

Light in the Desert

A LENTEN RESOURCE

First Sunday in Lent, Year C

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Filled with the Holy Spirit, Jesus left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the desert, for forty days being put to the test by the devil ...Then the devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become a loaf.' But Jesus replied to him, 'Scripture says: *A human does not live on bread alone.*'

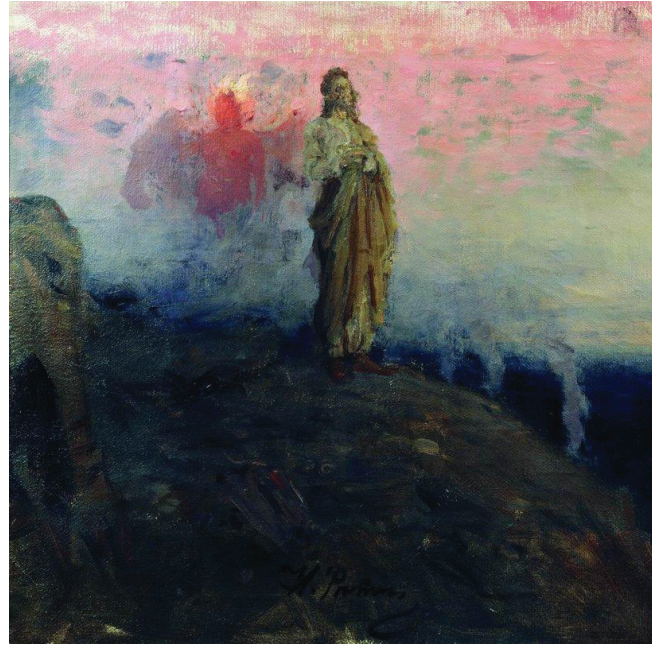
Then, leading him to a height, the devil showed him in a moment of time all the kingdoms of the world and said to him, 'I will give you all this power and their splendour, for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to anyone I wish. If you, then, worship me, it shall all be yours.' But Jesus answered him, 'It is written: *You shall worship the Lord your God, him alone shall you serve.*' Then he led him to Jerusalem and set him on the parapet of the Temple and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God throw yourself down from here, for it is written: *He has given his angels orders about you, to guard you, and that, they will carry you in their arms in case you trip on a stone.*' But Jesus answered him, 'It is said: *Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*'

Having finished every way of putting him to the test, the devil left him, until the opportune moment. (*Luke 4:1-2, 3-13*)

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore.

In the Catholic Church, Lent is a season of conversion where we observe three penitential practices: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. As a season of conversion, it is also a season of grace: 'Conversion is first of all a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to him: "Restore us to thyself, O Lord, that we may be restored!" (Lam 5:21)' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church §1432*).



Follow me, Satan (Temptation of Jesus Christ), by Ilya Repin (1901-1903).

Exploring the faith

The desert evokes a lot of things in the Bible. The desert is wandering and pilgrimage, punishment and hardship. It is the place of betrothal, where God draws his people to speak to their hearts (Hosea 2:17-18). But it is also a place of testing and deepening, where God teaches us dependence, trust, and what it means to worship him alone. It is a place, quite literally, 'set apart' for growth in holiness.

God teaches us dependence, trust, and what it means to worship him alone.

As we start Lent, a time of intentional struggle and growth in holiness, a reading from *Lumen gentium* (Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church) is the perfect place to start. *Lumen gentium's* teaching on 'the universal call to holiness' has been called the 'dynamite' of the Second Vatican Council. It teaches us that holiness is not a calling for a select few but for everyone, no matter their circumstances in life. It teaches us that holiness is both a grace *and* a quest. Christ is the beginning and end of our holiness, but we are called to participate in this gift, to see it grow and flourish. The Church calls us to strive along 'the quest for perfect love,' in the knowledge that the world as we know it is passing away (LG §42).

