

“The Domestic Church as a Domestic Monastery”
Homily for Easter Sunday Mass
April 12, 2020

Introduction

Church historians tell us that in the early centuries of the Church, when Christians sought a more perfect life in Christ, they fled to the deserts of Egypt to seek him in solitude. This was the beginning of the movement of Christian monasticism. During the season of Lent, it was customary for the monks to retreat individually further into the desert away from the monastery, and live as hermits, remaining there up to Palm Sunday, when they would reunite as a community to celebrate Holy Week. This means that they went through practically the entire season of Lent without access to the sacraments, including the Eucharist, since in early monastic communities monks were not ordained.

The ancient practice of these Egyptian monks has a haunting parallel to what we are experiencing now, in our own time. People are sheltering in place, staying at home, and so likewise do not have access to the Holy Eucharist. Let us not allow the timing of this necessary discipline due to the current pandemic be lost on us. We have been hearing for some time now of the decline in belief among Catholics in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, with surveys revealing that only a minority understand and adhere to this core Catholic belief. Could it be that God is allowing this deprivation in order to renew His Church in the truths He has revealed to us through His crucified and risen Son? Could it be that God is sending us this pandemic at this time so that every family can become a monastic community?

The Monastic Principle

At first blush that last proposal may seem like a preposterous idea, but it is one that actually goes back very far, to the early centuries of the Church. The fourth century Patriarch of Constantinople and great father of the Eastern Church, St. John Chrysostom, was even so bold as to say that all married people must at the same time be good monks. What in the world was he talking about?

Monasticism is simply the radical way of living out the very same baptismal promises and commitment made by all who are baptized. “Radical” means “root”: the point of the monastic vocation is to get right down to the root, or basics, of our faith and meaning of our baptism. This is something else of which we are deprived this year, and which some of us feel very acutely, that is, not being able to celebrate the initiation sacraments for God’s people. This is typically the beginning of the “Confirmation season” for parishes (and bishops!), and baptism is especially associated with Easter, for it signifies the believer’s death with the Lord by dying to sin, and so rising with him to new life. The ancient ritual of baptism, now revived in many parishes, demonstrated this in a striking way by immersion: the catechumen would be led into the immersion font three steps down to signify the three days Christ lay in the tomb; then immersed under the water three times, one for each person of the Trinity, and signifying being buried and dying with Christ (closing the eyes and holding the breath, reminiscent of death); and then rise out of the font and be clothed with a white garment to signify rising with Christ and putting on the new man who is Jesus Christ, after washing away the old life of sin.

Monasticism is razor focused on this baptismal commitment to life in Christ, focused on what is truly essential for our ultimate destiny. The great monastic spiritual masters would say that, for eternal salvation, it is essential for all Christians to “think about their death and judgment a few minutes every day.” As the world seeks to protect itself from this pandemic, the central question has indeed been, “what is essential and what is not essential?” Government officials are making critical decisions about which services are essential for providing people with the basic necessities of life and which are not, for the sake of our own protection. As people of faith, this is a time for us to focus on what is truly essential for life, at the deepest level, at the level that leads to eternal salvation. This is precisely the question that guides the monk in every moment of the monk’s life.

The Domestic Church

Through the current pandemic the entire world has in a sense become monastic, and providentially, it began during the very heart of the season of the Church when Catholics traditionally adopt, in various ways, monastic disciplines, such as fasting and other acts of penance, repentance, forgiveness, more intensified prayer, and more intentional works of charity. This convergence of occurrences gives us a prime opportunity to live out the vision of St. John Chrysostom and that of other early Church fathers, who urged that every household become a domestic church. This ancient principle was highlighted once again by the Second Vatican Council, and the Church has been emphasizing it ever since. “Domestic church” means that the elements that mark the life of the Church also mark the life and character of a household. These marks are, again, intrinsically monastic: prayer, reading of Scripture, meditation, quiet time, sense of community, deferential love, humility, and moderation in all things. But how do we realize this vision for ourselves?

