to-day the warning is repeated, for the sin of impurity, in its manifold forms, has brought disaster to countless human beings. The Apostle urges us to shun it in any of its various forms, for "because of these things cometh the anger of God upon the children of unbelief. Be ye not therefore partakers

with them. . . . Walk as the children of the light; for the fruit of the light is in all goodness, and justice, and truth."

We mortals learn but slowly. Despite education, learning, and even years of experience, we are in matters pertaining to the spiritual life truly stupid. We know our weaknesses, our spiritual poverty, the strength of temptation, and we are fully aware of what constitute for us the proximate occasions of sin. Yet, with all this knowledge, we deliberately grow careless; we begin once more playing with fire, and the inevitable results follow. It is a striking commentary on our stupidity, that when we fall we are often astonished at our fall and wonder how it was possible! This attitude of ours is most dangerous. We are deliberately turning our backs to the light we have received in Baptism; we are returning to the errors, the falsehoods, and the spiritual blindness of the world. We are intentionally exchanging light for darkness, grace for sin, life for death.

Not only is this the rankest ingratitude towards Our Saviour, but it has a particularly dangerous angle. For, when the soul begins to see the folly of its act, to perceive the depth to which it has fallen, to realize the baseness of its ingratitude, then it may give way to discouragement and wonder whether it is worth while to struggle any longer. Or it may deliver itself up to the blackest despair, feel that all is lost, and then frenziedly plunge itself into further sin. Our Lord warns us against this frightful possibility in to-day's Gospel. He tells us how the unclean spirit, when driven out of a man, declared:

> "'I will return to my house, whence I came out.' . . . Then he goeth and taketh with him seven other spirits more

wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there; and the last state of that man becometh worse than the first."

As Children of Light We Must Avoid Sin

In the past, perhaps, we have foolishly ignored this warning of Our Saviour; and we have verified the truth of His predictions when through discouragement or despair we failed to rise at once from sin. But now that we have been, through God's mercy and grace, cleansed from these evil spirits, we are become once more "children of light." Surely, we have learned there is no true happiness in the world or in its pursuits. God's law, difficult though it is at times, is the only thing that will bring us true happiness:

> "The laws of the Lord are right, rejoicing our heart; they are sweeter than the honey fresh from the honeycomb" (Offertory).

By God's grace, we have been led from the darkness and errors of the world. As Christians, we do not belong to the world and the world is not our home. As Christians, there is but one place where, during our sojourn on earth, we may dwell in safety: it is at the altar of our Eucharistic God. King David, expressing the joy of the pilgrims who visited the holy city of Jerusalem, exclaimed: "At last the sparrow has found a home and the turtle-dove a nest!" But we Christians have found a still greater home, one at the very altar of God —"at Thy altars, O Lord of hosts!"

> "Happy are they who dwell in Thy house. They shall praise Thee forever and ever" (Communion).

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

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The Source of Christian Joy

"I rejoiced at the things that were said to me: 'We shall go into the house of the Lord' " (Ps. cxxi. 1).

SYNOPSIS: (1) *The ancient Liturgy bade the catechumens rejoice, for soon they would receive great spiritual treasures.*
(2) *We too should rejoice because we have already received them from our Mother, the Church.*
(3) *Our Mother, unlike the Synagogue, rules us by love.*
(4) *She feeds us with Heavenly Food.*
(5) *We should be deeply grateful for these holy mysteries.*

To-day, we are mid-way through the penitential season. As penance and mortification bring sadness to human nature, we might expect that the Church to-day would take some cognizance of our sadness and console us in our misery. But only by the briefest allusion does the Liturgy show it is aware of our feelings, and then it is to remind us, in the Collect, that "we are being justly punished for our deeds."

The Church has something entirely different in mind, for from the beginning to the end of the Mass her tone is one of

joy and gladness. *"Lætare Jerusalem!* Rejoice, O Jerusalem, O Church of God! Rejoice with joy, . . . that you may exult!" (Introit). What is the meaning of this unlooked-for canticle of joy in the midst of the penitential season?

We mentioned to you last Sunday that on that day there began in the ancient Church the "great scrutiny" or examination of all the catechumens who were candidates for Easter Baptism. All during Lent, these candidates have been earnestly preparing themselves for that great solemnity. On the very morning when Christ the Saviour rises from the tomb, they too will rise from the tomb of paganism and of sin. That incalculable blessing for which they so sincerely long, and to obtain which they are willing to risk their very lives (since the persecutions were not yet ended), in just a few short weeks will be theirs! In a very short time, the waters of Baptism will wash all sin from their souls, and they will receive the gift of faith; their souls will be stamped with the glorious and perpetual mark of a Christian, of a follower of Christ. Nay more! During that Easter Vigil, they will also be signed with the holy oils—they will be made soldiers of Christ, and another dazzling character shall have been stamped upon their souls forever! And as that never-to-be-forgotten Vigil ends, these remarkable spiritual gifts will be climaxed by one even far greater: the neophytes will receive their God in Holy Communion! O happy catechumens! What other message could the Church send you than to bid you: "Rejoice, O City of God, and come together all you that love her! Rejoice with joy, you that have been in sorrow, that you may exult!" And well may you rejoice "at the things that were said to you;

namely, that you will go into the house of the Lord" (Gradual).