Reading from *Lumen gentium*

40. The Lord Jesus, the divine Teacher and Model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and everyone of His disciples of every condition. He Himself stands as the author and consummator of this holiness of life: 'Be you therefore perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5:48). Indeed He sent the Holy Spirit upon all men that He might move them inwardly to love God with their whole heart and their whole soul, with all their mind and all their strength, and that they might love each other as Christ loves them. The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, because in the baptism of faith they truly become sons of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are really made holy. Then too, by God's gift, they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received ... They must follow in His footsteps and conform themselves to His image seeking the will of the Father in all things. They must devote themselves with all their being to the glory of God and the service of their neighbour. In this way, the holiness of the People of God will grow into an abundant harvest of good, as is admirably shown by the life of so many saints in Church history.

...

42. Therefore, all the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for the holiness and perfection of their own proper state. Indeed they have an obligation to so strive. Let all then have care that they guide aright their own deepest sentiments of soul. Let neither the use of the things of this world nor attachment to riches, which is against the spirit of evangelical poverty, hinder them in their quest for perfect love. Let them heed the admonition of the Apostle to those who use this world; let them not come to terms with this world; for this world, as we see it, is passing away.

Questions

- » Lent is a time of intentional struggle. What struggles have you faced during Lent in the past?
- » What stands out to you from this reading from *Lumen gentium*? Why?
- » This Lent, how can you incorporate the wisdom of these passages into your Lenten journey? How can they help you grow in prayer, fasting, and almsgiving?

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Light in the Desert

A LENTEN RESOURCE

Second Sunday in Lent, Year C

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Now about eight days after these sayings, taking Peter, John and James with him he went up the mountain to pray. And it happened that, as he was praying, the aspect of his face was changed and his clothing became dazzling white. And suddenly, there were two men talking to him; they were Moses and Elijah appearing in glory, and they were speaking of his departed which he was to accomplish in Jerusalem ... a cloud came and covered them with shadow; and as they went into the cloud the disciples were afraid. And a voice came from the cloud saying, 'This is my Son, the Chosen One. Listen to him.' (Luke 9: 28-31, 34-36)

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore.

'Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, "sackcloth and ashes," fasting and mortification, but at *conversion of heart, interior conversion*. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures, and works of penance ... Scripture and the [Church] Fathers insist on three forms: *fasting, prayer, and almsgiving*, which express conversion in relation to oneself, to God, and to others' (CCC §1430, 1434).

Exploring the faith

We started Lent with the desert. Now we come to another place 'set apart' in the Bible: the mountaintop. If the desert signifies struggle and testing, the mountaintop signifies divine revelation and communion with God. The prophet Ezekiel reveals that the garden of Eden was, in fact, set on a mountain (Ez 28:13-14); it was from Mount Sinai that God delivered the law



The Transfiguration of the Lord, by D Nolle (1694).

to Moses, and where Moses and the elders ate and drank in God's presence (Ex 24:11); it was on a mountain that the prophet Elijah heard the still, small voice of God (1 Kings 19:11-13); it was from a mountain that Christ delivered his most famous sermon (Matthew 5-7); and it was on a mountaintop that the apostles witnessed Christ transfigured, receiving a glimpse of who he truly was as the Son of God (Lk 9:28-36). It was no wonder Peter wanted to make shelters and stay there.

The mountaintop signifies divine revelation and communion with God.

Dei verbum is Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. One of Christianity's many distinguishing marks is that we hold to Divine Revelation. We are not simply a philosophy or moral system. We believe something, and someone, has been revealed to us. While there are specific *things*, specific *teachings*, that have been revealed (Christ was a teacher, after all), *Dei verbum* draws us into the deeper reality that God reveals *himself* first and foremost. He reveals that he is a communion of love—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and that through the sacraments we are raised out of our fallen condition to share in that divine life. This is not esoteric doctrine. Instead, it teaches us something that could change the way we see Christianity, and our own lives, forever.

