

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 12 October, 2008

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

I was on Leave all last week, so there wasn't any CHURCH STUFF...but Leave is over, and things are back on track.

Too bad!

But on a positive note...

May you all be wrapped in the mystery of God this coming week!

Eternal One:

Silence

from Whom my words come;

Questioner,

from Whom my questions arise;

Lover,

of Whom all my human loves are hints;

Disturber,

in Whom alone I find my rest;

Mystery,

in Whose depths I find myself and my healing;

Enfold me now in Your Presence.

Restore me with Your peace.

Renew me through Your power.

Ground me in Your grace.

Amen!

THINGS CATHOLICS CAN DO:

CATHOLIC CADET PRAYER BREAKFAST

We're planning the annual Fall Catholic Cadet Prayer Breakfast for Tuesday, 28 October, at the West Point Club. More info to follow as we get closer.

DID YOU KNOW?

CANDLES:

If you're like me, you probably have never done much thinking about CANDLES in Church...just kind of taken them for granted.

In early times, CANDLES had a very practical use: to provide LIGHT. As you might guess, this wasn't a very symbolic function to most people.

But in a broader sense, the use of CANDLES also had a message and a symbolism that deserve some attention.

From the AD 200s, there is evidence of a Christian evening-prayer ceremony, held in private homes at the 12th hour of the day (6 PM). They used oil lamps, made of terra cotta and decorated with Christian symbols. In these lights, Christians saw a symbol of Christ as the “light of the world”.

Also in that century, Christians used CANDLES or lamps as part of funerals. They also kept them burning before the tombs of the martyrs, and by the 4th century, they were keeping CANDLES burning before the images and pictures of Christ and the saints.

By the 7th century, they were using CANDLES symbolically at Mass, carrying them in the Entrance procession and the Gospel procession; they also placed them around the altar.

By the 11th century, the CANDLES were placed on the altar itself, and they became a prescribed part of the Ritual.

Some of the symbolism came from the civil practices of the early times. High-ranking officials were accompanied in public by a “light-bearer”, and the officials of the Church were included in this. From this practice, it isn’t hard to transfer the meaning to the highest of “high-ranking officials”: Christ Himself.

From this comes the practice of keeping a light burning in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. That’s why a CANDLE burns constantly in the sanctuary of every Catholic church: to honor the presence of Jesus in the Sacrament and to remind us that he is, in fact, the only true LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, I was wondering what the Catholic teaching on Purgatory was. A Catholic friend of mine and I were discussing Purgatory. He believed that all Catholics went to Purgatory to pay for their sins. I thought that only the ones with sins go to Purgatory. He believes that if you die with sin, you go to Hell. If you could help me out with this question, it would be helpful; it would be good to know about our own mortality.

A: Good question...because purgatory has been the source of a lot of misunderstanding over the years.

The Catholic belief is that if you die in the love of God but still possess some “stains of sin”, such impurity is cleansed away during the process of purgatory. Purgatory is not a place but a stage or process in the afterlife. In this stage, the dead are aided by the prayers of the living, a biblical sentiment found in the Old Testament book of 2 Maccabees 12:39-45 (note: the 2 Books of Maccabees are found in the Catholic version of the Old Testament, but not in the Protestant version – so you wouldn’t find them in your Cadet Bible, which is the Protestant version). Anyway, the tradition of offering prayers for the dead was passed on by the early Christians as part of our tradition from Judaism, and the tradition was well established in the Church by the 2nd century.

Having passed through purgatory, one becomes utterly unselfish and capable of perfect love. The selfish ego – that part of a person that restlessly seeks self-satisfaction – will die forever. Here individuals are transformed and purified by the intensity of God’s love. This means that Catholics don’t see “the purgatory process” as punishment; they see it as the final stage in our journey to be one with God.

In this belief, we’re reminded that there’s a universal bond between us and those who have gone before us. The 2nd Vatican Council (1960s) focused on this bond when it said

that Catholics believe in the “venerable faith of our ancestors in the living communion which exists between us and our sisters and brothers who are in the glory of heaven or who are yet being purified after their death” (“The Church, #51).

THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

SACRAMENTAL:

You’ve heard the word SACRAMENT, I’m sure.

We Catholics use that word SACRAMENT to describe those immensely powerful actions of God within time and space.

We see seven of these actions of God: Baptism, Confirmation, Reconciliation, Eucharist, Anointing of the Sick, Church Orders and Matrimony...and we make a big deal of them.

Some are one-time events, and some are frequent encounters with God.

The word SACRAMENTAL is a corollary to this idea.

A SACRAMENTAL is a sacred sign that helps the human personality to participate in and benefit from the SACRAMENTS.

The word SACRAMENTAL first appears in the Church of the 12th century, but the idea existed in the Church many centuries before that. For example, you can find St. Ambrose (AD 375 or so) talking about the spiritual effects of simple rituals and actions.

Some SACRAMENTALS are closely associated with the SACRAMENTS themselves. For example, during the Sacrament of Baptism, the priest will bless the water which will be used...or during a wedding ceremony, the Ritual calls for the priest to bless the rings which will be exchanged.

Other SACRAMENTALS are associated with various human activities. For example, fields are sometimes blessed before the seeds are planted...or one blesses oneself with holy water upon entering a Catholic Church...or one wears a medal around one’s neck...or animals are blessed on St. Francis Day...or families offer a blessing before meals...or one hangs a cross or some religious symbol from the rear-view mirror of one’s car (which I don’t recommend)...

None of these are “good luck charms”, and they shouldn’t be looked upon as amulets or objects of superstition (although they can easily be misunderstood in that way).

The Catholic Church believes that by using the blessed water or wearing a medal or asking a blessing on the crops or hanging a crucifix on the wall of your room, a person opens his or her personality to God’s presence – so that when the time comes to receive an actual SACRAMENT, the mind and heart are more open to the grace of God which comes to us in the SACRAMENTS themselves.

It’s a bit like softening the soil before planting: the softening makes the earth more friendly to the plow and to the ultimate growth of the seed.

So too, our minds and hearts are softened by these simple objects and rituals that we call SACRAMENTALS, so that the coming of God’s grace can have its maximum effect through those main actions of God that we call SACRAMENTS.

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

“Let no one ever come to you

without leaving better and happier.”
Mother Teresa

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!!

All best wishes to all of you.
Know that you're in my prayers all the time...
and please let me know if I can ever be of any help.
Woodie