To-day's Mass, then, was an outburst of joy which the Church could no longer restrain as she thought of the lavish treasures which she would soon pour on the happy catechumens.

Our Mother, the Church, Has Already Given Us These Treasures

Yet, all that she says to-day in her Liturgy may be applied in the fullest sense to every one of us who have already received those three great Sacraments. This exultation of the Church should make us realize how truly invaluable are those gifts which we have already received. Let us then adopt the fine appreciation which the Church sets on those Sacraments; let us try to arouse within ourselves a better valuation of the precious gifts God has so generously bestowed upon us. By Baptism we have been united to Christ, as members to their Head; and by Confirmation the Holy Ghost infused Himself into our souls; and in both Sacraments we received resplendent and imperishable characters or marks that will remain with the soul forever. And if the catechumens had reason for joy that they were about to receive Holy Communion, how we are to be envied who have been accorded this favor countless times!

Our Mother, the Church, Unlike the Synagogue, Rules Us by Love

We too, then, should rejoice not only in having been received into the House of the Lord, but also because of what that reception means. It means, as the Epistle declares, that we have acquired a tender and solicitous Mother—the Church herself. The Church is the Spouse of Christ, who "delivered Himself up for it" (Eph., v. 25); and from this union we are born by the Sacrament of Baptism and strengthened and nourished by the other Sacraments of our truly Holy Mother. This Mother of ours is not like the Synagogue, a slave-mother who reared her children in abject fear and enslaved them by an intolerable ceremonial with its unending and unbearable restrictions. That mother ruled by the law of fear and punishment—a state befitting slaves. But our Holy Mother rules us by love; and like her we are also free—free "with the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free." Let us then rejoice "at the things that were said to us," that we should "go into the House of the Lord"—in effect, that we should become children of so surpassing a Mother. In this House of God we shall find peace and spiritual abundance and security from our spiritual enemies; for just as the holy city of Jerusalem is safeguarded from its enemies because "mountains are round about it; so the Lord is round about His people, from henceforth now and forever" (Tract).

She Feeds Us with Heavenly Food

How does our Mother, the Church, afford us this peace, abundance, and security? The Gospel gives us several clues. In the first place, it tells us that Jesus "went up the mountain and there sat with His disciples. Now the Passover, the festival day of the Jews, was at hand." The Passover! The feast which Jesus so earnestly desired to celebrate with His Apostles (Luke, xxii. 15). Doubtless, the Evangelist mentioned the nearness of this feast because of the miracle Our Lord was about to perform, for there is a connection between the two. And this miracle is the second clue. Taking compassion on the hungry multitude, Jesus blessed the five loaves and distributed them to the assembled throng, numbering some 5000 men. And when the men had eaten as much as they would, Our Lord said to His disciples:

> " 'Gather up the fragments which remain, lest they be lost.' They gathered up, therefore, and filled twelve baskets with the fragments of the five barley loaves, which remained over and above to those who had eaten. Now those men, when they had seen what a miracle Jesus had done, said: 'This is, of a truth, the Prophet who is to come into the world.' "

This Gospel is placed before us for two reasons: to impress upon us God's compassion for the hunger of His children, and to show His omnipotence whereby a great multitude was fed with a few loaves of bread. We too are spiritually hungry, we badly need food because of our weakness; God sees our hunger and has compassion on us. He intends to satisfy that hunger by another act of His omnipotence; only

the food He will give us will be far more wonderful. What is this food? Let Our Saviour answer: "The Bread that I will give is My flesh, for the life of the world" (John, vi. 52). And with this food He will feed countless millions without the Food being diminished.

We Should Be Deeply Grateful for These Holy Mysteries

Let us, then, enter wholly into the marvellous and instructive Liturgy of to-day's Mass. The Church bids us rejoice because, through no merits of our own, we have been enriched with the most extraordinary divine graces: Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Eucharist. Despite our unworthiness, despite our many sins, despite our indifference, God has heaped upon us treasures of His goodness, His love, His mercy. If He has been so lavish while we were indifferent and careless, what a torrent of graces and blessings may we not expect if we turn to Him with all our heart! Justly does the Church say to us: "Praise ye the Lord, for He is good; sing ye to His name, for He is sweet" (Offertory).

> "Let us fervently beseech our merciful God to grant us to handle with sincere worship, and ever to receive with faithful hearts, the Holy Mysteries whereon we are continually fed" (Postcommunion).

PASSION SUNDAY

PASSION SUNDAY

The Humanity and Divinity of Christ

"Christ being come a high-priest of the good things to come . . . by His own blood entered once into the sanctuary, having obtained an eternal redemption" (Heb. ix. 11).