Reading from *Dei verbum*

2. In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself ...

4. To see Jesus is to see His Father. For this reason Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself: through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and final sending of the Spirit of truth. Moreover He confirmed with divine testimony what revelation proclaimed, that God is with us to free us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to life eternal ...

8. Therefore the Apostles, handing on what they themselves had received, warn the faithful to hold fast to the traditions which they have learned either by word of mouth or by letter (see 2 Thess 2:15), and to fight in defence of the faith handed on once and for all (see Jude 1:3) Now what was handed on by the Apostles includes everything which contributes toward the holiness of life and increase in faith of the peoples of God; and so the Church, in her teaching, life and worship, perpetuates and hands on to all generations all that she herself is, all that she believes.

This tradition which comes from the Apostles develops in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts, through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth ...

21. The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the

body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body ... For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and everlasting source of spiritual life.

Questions

- » In the Scriptures, the mountaintop evokes divine revelation and communion. Have you ever had a 'mountaintop experience' where you felt especially loved or spoken to by God? What happened?
- » What stands out to you most from this passage from *Dei verbum*? Why?
- » How might a deeper understanding of Divine Revelation, as set out here in *Dei verbum*, aid our Lenten conversion of heart? How might it move us to continue on the path of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving?

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Light in the Desert

A LENTEN RESOURCE

Third Sunday in Lent, Year C

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So he came to the Samaritan town called Sychar, near the land that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there and Jesus, tired by the journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon, when a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' His disciples had gone into the town to buy food. The Samaritan said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?'—for Jews do not associate with Samaritans. Jesus replied to her: 'If you knew what God is offering and who it is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water ... Whoever drinks of this water will be thirsty again; but anyone who drinks of the water that I shall give will never be thirsty again: the water that I shall give will become an inner spring of water, welling up to eternal life.'

...

The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah, the one called Christ, is coming; and when he comes he will declare everything.' Jesus said, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.' (*John 4: 4-10, 13-14, 25-26*).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

'The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for: "The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God ..."' (CCC §27; cf. *Gaudium et spes* §19).



Stained glass window from St Philip's Episcopal Cathedral in Atlanta.
Photo by Fr Lawrence Lew OP.

Exploring the faith

Gaudium et spes, Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, may be one of the Council's most widely quoted, but little read, documents. While it is very long, it is rich with theological and spiritual insight, offering a witness to the Church's authentic pastoral instincts.

But first, what does the word 'pastoral' mean? The term comes from the word *pastor*, meaning *shepherd*. From its earliest years, the Church used the term *pastor* for its leaders because they were shepherds called to model their lives after Christ the Good Shepherd. To be pastoral in this sense is to, like a shepherd, lead the flock to good pasture. It is to lead them to real nourishment, just as Christ guided the Samaritan woman to 'living water'. This is, in a basic sense, what *Gaudium et spes* is doing.

In its opening sections, it does so, perhaps surprisingly, by reminding us of the fallenness of the human person and defending the doctrine of Original Sin—a doctrine that is, as GK Chesterton observed, 'as practical as potatoes.' But it also guides us to Christ, who not only reveals who God is but who we are. Christ reveals the ultimate dignity and purpose of human life. He is the one who, as the Samaritan woman says, 'will declare everything,' who offers the living water our hearts truly desire.

Reading from *Gaudium et spes*

3. Though mankind is stricken with wonder at its own discoveries and its power, it often raises anxious questions about the current trend of the world, about the place and role of man in the universe, about the meaning of its individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and of humanity ... The council brings to mankind light kindled from the Gospel, and puts at its disposal those saving resources which the Church herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder. For the human person deserves to be preserved; human society deserves to be renewed. Hence the focal point of our total presentation will be man himself, whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will ...

