

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 14 September, 2008

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

Perhaps it's been a rough week for you.

Perhaps you've just about had it with frustration and irritation...not to mention confusion and obfuscation...

Perhaps you need a mental break-in-the-action.

Prayer can provide that.

How about this one:

Almighty God,
help me to get a hold of myself.
Keep me from being overwhelmed by discouragement
or crushed by defeat.
In Your great compassion,
remind me that in Your sight,
no defeat is ultimate
and no disaster final.
Lead me to find in You
a strength that is greater than my own,
a strength that will uphold me in time of need.
And even though I can find no firm ground of faith
to stand on right now,
I pray that You will lead me out of my trouble
and become my Rock and my Fortress.
In the name of Christ the Lord.
Amen!

Hope you have a great weekend.

THINGS CATHOLICS CAN DO:

WANNA MAKE A RETREAT?

If so, you could check out the Retreat that UCF (United Catholic Fellowship) is planning for the Weekend of 17-19 October. You can contact CDT Madeline Lewis for info.

DID YOU KNOW?

THE TRUE CROSS

Every year, we celebrate the "Exaltation of the Holy Cross" on 14 September.

And we do this to remind ourselves that far from being a sign of shame, the cross of Jesus is the tree of victory and the door through which the grace of forgiveness enters the world.

But whatever happened to the real cross on which Jesus was crucified?

The question has been asked over the centuries, and while the answers are by no means certain, there's quite a history here.

Of course, you probably already know that the Scriptures do not mention what actually happened to the cross.

And you may even know that over the centuries, opinion has been divided over whether Jesus actually carried the full cross or just the crossbar to Cavalry. Many scholars feel that condemned criminals carried only the crossbar to their place of execution and that the crossbar was simply lifted to the top of the vertical post, forming a kind of "T", rather than the classic figure of the cross as we've come to know it.

Who knows?

Still by the 350s, St. Cyril of Jerusalem (the bishop of the city) went on record as claiming that the Church at Jerusalem had possessed the True Cross of Jesus for some time and that tiny pieces had been broken off and taken to different places throughout the Roman world. He said that it had been discovered in the city during the reign of the Emperor Constantine earlier in that century.

There is at least one ancient inscription that has been found (in Algeria, which was Christian in those days) that speaks of the "relics of the wood of the cross" in that location.

And in the late-300s, there was a Spanish nun named Egeria, who went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and was there during Holy Week. She spoke of the ceremony of the "Veneration of the Cross", when people would come to kiss the True Cross, and she mentioned specifically the care of the deacons to make sure that no one bit off a piece of the cross to take home.

And at the time, there was the persistent story that St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, had found the True Cross several decades earlier (around 326 AD), when she visited Jerusalem. According to the stories, Helena engaged in investigations in Jerusalem and then was led to unearth three crosses. There was no clue as to which, if any, was the cross of Jesus, but the body of a man who had recently died was brought to the site, and each of the three crosses was touched to his body. When the third cross touched him, he was brought back to life, and Helena believed that she had found the True Cross.

There are many forms of this story, and some of them contradict the others.

Still, it seems certain that by the 300s, the Church at Jerusalem believed that it possessed the "True" Cross, and from time to time, the cross was shown publicly during worship. Small pieces were broken off and sent to other churches throughout the world as a gesture of solidarity of faith.

In the 600s, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius waged a series of wars with the Persians with the express purpose of recovering the True Cross (which had fallen into Persian hands when they overran Jerusalem in 614 AD). Heraclius was successful and restored the True Cross to the Christians of Jerusalem.

And, of course, the Crusades were fought not just to regain control of the holy places in Jerusalem but also in order to safeguard the ancient relics from the earliest days of the Christian Church in Jerusalem.

In our own day, portions of the “True Cross” are kept in Jerusalem and at St. Peter’s in Rome.

But there’s no real certainty that these fragments of the “True Cross” really come from the cross on which Jesus was crucified.

The important thing to remember is that while it might be satisfying to human curiosity to debate whether the so-called “True Cross” is “true”, real faith doesn’t depend on material items at all but on the constant response to the powerful grace of God in the heart.

PLEASE REMEMBER IN YOUR PRAYERS

- ...the Firsties, as they celebrate Ring Weekend – and their guests who will travel to celebrate with them.
- ...the Plebes, as many of them take part in their Mini-Retreat.
- ...all our military brothers and sisters – and their families – throughout the world.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, why do Catholics baptize infants? Doesn’t it seem more reasonable that such an important part of a Christian’s life be accompanied by a personal act of faith?

A: I know that within some Christian traditions (Baptist, 7th-Day Adventist, Disciples of Christ, Mormons), this idea is very strong: namely, that since infants cannot yet think for themselves, baptizing them doesn’t enable them to make the personal act of faith that Scripture requires.

On the other side of the question, you can find the Eastern and Western Catholic Churches (and the Orthodox, too), the Episcopal Church and several other churches within the Protestant tradition (Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian), all of whom have preserved the practice of infant-baptism.