SYNOPSIS: (1) *The general nature of Passiontide.*
(2) *The Humanity of Christ is emphasized.*
(3) *The Divinity of Christ is affirmed.*
(4) *The Mass is the memorial of Christ's Passion.*

To-day is called Passion Sunday, because the Liturgy—for the first time since Lent began—directs our attention to the Passion of Christ. Thus far we have been considering our sinfulness and the urgent need of doing penance; but to-day this thought is submerged as we begin our immediate preparation for the events of Holy Week. If we would enter completely into the spirit of this period, we will recall that long before Lent came into existence these two weeks of Passiontide had been set aside by the Church—very likely by the Apostles themselves—as a time of the most rigorous penance. So we should endeavor to increase our prayers, our penances, our mortifications, during these two weeks. If we have taken Lent carelessly thus far, surely, if we have any gratitude whatever in our hearts towards Christ, we will endeavor by the

heroism of our efforts during Passiontide to make up for our unchristianlike conduct during this holy season.

Next week, the Church will set before us the sufferings and death of Our Saviour. But before she does so, she wants to prepare us by making sure that we understand certain fundamental dogmas connected with the Passion; so that Holy Week will not be for us a time of shallow emotionalism or mere sentimentality, but a time of solid and lasting benefit.

We are told that in the whole Antiphonary of the Church there is not a Mass whose music is as beautiful and full of pathos as this one; and we might add that in the whole Roman Missal there is not a Mass whose text surpasses this one in dramatic composition. It reminds one of some great symphony whose opening chords, ominous and foreboding in their suggestion, quickly fade away only to re-appear again and again with their insistent note of impending tragedy. Thus, to-day's Mass begins with the appealing cry of the just man, hemmed in by his enemies, begging God to come to his aid; and this foreboding note sounded by the Introit re-appears in the Gradual and again in the Tract, and in a masterly way suggests the nearness of Calvary, while at the same time it furnishes the background of the Passion to the principal theme of to-day's Mass.

> "Judge me, O God, and distinguish my cause from the nation that is not holy, deliver me from the unjust and deceitful man (Introit).
>
> "Deliver me from my enemies, O Lord. . . . Thou art my deliverer, O Lord, from the angry nations; Thou wilt lift me up above them that rise against me . . ." (Gradual).

"Often have they fought against me from my youth. . . . The wicked have wrought upon my back, they have continued their iniquities" (Tract).

The Humanity of Christ Is Emphasized

These verses are taken from the royal Prophet David, who was a type of Christ; and the Liturgy uses them to represent the feelings of Our Lord as He saw His enemies closing in on Him. He was fully aware of their evil plots; and He knew the terrible tortures and horrible death that they would soon inflict upon Him. The Church deliberately uses these verses that suggest great fear, for she would impress upon us the reality of Christ's humanity. Even in the early ages of the Church, some heretics denied the humanity of Christ, and others claimed that He only *appeared* to suffer. The Church would have us clearly understand that the Saviour was truly human; that He had a human nature just like ours; that He experienced human sentiments as we do—sentiments of sadness, anguish, horror, agony, and the like; and that, in addition, He keenly felt the physical pains inflicted upon His sacred Body.

But while the Liturgy thus emphasizes the reality of the humanity and of the sufferings of Christ, let us not get the impression from these verses of David that Christ was put to death against His will. Our Saviour went to the death of the cross of His own free will: "No man taketh My life from Me, but I lay it down of Myself" (John, ix. 17). The Jews and the Roman soldiers were instruments that Our Lord made use

of to offer up His life to His Heavenly Father; for Christ is a high-priest, who came into this world to offer as a sacrifice to the Father His own Body and Blood.

In the Epistle of the Mass, St. Paul dwells on this priesthood and sacrifice of Christ, and he shows how superior it is to the priesthood of the Old Law. In the Old Law, the high-priest had to enter once every year the Holy of Holies, and his offering was merely the blood of animals. Being himself a sinner, he had first to make his offering for his own sins and then for those of the people; and finally, this blood-offering cleansed merely from legal defilements and not from sin. But Christ, our high-priest, was utterly sinless; the offering He made was that of His own Blood, and this was so efficacious that it had to be offered only once to wash away, not merely legal defilements, but all our sins "so that they who are called may receive the promise of eternal inheritance in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The Divinity of Christ Is Affirmed

But whence comes this great efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ? It comes from the fact that this Man whom we call Christ is also God. In Him, the divine and human natures are united by the hypostatic union in the one Divine Person, and because of this union all the human acts of Christ, including His sufferings and death, acquire an infinite value in the sight of the Father. The Gospel stresses this, for it is something we must bear in mind when we see Christ arrested by the rabble, dragged off to the high-priest, crossexamined like

a common criminal, slapped in the face, brutally scourged, spit upon, mocked, and finally led to a horrible death. We may well ask ourselves in amazement: "Can this man be really God? Is it possible that God would permit Himself to be so outraged by His creatures?" The Gospel answers: "Yes, He is God." But let us hear this assurance from the lips of Christ Himself.