The second reading for our Mass today is the classic Epistle reading associated with Easter Sunday from ancient times, from St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. In it he uses a very biblical image to teach a very powerful lesson: clearing out the old yeast. This is clearly a reference to the Passover ritual, so appropriate for Easter, the Christian Passover, when Christ passes over from death to life. The Jewish Passover, of course, commemorates their passing from slavery out of Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land, that night when the angel of death passed over the Jewish homes whose doorposts were marked with the blood of the lamb. Remember the instruction that God gave them that night, still reenacted in the Seder meal: they had to eat bread without leaven because they were leaving Egypt in haste. The Seder meal includes bitter herbs, to remind them of the bitter centuries of slavery in Egypt. Leaven, or yeast, in the Bible is associated with the bitterness of slavery in Egypt, and so came to symbolize corruption, defilement and sin. The image, then, is one of purification, clearing out the old, to make room for the new. In the yearly cycle of domestic life in modern times it might be something akin to spring cleaning.

In the case of the situation in Corinth, St. Paul had to address a situation of serious immorality, as he says a few verses before our passage begins, “of a kind not found even among the pagans.” Just like a little bit of yeast affects the whole batch of dough making it rise, so a little bit of vice corrupts the whole community. He is harkening back here to his Jewish identity: purification. He is telling them to purge their community of all defilement and sin. He says they

have become unleavened: that is, made pure through the saving waters of baptism. As he says, yeast represents malice and wickedness, and unleavened bread sincerity and truth. The one who is sincere and truthful is the one who can rejoice that our Paschal Lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.

What does this look like? We turn, as always, to the monastics for guidance. By imitating the hallmarks of monastic life we can purify ourselves of that old yeast, thereby renewing the life of the domestic church in our own homes, and so also renewing a true appreciation of our Lord's constant presence to us in the Blessed Sacrament. Yes, the Holy Eucharist lies at the center of Catholic life. However, this does not mean that for the Church to flourish Holy Communion must simply be made as readily and frequently available as possible. If this were all there were to it, it would risk seeing Holy Communion as something that I "get" – which, I fear, is an attitude that is creeping into the minds of many Catholics. Ancient Christian monasticism teaches us something very different: Holy Communion is something for which one must strive to be worthy. Those monks deprived themselves of the sacraments in order to intensify their appreciation and longing for them, and to prepare themselves to partake worthily. Here again we see the same virtues at play as in holy matrimony: the spouses must always strive to prove themselves worthy of the trust and fidelity of their spouse.

Those very virtues which are modeled and lived with an exclusive and intense focus by monastics, are also the virtues that build up the domestic church and thereby lead to peace, harmony, and human flourishing in the home. Do we have the attitude of the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth? All should ask themselves what their attitude is right now, in this situation, without the availability of attending Mass in person. Is it one of relief, as if thinking, "This is great, we don't have to worry about going to Mass!"? Or is it sadness at not being able to be with the assembly of believers in person worshiping God in His house, and thus sanctifying the Lord's Day as the Church would normally envision us doing? I can say that the feeling on this side of livestream, looking out to a large church full of empty pews, feels very sad. But today there is no room for sadness.

Conclusion

Christ is risen from the dead, he has won for us what is most essential in life: forgiveness of our sins and eternal life with him. The real sadness is the old yeast of malice, wickedness and sin, and our Lord, by his triumph over death, has put an end to that. Yes, in the immediate situation there is a certain sadness, since for the vast majority of Catholics sheltering in place in response to the current pandemic means lack of access to the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church as we are accustomed to it. Perhaps this is something we have taken too easily for granted. Perhaps God is using this as a way to renew His Church in the spirit of the monastics, who are always the guiding lights for all vocations in the Church. And if you do feel sad (and not relieved!), take heart, for that is the first sign of renewal: your longing to be with your Eucharistic Lord is the sign of your proper attitude of worshiping him in sincerity and truth.

The home is the domestic church, and right now the domestic church has become more like a domestic monastery. What a grace God has given us! For monastic virtues and domestic virtues coincide: placing worship of Jesus Christ above all else, and seeking ways to foster unity and harmony in one's community, whether that community be a monastery or a household.

Homily, Easter Sunday, 2020

Ridding ourselves of the old leaven of malice and wickedness – selfishness, greed, self-indulgence in every fleeting desire – and becoming the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth – cheerfulness in the midst of trial, generosity and patience in the midst of panic – this is the key to the renewal of the life of faith in the household, and to inculcating the instinctual sense of reverence for the sacred and deference to the other. This is also the key to renewing faith in the Real Presence of our Lord in the Eucharist. This is how we are assured that he is still truly with us, constantly present to us, even – and especially – in this time of distress. This is how we keep our vision focused on the true essential: worship of him, the conqueror of death, in sincerity and truth, so that we might live with him forever in heaven.