10. The truth is that the imbalances under which the modern world labours are linked with that more basic imbalance which is rooted in the heart of man. For in man himself many elements wrestle with one another. Thus, on the one hand, as a creature he experiences his limitations in a multitude of ways; on the other he feels himself to be boundless in his desires and summoned to a higher life. Pulled by manifold attractions he is constantly forced to choose among them and renounce some. Indeed, as a weak and sinful being, he often does what he would not, and fails to do what he would (Rom 7:15-20). Hence he suffers from internal divisions, and from these flow so many and such great discords in society ... The Church firmly believes that Christ, who died and was raised up for all, can through His Spirit offer man the light and the strength to measure up to his supreme destiny. Nor has any other name under the heaven been given to man by which it is fitting for him to be saved. She likewise holds that in her most benign Lord and Master can be found the key, the focal point and the goal of man, as well as of all human history. The Church also maintains that beneath all changes there are many realities which do not change and which have their ultimate foundation in Christ, Who is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever ...

22. The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of

man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown.

Questions

- » Without God, the human heart is imbalanced and incomplete. Have you ever experienced this in your own life? Have you ever experienced a deep sense of restlessness and dissatisfaction? How?
- » What stands out to you most from these passages in *Gaudium et spes*? Why?
- » How might this understanding of the heart's desire for God inform our Lenten practices of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving?

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Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year C

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The tax collectors and sinners, however, were all crowding round to listen to him, and the Pharisees and scribes complained saying, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.' So he told them this parable ... 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me." So the father divided the property between them. A few days later, the younger son got together everything he had and left for a distant country where he squandered his money in loose living ...

Then he came to his senses and said ... "I will get up and go to my father and say: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men.' So he got up and went back to his father.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was moved with pity. He ran to the boy, clasped him in his arms and kissed him ... the father said to the servants, "Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf, and kill it; we will celebrate by having a feast, because this son of mine is dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found." (Luke 15: 1-3, 11-13, 17-24).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore.

The parable of the prodigal son encapsulates the journey of conversion and repentance, with the merciful Father at the centre: '... the fascination of illusory freedom, the abandonment of the father's house; the extreme misery in which the



The Prodigal Son, by John Macallan Swan (1888).

son finds himself after squandering his fortune; his deep humiliation at finding himself obliged to feed swine, and still worse, at wanting to feed on the husks the pigs ate; his reflection on all he has lost; his repentance and decision to declare himself guilty before his father; the journey back; the father's generous welcome; the father's joy—all these are characteristic of the process of conversion ... Only the heart of Christ Who knows the depths of his Father's love could reveal to us the abyss of his mercy in so simple and beautiful a way' (CCC §1439).

Exploring the faith

Another image that recurs throughout the Scriptures is the feast. Often, the Old Testament expresses Israel's hopes in the language of feasting. No matter what they faced, Israel was called again and again to put their trust in the Lord, to believe that no matter how dire things seemed he would lead them to a land of abundance, where their stomachs and their hearts would be full (cf. Jer 31:1-14).

The New Testament takes up this theme, speaking of 'the wedding feast of the Lamb' to which all people are invited at the end of time (Rev 19:9). Will we 'come to our senses' as the prodigal son did and rise to meet the heavenly Father who runs ahead to embrace and clothe us in the dignity of his household?

Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*, invites us to look beyond the veil and see the heavenly feast of which we eat whenever we partake of the Eucharist.

Reading from *Sacrosanctum concilium*

2. For the liturgy, 'through which the work of our redemption is accomplished,' most of all in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church. It is of the essence of the Church that she be both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly equipped, eager to act and yet intent on contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it ... While the liturgy daily builds up those who are within into a holy temple of the Lord, into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit, to the mature measure of the fullness of Christ, at the same time it marvellously strengthens their power to preach Christ, and thus shows forth the Church to those who are outside as a sign lifted up among the nations under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together, until there is one sheepfold and one shepherd ...

8. In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle; we sing a hymn to the Lord's glory with all the warriors of the heavenly army; venerating the memory of the saints, we hope for some part and fellowship with them; we eagerly await the Saviour, Our Lord Jesus Christ, until He, our life, shall appear and we too will appear with Him in glory ...