The Gospel narrates how Christ reproached the Jews for not believing in Him, *although He is absolutely sinless.* His declaration: "Which of you shall convince Me of sin?", shows that His argument was: "It is impossible for Me to sin." The inference is obvious: His human nature could not sin, because of its hypostatic union with the divine nature. This meaning is supported by the rest of the Gospel; for in it, Our Lord refers to the Father in a familiar way as one equal speaking of another equal; He promises eternal life to those who keep His (Christ's) teaching; and finally He proclaims His Divinity in words which even the bigoted Jews cannot misunderstand. He declares that even before Abraham was born —some 2000 years before—He, Christ, existed! This statement aroused the fury of the Jews, for it was couched in language that was an unmistakable declaration of Christ's Divinity: "Before Abraham was made, I am." Among the Jews, this phrase was sacred to Jehovah. For example, in the Book of Exodus (iii. 14) we read: "God said to Moses: *I am who am.*" Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel: "*He who is* hath sent me to you." The infuriated Jews understood Christ's meaning, and "they took up stones therefore to cast

at Him," for stoning to death was the penalty prescribed in the Mosaic Law for blasphemy.

Next week, when the Church dwells upon the details of the Saviour's death on the cross, we would do well to keep clearly in our mind these thoughts suggested by to-day's Mass. As we contemplate the appalling sufferings and incredible humiliations inflicted upon the Saviour, let us remember that He really and truly did experience those sufferings in His human nature; that He really felt the bitterness of the Passion as acutely as if no union existed between His human nature and the divine. Furthermore, let us not be scandalized that He should have willed to undergo such sufferings; rather let us see in this voluntary abasement the immensity of God's love for us.

The Mass Is a Memorial of Christ's Passion

Our Divine Lord knew only too well how quickly we ungrateful mortals would forget His sufferings and His death. And so, when about to offer Himself on the cross to the Father, Our Saviour could not "have given any more illustrious indication of His unbounded love towards us than by bequeathing to us a visible sacrifice, by which that sacrifice of the cross would be renewed, and its memory daily celebrated with the greatest utility, unto the consummation of the ages."[1] The Communion prayer of the Mass reminds us of this unbloody sacrifice: " 'This is My Body, which shall be offered for you: this chalice is the new testament in My Blood,' saith the Lord:

[1]"Catechism of the Council of Trent," edited by Callan-McHugh, p. 255.

'Do this, as often as you receive it, in commemoration of Me.' "

In a few moments, here on our altar, we shall perpetuate the same sacrifice which Our Saviour offered up on the cross for our redemption. Let us all then unite in a most fervent prayer to the Father, beseeching Him that "these gifts we offer" of the Body and Blood of His Son "may loosen the bonds of our wickedness, and obtain for us the gifts of His mercy" (Secret).

PALM SUNDAY

PALM SUNDAY

Contrast in To-Day's Liturgy

"Father, if this chalice may not pass away, but I must drink it, Thy will be done" (Matt., xxvi. 42).

SYNOPSIS: (1) *The joyful palm procession is followed by a sad Mass.*
(2) *But this sadness is tempered by a note of victory.*
(3) *The sufferings of the cross are but the prelude to glory.*
(4) *May we learn this lesson!*

The Liturgy of to-day presents two contrasting moods—great joy and great sorrow. Down to the end of the Middle Ages, in imitation of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem, it was customary for the faithful to assemble at some church or station several miles distant from the cathedral or parish church. There palm branches would be distributed to the people, a procession would form, and the people singing joyfully would return to their own church, where Mass would follow.

But the Mass was and is of an entirely different spirit. It begins and ends in grief. Nowhere is there the faintest reference to Our Lord's entry into Jerusalem, nor to palms nor to any procession. One reason of this is that the proces-

sion was—at least in the Roman Rite—a later addition to the Mass. Even so, it is not out of harmony with the Mass.

Last Sunday, the Liturgy directed our attention to certain important dogmas concerning our redemption: that Christ is really God, that He is also really man, and that because of the hypostatic union of these two natures in one Divine Person Christ's death on the cross had an infinite value. Today, the last Sunday before Good Friday, we naturally expect the Church to draw again our attention to the same subject. She does; but in a manner that is at first rather surprising.

The Sadness of the Mass Tempered by a Note of Victory

The Mass vividly places before us the crucifixion by beginning with the very Psalm Our Lord made use of in His agony on the cross:

> "O God, my God, look upon me. Why hast Thou forsaken me? O Lord, remove not Thy help to a distance from me, look towards my defense. . . . O God, my God, look upon me. Why hast Thou forsaken me?"