I’ll simply present the Catholic view in answer to your question.

The Catholic Church believes that the practice of infant-baptism has existed in the Church from the beginning. Granted, the phrase “infant-baptism” doesn’t appear in the Scriptures; nevertheless, in several places, the New Testament speaks of people being baptized “with their households” (read Acts 16:15 and 16-33 for that phrasing), so the Scriptures seem to make no distinction between any age-groups.

The oldest Church Ritual – from the early 200s AD – contains this directive:

Baptize the children first of all.
Any of them who can speak for themselves
are to give the answers; in the case of those
who cannot speak for themselves,
their parents or someone else in their families
are to speak for them.

“Apostolic Tradition”
(written by St. Hippolytus)

Early Church writers like Origen (d. 253) and St. Augustine (d. 410) called infant-baptism “a tradition received from the Apostles”.

And even Martin Luther, who criticized a lot about the Catholic Church at the time of the Protestant Reformation, kept the practice of infant-baptism. He said that “the Church could not have been permitted by God to be in error for so long” and that to deny infant-baptism “is to deny the Church itself”.

So Catholics baptize their infants because they believe that the practice has been part of the Church from the beginning.

The reasoning is this: salvation is a gift from God; it is not accomplished by a personal decision. This is what the Church refers to as “grace”. And the fact that the Church baptizes babies into the conversion-process without their having to perform any special “works” on their own shows that God’s love is freely given to all who come to him.

Just as children are completely accepted into their “natural” family at birth, so too they’re accepted into their “spiritual” family at birth as well. And just as babies receive citizenship in an “earthly nation” at birth because of their parents, so too do they become citizens of a “heavenly kingdom” at birth because of their parents.

What about the question of a “personal decision to follow Christ”?

The Church believes that such decisions can be made and strengthened each Easter at Mass, when Catholics are asked to renew their baptismal promises and are sprinkled with water that recalls their Baptism.

Basically, Catholics baptize infants so as to share with them as soon as possible the redeeming grace of Christ and to follow the practice of the earliest Christians.

For us, infant-baptism is a vehicle of faith, a symbol of God’s free gift of love, an initiation into the family of the Church and the beginning of a conversion-process that lasts a lifetime but which is accomplished with the support and the corporate strength of the family we call “The Church”.

THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW: THE GIFT OF TEARS

I bet you’ve never thought of TEARS (or “crying”) as having any relationship to the spiritual life.

Well, that’s all about the change because both Eastern and Western traditions of Catholicism consider TEARS to be a normal feature of spiritual reality.

Basing their ideas on the Bible, spiritual writers believe that TEARS expose the intimate, profound relationship between every human being’s body, emotions, mind and spirit. TEARS express feelings and levels of EXPERIENCE that go beyond verbal expression.

In the Bible, TEARS are seen on several levels. Obviously the act of weeping is an expression of natural human emotion, but weeping can also express deep sentiments of GRATITUDE, SORROW and LOVE. In other words, TEARS can give evidence of the WHOLE HUMAN PERSON responding to God at all levels of the faith-journey.

The depth of such spiritual movement can be seen in various biblical settings. For example, in Lamentations (2:11), the prophet surveys the wrecked city of Jerusalem and says:

My eyes are worn out from weeping.

Within me, all is in ferment.
My gall is poured out on the ground
because of the downfall
of the daughter of my people,
as child and infant fade away
in the open spaces of the town.

Or again, in Psalm 6:7-8, we read:

I am wearied with sighing.
Every night, I flood my bed with my weeping.
I drench my couch with my tears.
My eyes are dimmed with sorrow;
They have aged because of all my foes.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem's resistance to grace (Luke 19:41), and in another place, he commented that "They who mourn are blessed, because they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4).

The GIFT OF TEARS is not just a natural phenomenon, although it might seem so to the casual observer. Far from being simply natural, TEARS can be the overflow of God's grace as it moves the heart of a human being.

Witness Peter weeping after he denied Jesus (Mark 14:72):
Peter remembered the words that Jesus
had spoken to him...He broke down
and wept.

And then witness the despair of Judas in Matthew 27:5:
And flinging the money into the Temple,
Judas departed and went off and hanged himself.

The two figures are different because one allowed himself to be moved by GRACE, and the other seemingly did not.

And even speaking on the NATURAL level, TEARS can mark an opening of a HEALING process and gradually become an expression of GRATITUDE and FREEDOM.

Such TEARS are a gift and a deeply personal expression of the transforming actions of God within an individual and a community.

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

"Every Christian
needs a half-hour of prayer
each day,
except when he or she is busy;
then, an hour is needed."

St. Francis de Sales
(d. 1622)

And that's the way it is, a day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our time...

and YOU ARE THERE!!

Have a good weekend...
and somewhere along the way,
think of the God who made you...
and whisper a bit of thanks
for all that you have.

Woodie