

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 25 January, 2009

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

We're in the dull period of the year.

Some people call it the GRIM period.

And the weather doesn't always help.

As a matter of fact, the weather can sometimes be a pain.

So in the midst of it all, it doesn't hurt to pray:

O God of all seasons and senses,
grant me Your sense of timing
to submit GRACEFULLY
and rejoice QUIETLY
in the turn of the seasons.

In this season of short days and long nights,
of gray and white and cold,
teach me the lessons of WAITING,
the lessons of snow
joining the mystery
of the hunkered-down seeds
growing in their sleep,
watched over by gnarled-limbed, grandparent trees,
resting from autumn's staggering energy.

O God, grant me your sense of TIMING.

May the silence of the cold and the snow somehow bring God to you...and you to God.

THINGS CATHOLICS CAN DO:

NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST

The annual NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST will be held on Wednesday, 4 February, at the West Point Club at 0600. You can get tickets from any of the Chaplain's Offices; tickets are free (but you need one).

BLESSING OF THROATS

In honor of the Feast of St. Blaise (3 Feb), the Blessing of Throats will be offered at all the Masses over the weekend of 31 Jan-1 Feb at the Chapel and in WH5300.

CANDLEMAS DINNER

Every year around this time, the Chaplain's Office
Hosts a dinner at Ike Hall for Catholic cadets.
Nothing formal...just a chance to get together for a
Change of pace. This year's dinner will be on
Friday evening, 6 February, at 1815. More info later.

DID YOU KNOW?

ST. SEBASTIAN:

Last Tuesday was the Feast of St. Sebastian, and since he's one of the long-time patrons of soldiers, I thought I'd offer a sketch of what's known about him.

According to traditions, he was a Roman soldier who became a Christian and was killed for his faith.

References to him can be found in Church documents ("Depositio Martyrum" – "The Burial of the Martyrs") as early as AD 350. This particular document mentions that he was buried in the catacombs under the Church of St. Sebastian on the Appian Way in Rome.

Devotion to him spread quickly, and he was soon mentioned in other lists of Early Church martyrs. St. Ambrose, who died in AD 397, claimed that he was a native of Milan and suffered during the persecution of the Emperor Diocletian (c. 300 AD).

There's a written work from around AD 450 called "Passio Sancti Sebastiani" ("The Suffering of St. Sebastian"), probably the work of a monk from a monastery located near those catacombs where Sebastian was buried. According to this "Passio", Sebastian was an Army officer who was condemned to death for being a Christian. His punishment was to be shot with arrows by his fellow-soldiers. He was then buried in the catacombs "near the remains of the Apostles".

In Renaissance times, he was represented as an older soldier, then as a young man with prominent muscles, then as a heroic figure standing before the archers. In earliest representations, he is shown as a bearded Roman warrior, then as a clean-shaven young man.

There's even a legend that he recovered from the attempted execution and was later beaten to death.

Anyway, that's what the traditions say.

Next time you're up at Most Holy Trinity, check out his stained-glass window.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Do Catholics believe that truly moral people who try to do the right thing will go to heaven even if they've heard the word of God but do not believe, although they have struggled with the issue? Since one of God's greatest gifts to humans is the ability to reason, how can He punish those who have used reason to evaluate the evidence and concluded that there is simply not enough evidence to believe in Christianity.

Q: Father, if you have to believe in Jesus Christ to be saved, then what happens to the people who have never even heard the name "Jesus" spoken?

A: I've put these two questions together because they deal with the same phenomenon: the PROCESS of belief.

It's true that there are Christians who will tell you that only those people who publicly profess belief in Jesus Christ will enter heaven. They claim that unless a person is a believing Christian, there is no hope for salvation for him or her.

This is not the Roman Catholic position on the question.

Let me quote for you a statement from the 2nd Vatican Council on the matter:

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation
who through no fault of their own do not know
the Gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely
seek God and, moved by his grace, strive by their deeds
to do his will as it is known to them through the
dictates of conscience.

Decree on "The Church", II:16
21 November, 1964

And that's the Church's belief: that if, through no fault of their own, people do not know the truth of the Christian message –or even do not accept it – and yet at the same time, they sincerely follow their own beliefs and their own consciences in their search for God, they can enter heaven after death.