The Collect or Prayer also speaks of Christ's Passion, as do the Epistle, the Tract, the Gospel, the Offertory, and the Communion. This is precisely what we would expect on this day; but what we do not look for is the triumphant note that we meet in the first part of the Mass. For, after the almost despairing cry of Christ on the cross which we just read from the Introit, the Collect begins to speak already of His resurrection! And while the Epistle describes the sacrifice Our

Lord made, the Liturgy does not end her selection on this note, but deliberately continues so as to include Paul's description of the triumph of Christ. Because of this sacrifice

> "God hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a Name, which is above every name: that at the Name of Jesus every knee should bend. . . . And every tongue should confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is in the glory of God the Father!"

Now, we might be tempted to think that this apparent inconsistency was perhaps an oversight resulting from ancient alterations in the Missal; but the Gradual continues to sustain this theme of triumph:

> "Thou hast held me by my right hand, and by Thy will Thou hast conducted me, and with glory Thou hast taken me up."

And even the Tract with its long excerpt from the greatest of all the Passion Psalms (the Psalm which describes the crucifixion with such remarkable detail), even this selection ends in the same triumphal manner:

> "Ye that fear the Lord, praise Him; all ye the seed of Jacob, glorify Him. There shall be declared to the Lord a generation to come, and the heavens shall show forth His justice to a people that shall be born, which the Lord hath made!"

What are the reasons for this strange medley of suffering and triumph?

The Sufferings of the Cross a Prelude to Glory

First of all, the Church, ever jealous of the honor of her

Founder, admits to us to-day that the enemies of Christ will succeed in their evil designs; they will arrest Him, torture Him, yes, even kill Him; but, adds the Church triumphantly, they have not defeated Him! He will conquer death itself; He will rise again from the dead; He will have a triumph the like of which the world has never seen!

Moreover, this Resurrection of Our Lord is a reminder to us that death is not the end for us; there is a life beyond the grave. We all shall rise again; some to glory, others to eternal sorrow. During this Holy Week we should particularly reflect on the lessons we may gather from the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Our Saviour. Christ came into this world, not only to die for us, but also to show us by word and example how we can save our souls. Almighty God has called upon us to forsake a purely natural life and to lead a supernatural one. What He is asking us to do is entirely beyond our powers, unless we are constantly supported by divine grace. Living a supernatural life means, then, an unending struggle: a fight between the spirit and the flesh, between the will and the passions, yes, even between the soul and its Maker. It is a call to a lifetime of struggle, of mortification, of self-denial; a call to alert watchfulness, day and night, as long as life is in the body. Now the very prospect of constant effort, of endless suffering, over a span of years is in itself disheartening; and when we realize that despite all our efforts and all our sacrifices we appear to be making little or no progress, that our fight seems to be largely one of repeated defeats, we are strongly tempted to cease our efforts.

Perhaps we may even rebelliously think that God is asking too much of us.

May We Learn This Lesson of Suffering and Triumph!

Is God asking too much of us? Gaze at the picture which the Sacred Liturgy sets before you to-day: Christ in such intense agony on the cross that He cries aloud: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Who is this man Christ? He is God—the equal of God the Father in all things. He comes down from heaven, as the Epistle tells us, and humbles himself to the incredible extent of assuming our human nature; in a word, He passes voluntarily from the highest state to the very lowest—from God to man! Even yet His love is not content; so He becomes the lowest of human beings, He takes His place among the poorest of the poor; and after following a humble trade in life, He elects to die a most shameful and cruel death: "He humbled Himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." The Liturgy will never grow tired during this coming week of repeating over and over this statement.

Why did He do all this? This extraordinary amount of suffering was not necessary for our salvation, but God's infinite love for us impelled Him to teach us the value of suffering—to show us that suffering can make us like Christ, to assure us that if we will only bravely follow in His footsteps, yes, even to Calvary, we too shall rise from the grave glorious

and immortal: "As you are partakers of the sufferings of Christ, so shall you be also of the consolation" (II Cor., vii. 4). Yes, the sufferings and death of Our Lord are the harbinger of our own success; His resurrection is the pledge of our own.

A great liturgist of the thirteenth century said: "Christ loved—hence He wished to suffer for us. Let us love Him so that we may be willing to suffer all things. Thus, we shall obtain the humility, the mildness, and the patience of Christ." Let us then address Him in the words of to-day's Collect:

> "Almighty and everlasting God, who caused Our Saviour to take upon Him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross that all mankind might follow the example of His humility: grant propitiously that we may deserve both to keep in mind the lessons of His patience, and also to be made partakers of His resurrection."

GOOD FRIDAY

GOOD FRIDAY

The Passion in the Liturgy

"And they took Jesus . . . to that place which is called Calvary . . . where they crucified Him" (John, xix. 16-18).