9. The sacred liturgy does not exhaust the entire activity of the Church. Before men can come to the liturgy they must be called to faith and to conversion: 'How then are they to call upon him in whom they have not yet believed? But how are they to believe him whom they have not heard? And how are they to hear if no one preaches? And how are men to preach unless they be sent?' (Rom. 10:14-15). Therefore the Church announces the good tidings of salvation to those who do not believe, so that all men may know the true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent, and may be converted from their

ways, doing penance. To believers also the Church must ever preach faith and penance, she must prepare them for the sacraments, teach them to observe all that Christ has commanded, and invite them to all the works of charity, piety, and the apostolate. For all these works make it clear that Christ's faithful, though not of this world, are to be the light of the world and to glorify the Father before men.

Questions

- » The parable of the prodigal son offers a vision of God the Father in striking terms. What stands out most to you about it? Have you ever experienced the love of the Father in a special way?
- » What stood out to you most from these passages in *Sacrosanctum concilium*? Why?
- » How are the sacrament of the Eucharist and penance connected? How might our prayer, fasting and almsgiving prepare us better to celebrate the liturgy?

Notes

Light in the Desert

A LENTEN RESOURCE

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C

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On arriving, Jesus found that Lazarus had been in the tomb for four days already ... Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died, but even now I know that God will grant whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her: 'I am the resurrection and life. Anyone who believes in me, even though that person dies, will live, and no one who lives and believes in me will ever die. Do you believe this?'

She said, 'Yes, Lord. I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into this world.' ... So they took the stone away. Then Jesus lifted up his eyes and said: 'Father, I thank you for hearing my prayer. I myself knew that you hear me always, but I speak for the sake of all the crowd standing around me, so that they may believe that you sent me.'

When he had said this, he cried in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his feet and hands bound with strips of material, and his face wrapped in cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.' (*John 11:17, 21-27, 41-44*).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

Catholic theology speaks of 'the beatific vision': the full vision of God, with his people united in Christ.

'Those who are united with Christ will form the community of the redeemed, "the holy city" of God, "the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." She will not be wounded any longer by sin, stains, self-love, that destroy or wound the earthly community. The



The Raising of Lazarus, by Guercino (1619).

beatific vision, in which God opens himself in an inexhaustible way to the elect, will be the ever-flowing well-spring of happiness, peace, and mutual communion' (*CCC §1045*).

Exploring the faith

'Unbind him, and let him go.' These words of Jesus are full of spiritual significance. Ultimately, they point us to what the Church calls 'the eschaton,' or 'the end times'. Christ comes into this world, wounded by sin and death, and sets it free. The raising of Lazarus, in this sense, was merely a foreshadowing—a foretaste—of his own resurrection and all that would mean for creation.

While there is no shortage of apocalyptic visions of the future in our culture, many of them dark and dystopian, *Lumen gentium* makes something abundantly clear: the end times have already begun. We have been living in them since the resurrection and Pentecost.

This is why reflecting on 'the last things' (death, judgement, heaven, and hell) is a basic feature of the Catholic spiritual tradition. The pilgrim Church is 'eschatological' by nature: we are journeying towards that eternal life we have already been given. And this affects many of our other practices, including seeking the intercession of the saints and praying for the dead, because all of us through Baptism are connected in Christ, 'the resurrection and the life.'

Reading from *Lumen gentium*

48. Already the final age of the world has come upon us and the renovation of the world is irrevocably decreed and is already anticipated in some kind of a real way; for the Church already on this earth is signed with a sanctity which is real although imperfect. However, until there shall be new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells, the pilgrim Church in her sacraments and institutions, which pertain to this present time, has the appearance of this world which is passing and she herself dwells among creatures who groan and travail in pain until now and await the revelation of the sons of God ...