This may seem strange at first. After all, John 14:6 has Jesus making this statement:

I am the way, the truth and the life.

No one can come to the Father except through me.

That seems to be pretty specific in eliminating lots of people from the picture.

Yet at the same time, Scripture contains other statements, like the one in I Timothy 2:4, where St. Paul describes God as wanting

...all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge
of the truth.

The Catholic position is based on the belief that men and women were given "human reason" in order to come to God AND that if followed sincerely and in the right way, one's reason will enable a person to do precisely that. Of course, "human reason" is only part of the picture. We also believe that God's grace (in other words, God's life as it's shared with us) enters into the picture as well.

The two – reason and grace – involve each of us in a drama or a journey that may take a lifetime.

True, Jesus Christ is the WAY to God...and has already redeemed each and every human being. He is the source of salvation for everyone.

But who is to determine the manner in which each person comes to believe in Jesus Christ? And how is one's "conversion" to Christ to be determined?

Can one human being make this judgment about another?

Other human beings can't do it because what goes on in the mystery of "reason and grace" is a mysterious movement in the heart of each human being.

So the Catholic view is to leave it to God and not to try and dissect the process of belief. For some people, conversion to Christ may be an easy and discernible thing; for others, the journey may take a lifetime and never happen in an observable way.

Only God can make the judgment, and as Paul said to Timothy:

God wants all people to be saved...

THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

MAGIC:

Once again, this isn't a "theology" topic, strictly speaking, but it has tremendous implications that certainly touch on a Christian's LIFE OF FAITH.

The Catholic Church believes that MAGIC is nothing more than superstitious practices which claim to perform extraordinary wonders by invoking hidden spiritual powers. This is obviously NOT the same as the kind of "magic" performed by entertainers; that type is more correctly referred to as "sleight-of-hand".

The more objectionable kind of MAGIC presumes that there are hidden "intra-cosmic" powers that can have extraordinary influences on natural phenomena, if accessed in the proper manner. These "intra-cosmic" powers are discovered by the human will and can either control the life of the person or be controlled by the will of the person.

MAGIC can be both "white" and "black". In WHITE MAGIC, one seeks to communicate with these "beings" to gain special blessings and goods; in BLACK MAGIC, one invokes these beings to bring harm to others.

Despite these differences, the Catholic Church objects to both as being contrary to the LIFE OF FAITH and the honor and respect due to God alone.

Magical practices include the following:

- a) Divination (attempting to "tell the future")
- b) Fortune-telling
- c) Interpretation of dreams
- d) Necromancy (attempting to communicate with the dead)
- e) Ouija boards
- f) Ordeals to determine guilt or innocence
- g) Use of horoscopes
- h) Devil worship and other similar practices

MAGIC was also widely practiced in antiquity.

It was also evidently practiced among the Israelites. There are lots of references to it in the Old Testament, and prophets condemned it again and again. For example, in Micah 5:11, you can read the following:

I will abolish the means of divination
from your use, and there shall no longer
be soothsayers among you.

Still, the ancient Jews continued to practice MAGIC, and a good example of this is King Saul's attempt to conjure up the dead. You can read the story in I Samuel 28:3-19.

There is some evidence that some early Christians practiced it as well. Two of the most famous episodes are in the Acts of the Apostles: the story of Simon Magus ("magus" is Latin for "magician") in Acts 8:9-24 and the story of Elymas in Acts 13:6-12. Both men are soundly denounced by the Apostles. St. Paul condemns sorcerers as being among the immoral, the licentious and the idolatrous (Galatians 5:16-24), and in the Book of Revelation, the author John consistently places "sorcerers" and "magic potions" among the enemies of God (see Revelation 9:21, 18:23, 21:8, and 22:15).

Catholic Church teaching has condemned all forms of “magical” practices as contrary to FAITH and HOPE...because MAGIC attempts to put created realities on the same level as the Creator and to capture and misuse the power that belongs only to God.

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

“God is not what you imagine
or what you think you understand.
If you understand, you have failed.”
St. Augustine
“On the Trinity”

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
all good wishes to the Class of 2010 for 500th Night.
You’re always in my prayers.
Woodie