SYNOPSIS: (1) *The Prophets announce: (a) the choice of a new people by God; (b) the coming of the Messiah.*
(2) *The law describes the sacrifice of the paschal lamb.*
(3) *The Messiah prays to the Lord for aid against His foes.*
(4) *The story of the Passion.*
(5) *Adoration of the cross, and the "reproaches" of Christ.*

Over seven hundred years before the coming of Our Lord, there lived in Israel a prophet named Osee. Sent by God to the apostate Jews, Osee (vi. 1-3) warned the guilty people that their sufferings had been inflicted upon them in the hope that they would repent and say:

> "Come, let us return to the Lord; for He hath taken us and He will heal us; He will strike us and He will cure us, and He will revive us after two days; and on the third day He will raise us up and we shall live in His sight."

However, the efforts of God to recall these apostates were in vain; and so the prophet declares the rejection of the Jews and

the merciful designs of God towards His new people, the Gentiles.

Having proclaimed the adoption of a new people, the Liturgy now brings forward another prophet, Habacuc, who announces the coming of the Messiah. When He appears, foretells the prophet, He will appear "between two living creatures," that is, between the two thieves on Calvary.

But, despite all the prophecies foretelling the coming of the Saviour of mankind, He will not be welcomed by all men. For some, like Judas, His coming will be the occasion of terrible guilt; for others, like the penitent thief, it will be a time of reward. May this coming be for us a season of divine clemency, so that we may be delivered from our past sins and granted the grace of Our Lord's resurrection (Collect)!

The Law Describes the Sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb

The prophets have now been heard; let the Law in its turn prefigure the Messiah. In the Book of Exodus (xii. 3-11), God commanded Moses to say to the people of Israel:

> "On the tenth day of this month, let every man take a lamb. . . . And it shall be a lamb without blemish. . . . And you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; and the whole multitude of the children of Israel shall sacrifice it in the evening. And they shall take the blood thereof and put it on . . . the door-posts of the house. . . . And you shall eat it in haste; for it is the Phase (that is, the passage) of the Lord."

Now, twelve centuries after this vivid portrayal of the paschal lamb by Moses, the true paschal Lamb is at hand, and on this very day His Blood is to be shed in sacrifice! Already is Our Saviour betrayed into the hands of His enemies; already have they seized Him, and are plotting His death. The Liturgy graphically depicts Him as imploring the help of the Most High:

> "Deliver me, O Lord, from the evil man, rescue me from the unjust man. They have devised wickedness in their heart. Hear, O Lord, the voice of my supplication. . . . Give me not over to the desire of the wicked. They have plotted against me; do Thou not forsake me, lest at any time they should triumph" (Tract).

It is obvious that the Sacred Liturgy of the Church presents to us the events of this day as the climax of a mighty drama, which began with the fall of Adam and Eve and whose results stretch into eternity. This explains the restraint of emotion and the almost detached way in which the Liturgy celebrates this day. Instead of using a highly emotional service, the Church indicates by her example that the most solid results are to be obtained by recalling the simple, historical narratives of the Gospel. Let us then listen to the poignant story of the Passion, as told by "that disciple whom Jesus loved" (John, xviii. 1—xix. 30):

The Story of the Passion[1]

"At that time, Jesus went forth with His disciples to a garden. Judas therefore, having received a band of soldiers from the chief priests and Pharisees, came thither. Jesus, knowing all things that should come upon Him, went forth and said to them: 'Whom seek ye?' They answered: 'Jesus of Nazareth.' Jesus said to them: 'I am He.' Then the band took Jesus and bound Him and let Him away to Annas, father-in-law to Caiphas, who was the high priest of that year. Now, Caiphas was he who had given the counsel to the Jews that it was expedient for one man to die for the people.

"The high priest therefore asked Jesus of His disciples and of His doctrine. Jesus answered him: 'I have spoken openly to the world. Ask them who have heard what I have spoken to them.' And one of the servants standing by gave Jesus a blow, saying: 'Answerest Thou the high priest so?' And Annas sent Him bound to Caiphas the high priest; and then they led Him from Caiphas to the governor's hall. And Pilate said to Him: 'Art thou king of the Jews?' Jesus answered: 'My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, My servants would certainly strive that I should not be delivered to the Jews.' Pilate therefore went out to the Jews and said: 'I find no cause in Him. But you have a custom that I release one unto you at the Pasch. Do you wish that I release Barabbas or the king of the Jews?' But the rabble cried out: 'Not this man, give us Barabbas.'

"Then Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. And the

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[1] The Gospel account is, of course, here greatly condensed; it may be still further condensed or expanded, according to the amount of time at one's disposal. It would be fully in accord with the spirit of the Liturgy for the preacher to tell the Passion story *in his own words*, drawing upon all four Gospels for details. The mere narrative, *without any comment*, is always of intense interest to the faithful.

soldiers, platting a crown of thorns, put it upon His head; and they put on Him a purple garment. And they cried: 'Hail, king of the Jews,' and they struck Him. Pilate therefore went forth again, and said to them: 'Behold, I bring Him forth to you, that you may know I find no cause in Him.' When the chief priests and the servants had seen Him, they cried out: 'Crucify Him, crucify Him! If thou release this man, thou art not Cæsar's friend. For whosoever maketh himself a king, speaketh against Cæsar.' Pilate therefore delivered Him to them to be crucified.