50. Fully conscious of this communion of the whole Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, the pilgrim Church from the very first ages of the Christian religion has cultivated with great piety the memory of the dead, and 'because it is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins', also offers suffrages for them. The Church has always believed that the apostles and Christ's martyrs who had given the supreme witness of faith and charity by the shedding of their blood, are closely joined with us in Christ, and she has always venerated them with special devotion, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary and the holy angels. The Church has piously implored the aid of their intercession. To these were soon added also those who had more closely imitated Christ's virginity and poverty, and finally others whom the outstanding practice of the Christian virtues and the divine charisms recommended to the pious devotion and imitation of the faithful. When we look at the lives of those who have faithfully followed Christ, we are inspired with a new reason for seeking the City that is to come and at the same time we are shown a most safe path by which among the vicissitudes of this world, in keeping with the state in life and condition proper to each of us, we will be able to arrive at perfect union with Christ, that is, perfect holiness ...

51. Let them therefore teach the faithful that the authentic cult of the saints consists not so much in the multiplying of external acts, but rather in the greater intensity of

our love, whereby, for our own greater good and that of the whole Church, we seek from the saints 'example in their way of life, fellowship in their communion, and aid by their intercession.'

Questions

- » 'Unbind him, and let him go.' Have you ever felt 'bound' in your spiritual life? How?
- » What stands out to you most from these passages in *Lumen gentium*? Why?
- » How might a love for the saints, and devotion to them, help our pilgrimage towards the beatific vision? Do you already have a devotion to a particular saint? How have they helped you?

Notes



Last supper, by A N Mironov (2019).

Light in the Desert

A LENTEN RESOURCE

Palm Sunday, Year C

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When the time came he took his place at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, 'I have ardently longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; because, I tell you, I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' Then, taking a cup, he gave thanks and said, 'Take this and share it among you, because from now on, I tell you, I shall never again drink from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.' Then he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' And the cup similarly after supper saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you.'
(Luke 22:14-20).

Did you know?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

Within the Catholic tradition, the practice of contemplating the crucified Christ holds a special place, since it is this act of love that moves us to conversion: 'The human heart is converted by looking upon him whom our sins have pierced ...' (CCC §1439)

Exploring the faith

This Gospel passage is a much shorter version of what we hear during Mass on Palm (or Passion) Sunday. But during Holy Week, we enter more intentionally, and slowly, into the Passion narratives, which include the stories of the Last Supper, where Christ instituted the Eucharist. This is the perfect opportunity to delve again into *Sacrosanctum concilium*, Vatican II's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

The liturgy is a sacred ritual like no other. It is the source and summit of the Church's life, a participation in 'the paschal mystery'. It is Christ's eternal, 'once for all' offering to the Father made present (Heb 7:27). It is living bread from heaven. For this very reason, the Church cares for the liturgy with the utmost care, recognising who it is that is at work: Christ himself.

How we understand the liturgy will affect in no small measure how we enter the mystery, how we prepare for it, and how we open ourselves to the grace that is present.

Reading from Sacrosanctum concilium

7. ... Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister, 'the same now offering, through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on the cross', but especially under the Eucharistic species. By His power He is present in the sacraments, so that when a man baptizes it is really Christ Himself who baptizes. He is present in His word, since it is He Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings, for He promised: 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them' (Matt 18:20) ...

Rightly, then, the liturgy is considered as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In the liturgy the sanctification of the man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members ...

10. Nevertheless the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows ...

The liturgy in its turn moves the faithful, filled with 'the paschal sacraments,' to be 'one in holiness'; it prays that 'they may hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped by their faith'; the renewal in the Eucharist of the covenant between the Lord and man draws the faithful into the compelling love of Christ and sets them on fire. From the liturgy, therefore, and especially from the Eucharist, as from a font, grace is poured forth upon us; and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed as toward their end, is achieved in the most efficacious possible way.

11. But in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain.

Questions

- » What stands out to you from these passages in *Sacrosanctum concilium*? Why?
- » Have you ever experienced the liturgy as a 'font of grace'? What grace is present there?
- » Knowing who it is we encounter in the Eucharist, and who it is that desires us to be there, how can we enter more deeply into Holy Week this year?

Notes
