

LENT AND THE MYSTICAL BODY

(J.F.M.H. – 2.3.2017)

During Lent, the Church in its great prayer, the Divine Office, leads us from Ash Wednesday via the story of the Jewish Exodus from Egypt. The journey of the Jews in the wilderness to the Promised Land lasted 40 years. The public life of Christ started after the Baptism of our Lord when He withdrew into the wilderness and fasted for 40 days, which is the same duration as our modern Lent. Pope Pius XI in the encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor* told us; *"The Passion of Christ is renewed, and in some way continued and completed in His Mystical Body which is the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church takes this point when teaching us about the Mystical Body (793-795). "Christ unites us with his Passover: all His members must strive to resemble Him, "until Christ be formed" in them. For this reason we . . . are taken up into the mysteries of His life, . . . associated with His sufferings as the body with its head, suffering with Him, that with Him we may be glorified. (793)*

Christ provides for our growth: to make us grow towards Him, our head, He provides in His Body, the Church, the gifts and assistance by which we help one another along the way of salvation. (794) Christ and his Church thus together make up the "whole Christ" (Christus totus). The Church is one with Christ. The saints are acutely aware of this unity: Let us rejoice then and give thanks that we have become not only Christians, but Christ Himself. Do you understand and grasp, brethren, God's grace toward us? Marvel and rejoice: we have become Christ. For if He is the head, we are the members; He and we together are the whole man. . . . The fullness of Christ then is the head and the members. But what does "head and members" mean? Christ and the Church. Our redeemer has shown himself to be one person with the holy Church whom he has taken to Himself. Head and members form as it were one and the same mystical person. A reply of St. Joan of Arc to her judges sums up the faith of the holy doctors and the good sense of the believer: "About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they're just one thing, and we shouldn't complicate the matter." (795)

There are good reasons for training our body to obey the will by fasting and self-denial. The first is to atone for sin. By every sin we take some satisfaction to which we have no right. Moreover, since we are all one body in Jesus Christ (1Cor.10) our self-denial can atone for the sins of others and obtain grace and help from God, both for the living and the dead. By self-denial we give up some legitimate satisfaction and so make up for the unlawful pleasure we have taken. Self-denial willingly borne is a way in which we follow in the footsteps of Our Lord. Remembering Christ's instruction *"if anyone would be My disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me."* The Church urges us to follow His example as we make ready for Easter. With fasting is linked the practice of prayer and almsgiving.. *Therefore Christ, who is still suffering in His body, asks us to accompany Him in expiation... Whatever the head suffers, the limbs also must share".* The Christ of Lent awaits us in every suffering person.

Christ taught us to love, and told us that He judges each according to what we have done for even one of our weaker brethren. In this way Lent is a challenge to let Christ open up our consciences through the eloquence of His Passion and cross. The life that follows of major and minor sufferings and self-denials is offered up to God the Almighty Father at every Mass. There is a connection between our life and the Mass. We are, after all, members of the mystical body of Christ, and it is the whole Christ that is offered in the Mass to Our Almighty Father. In the Mass we are invited to share with Christ not only His sacramental body but also His sacrificial act. At every Mass after the priest has washed his hands he says *"Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father."* Given that the Mass makes present the sacrifice Christ offered at Calvary and that the sacrifice on the cross was acceptable, and is always acceptable to the almighty Father; our prayers cannot make it more or less acceptable. However, we with our own sacrifices and sufferings are united to Our Lord's sacrifice, and we need to pray

about that part of it, for that does have to be made acceptable. We need to be sorry for our sins, confess them, be forgiven and blessed before making our offering. Hence the Mass includes the 'Confiteor', 'and the Absolution'. Then just before we receive Our Lord Himself, that wonderful prayer adapted by the Church from the words of the Roman Centurion, "*Lord I am not worthy to receive You, but only say the word and I shall be healed*". The loving, compassionate and merciful Lord whom we receive in Communion hears our prayer, and offers the sacrifice to Our Almighty Father.

Many years ago now, Fr. W. Roach S.J. wrote a preparatory prayer for priests about to say Mass, on the sacrifice of Christ with His Church. It illustrates this point and makes clear our own part in joining in the sacrifice of Our Lord.

***The mass is not a private prayer of mine
such as I can say at home,
nor the public prayer of pious people.
It is the mystery of Our Lord's own supplication,
His perfect prayer of self-oblation,
adoration and thanksgiving
in which I take a part.***

***It is then more than words and wishes,
more than asking things of God.
It is giving, an offering, a sacrifice.
Whoever offers sacrifice offers self:
the offerer and the victim must
somehow be one.***

***So I am here to give rather than to get,
to fulfil a duty,
to pay a debt,
to render homage,
to satisfy the claims and rights of God,
my Sovereign Lord, Creator, King of Kings.***

***This, I can never do alone,
I am not fit.
But do it I can most perfectly
in this Holy Mass,
with Jesus my Saviour,
through Whom are given
to God all Glory, worship, honour, thanks,
and to me continued mercy, a Father's love and guidance,
and with that all best things. Amen.***

May God bless us and our efforts to follow diligently the Christ of Lent, which we offer to God the Almighty Father through His Son our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