"They took Jesus and led Him forth. And bearing His own cross, He went to Calvary, where they crucified Him, and with Him two others, one on each side. Then the soldiers took His garments and also His coat. As the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout, they said to one another: 'Let us not cut it but let us cast lots, whose it shall be.' That the Scriptures might be fulfilled, saying: 'They have parted My garments among them, and upon My vesture they have cast lots.'

"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother; and when Jesus saw her and the disciple whom He loved, He said to His mother: 'Woman, behold thy son.' And to the disciple: 'Behold thy mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own.

"Then Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said: 'I thirst.' Now, there was a vessel set there full of vinegar; and they put a sponge full of vinegar on a reed and put it to His mouth. When Jesus therefore had taken the vinegar, He said: 'It is consummated.' And bowing His head, He gave up the ghost."

The Adoration of the Cross, and the Reproaches of Christ

For forty centuries the justice of the Eternal Father had been awaiting this hour. Man too, who had thrown away his birthright, had been looking for forty centuries to this moment, the moment when the Son of God should satisfy the justice of the Eternal Father, and re-open once more to man the gates of heaven. At this moment, the Cross—hitherto the tree of shame—became the tree of glory; the Cross of death became the tree of life and salvation. O thrice-sacred Cross, honored by the Body nailed to thee, consecrated by the Precious Blood shed on thee, glorified by the One who died on thee; O holy Cross, we venerate thee! O Cross, "on which hung the Saviour of the world," we adore thee!

While our hearts overflow with love and gratitude to God for this great mystery of our redemption, let us reflect upon the many benefits which God showered upon His chosen people and the utter baseness they displayed towards God in return. The Sacred Liturgy, in the name of the Redeemer, addresses these reproaches to the ungrateful Jews:

> "O My people, what have I done to thee, or in what have I afflicted thee? Answer Me.
>
> "Because I led thee out of the land of Egypt, thou hast prepared a cross for thy Saviour.
>
> "I led thee out through the desert for forty years, and fed thee with manna, and brought thee into a land exceeding good;
>
> "Before thee I opened the sea; I went before thee in the pillar of a cloud.

"I gave thee to drink wholesome water from the rock; I gave thee a royal sceptre; I have exalted thee with great power.

"*In return* thou didst scourge Me and deliver Me up; thou hast beaten Me with blows and stripes; thou hast given Me a crown of thorns; thou hast smitten My head with a reed; thou hast hanged Me upon the gibbet of the cross; thou hast given Me gall and vinegar; and with a spear hast thou pierced the side of thy Saviour!

"My people, what have I done to thee, or in what have I afflicted thee? Answer Me."

Let Us Bewail Our Own Ingratitude

While we reprobate such shocking ingratitude, let us reflect on our own ingratitude to God. He has led us out of another Egypt—the darkness of this world; He has given us as food and drink, not mere manna and water, but the Body and Blood of our Redeemer; He has refreshed us with the grace of His Sacraments; and He is trying to lead us to a Promised Land far more glorious than the one He gave the Jews. Yet, we too have often rejected Him, and have often crucified Him by our sins.

For He was "delivered for our sins" (Rom., iv. 25); and, as St. Bernard declares, we are the authors of His death, far more than Pontius Pilate who condemned Him or the soldiers who crucified Him. Had it not been for the sins of the world, there would have been no need for this cruel crucifixion. Overwhelmed by our own ingratitude, let us prostrate ourselves before the holy Cross, and with deepest contrition exclaim in the words of the Liturgy:

"O holy God, holy and mighty One, holy and immortal One, have mercy on us! May God have mercy on us; may He cause the light of His countenance to shine upon us, and have mercy on us!"

The Cross is our certain assurance that our prayers for mercy will be heard. For are not the arms of Jesus outstretched to embrace us? And is not His side opened by the spear that we might readily take refuge in His Sacred Heart? And are not His feet nailed to the cross to show He will not leave us? Let us then approach the Cross with confidence and repeat with the Church:

"Thy Cross, O Lord, we honor, and we praise and glorify Thy holy Resurrection; for by the wood of the Cross the whole world is filled with joy."

EASTER SUNDAY

EASTER SUNDAY

Easter Joy

"Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen; He is not here" (Mark, xvi. 6).

SYNOPSIS: (1) *Easter is the most joyous feast of the Church.*
(2) *Ancient ceremonies on this day.*
(3) *The story of the Resurrection; the Church's joy.*
(4) *We rise with Christ by purging away all corruption.*

"Together, death and life in a strange conflict strove. The Prince of life, who died, now lives and reigns! We know that Christ indeed has arisen from the grave! Hail, Thou King of victory! Alleluia!" (Sequence). These are the exulting words of the Church this Easter morn. Gone are the grief and mourning of the last two days; her agony and desolation are forgotten; for Christ her Lord is risen from the grave! The intense feeling of the Church, like all intense emotion, is overwhelming; and from the first words of the Mass—"I am risen"—to the "Alleluia, alleluia!" at the end of the Mass, she is beside herself with joy. She makes Easter the most joyous of all her feasts. She rejoices in her Risen Saviour; she also rejoices in what that Resurrection implies—

our redemption and incorporation with Christ the "King of victory."

The Ancient Ceremonies of the Church on This Day

That we may better appreciate the feelings of the Church on this greatest of all feast days, let us briefly recall how this day was observed in the early days of Christianity. With the death and burial of Our Lord on Good Friday, the Church was plunged into the deepest sorrow. On Holy Saturday there were no services, for Christ lay buried in the tomb. It was a day of emptiness and desolation; the churches were bare, the altars stripped of every ornament, the tabernacles empty. But late Saturday night the faithful would gather together for the Easter-vigil. The first part of the services pertained to the catechumens, who received their final instructions, were baptized and then confirmed. By the time these lengthy ceremonies were completed, it would be very early Easter morning. The Mass would now follow, and during it the catechumens would receive their third Sacrament—the Holy Eucharist. Truly, were they "initiated in the Paschal Mysteries" (Secret)! For they who by faith were dead to the world, being "buried with Christ by baptism unto death" (Rom., vi. 4), rose this Easter morn with Christ the Redeemer. Thus, the Liturgy in the golden age of Christianity closely linked together the spiritual resurrection of souls with the Resurrection of Christ. It was indeed the beginning of a new and glorious life for the whole world. Let us see how this thought is set forth in to-day's Mass.

The Story of the Resurrection and the Church's Joy

The Gospel gives the historical setting of the feast. Mary Magdalene and two other women early in the morning approach the sepulchre; they are bringing with them spices that they might embalm the Body of the Saviour. In their grief, they had given no thought to the huge stone which sealed the entrance to the tomb, but now they asked each other in dismay: "Who shall roll back for us the stone?" But upon arrival they find that the massive stone has already been rolled away from the entrance, and entering the large tomb they find a young man, clothed in a resplendent, white robe, sitting on the right side of the tomb. The women are naturally frightened at this apparition; but the angel says to them: "Be not affrighted: you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen, He is not here. Behold the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter that He goeth before you into Galilee. There you shall see Him, as He told you!"

Never before in the history of the world had such a statement been made. The angel did not declare: "He has been raised from the dead," or "He has been brought back to life." No, his words were: "He is risen!" No prophet stood at the tomb and bade Him in the name of the Almighty God to come forth; but Jesus, by His own power, returns to life from death! Christ, our Saviour, has conquered death; He has risen, glorious and immortal, and never again shall death be able to claim Him.

Yes, "He is risen," exults the Church; and in the Introit

she places on His lips the prophetic words of King David: "I am risen and am yet with Thee; Lord, Thou hast proved Me. . . . Thou hast known the abasement of My passion and the glory of My resurrection." It is a joyful cry of gratitude to the Father, uttered by the God-Man as He rose from the tomb; and, just as the earth shook at the moment of His death on the cross, so now, at the moment of His victory over death, it shakes once more: "The earth trembled when God arose in judgment" (Offertory). It is then with the very best of reasons that the Gradual bids us rejoice; for, in truth, "this is the day which the Lord hath made; let us be glad and rejoice therein! Alleluia, alleluia!"

We Rise with Christ by Purging Away All Corruption

But the Church, like a solicitous Mother, would not have us celebrate this feast merely by indulging in joyous sentiments; she wants us to draw lasting benefit from it. And so she reminds us in the Communion verse:

> "Christ our pasch is immolated. Therefore, let us feast with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!"

In that comprehensive attitude towards time and eternity, so characteristic of her, the Church is thinking of the past, the present, and the future. She is recalling that in the past the Jews were commanded to celebrate the Pasch or Passover by sacrificing and eating an unblemished lamb. On this, their

greatest feast, they were forbidden to have any leavened bread in the house; only unleavened bread was served with the paschal lamb. The reason for this distinction was that leaven meant fermentation, and fermentation takes place through corruption. Hence, leavened bread represented corruption, while unleavened bread signified incorruption.

From the past the Church comes to the present: at the Christian Pasch, the paschal lamb is Christ Himself. The Epistle tells us that to this banquet to which we are invited, we must not bring any leavened bread of malice and of sin; we must bring only the incorruptible bread of pure morals and unfeigned holiness. This was the purpose of Our Saviour's Resurrection, that redeemed from sin we might become new creatures.

From the present the Church looks forward to eternity. "God on this day, by the victory of His only-begotten Son over death, opened for us a passage to eternity" (Collect). May we so "feast in the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" that we may be able to avail ourselves of this passage to heaven! In the words of the Secret, let us then beg Our Lord that we who have been admitted to these Paschal mysteries, "may by divine help be led one day to the consolations of eternity. Through the same Christ, Our Lord."

NOTES