

“Personal Relationship to Jesus Christ: A Biblical and Catholic Perspective”
Homily for the 6th Sunday of Easter, Year “A”
May 17, 2020

Introduction

Among a certain type of Christian believer, the kind who are very evangelical and charismatic, and on fire for Jesus, it is not uncommon to hear them pose the question to someone they meet: “Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?”

It is a little bit curious, because this phrase, “personal Lord and Savior,” originated in some more evangelical-type Protestant churches, the ones that look to the Bible alone for authority and read the Bible literally. However, this exact phrase is not found, literally, in the Bible. The Bible is certainly full of news about Jesus being Lord and being Savior, but the idea of a *personal* Lord and Savior is something more recent, thanks to insights we’ve gained from modern psychology.

Nonetheless, this concept of a personal Lord and Savior is certainly consistent with our own Catholic tradition. Our mystics for very many centuries have written about the intimate relationship of the soul with its Lord; mystical literature is filled with this sense of deep, personal relationship. As Catholics, we can see this idea as a development of what is implicitly in the Bible and has grown throughout our tradition.

The Personal and the Communal

One could say that the point of putting it this way, “Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior,” is a way of asking if one is taking one’s Christian faith seriously in all its aspects, if one is living the faith with the purity and integrity. This would especially apply to one’s life of prayer, which is our communication with God, listening as well as speaking and petitioning. Communication, and especially listening, is how we get to know another. We certainly cannot say that we know Jesus if we do not pray! How, though, can we be sure that this relationship is authentic, that it is with the real Jesus, and we are not just turning Jesus into some sort of an imaginary friend whom we can tailor to our own liking?

Our Lord gives us the answer in the Gospel reading for today’s Mass: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments”, and, “Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me.”

Obedience to our Lord’s commandments is the measure of love he sets for us. And how can we be sure that we really understand his commandments, that we understand them correctly? It is a matter of being in communion with the Church. The personal dimension of our relationship to the Lord cannot be rightly directed without the communal dimension of relationship to the Church, just as a communal relationship to the Church without the personal relationship to Christ – meaning simply fulfilling the external duties of our religion in a perfunctory way – makes our life of faith very superficial. Both are necessary for our relationship to God to avoid dissolving into mere sentimentalism, and instead to be concretely and soberly manifested in a life of obedience to Christ’s commandments.

The passage we heard proclaimed from the Acts of the Apostles in our first reading shows that the Church has understood this from the very beginning. This story recounts for us the first time the faith had been accepted outside of Jerusalem. Therefore, the apostles were sent from Jerusalem to pray over the newly converted. The Philip here who evangelizes the city of Samaria is not Philip the apostle, but the Philip who was one of the “seven reputable men” we

heard about last week who were ordained to assist the apostles with the temporal needs of the community, but also, clearly, from the very beginning, also were evangelists themselves. But the Church has always understood that the Holy Spirit operates only where there is communion with the apostles. And the apostles would appoint successors, bishops, to maintain this communion of the Church throughout all generations until the Lord’s return, going back to the apostles themselves, who received their commission directly from Christ.

Cascading Pattern of Communion

What we see here is a sort of cascading pattern of communion, one leading to another. Listen to what our Lord tells his disciples will happen when they receive the Holy Spirit: “On that day you will realize that I am in the Father and you are in me and I in you.” “I am in the Father”: this is what we profess every Sunday in the Nicene Creed, “begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father.” He is God, from all eternity, the second person of the Most Holy Trinity, proceeding from the perfect communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. “You are in me”: this, too, we profess in the Nicene Creed, “by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” This is the mystery of the Incarnation: we are in him in the sense that he took our human flesh in order to come into the world. He wasn’t a ghost, but a true human being with human flesh. “I [am] in you”: this refers to his presence to us and in us in the Blessed Sacrament. In receiving the Most Holy Eucharist, he literally comes into our physical body.

The great Church father St. Hilary put it very succinctly: “He is in the Father by divine nature; we are in Him by His corporeal birth; and He again is in us by the mystery of the [Blessed] Sacrament.” So we see again how our communion with God is mediated by the Church, understood as the whole Christ: Christ the head of the Body, and we the members of the Body, united to and under the head.

I realize, of course, the sadness our people are feeling at this time by not being able to access the sacrament of our communion with Christ and the Church. Despite the hardship, we have made great progress here in the Bay Area in stemming the spread of the coronavirus by our cooperation with the directives of our government leaders. We Church leaders have cooperated with this effort by making the painful decision to suspend public Masses; however, if we continue to strictly abide by these directives, it may soon be safe for us to open up for public Mass with limited numbers of people.

“Getting Something Out of It”

The sadness, and even suffering, some of you feel at this deprivation is actually a positive sign: it would mean something much worse if you were indifferent! There are, after all, many people who are; how often do we hear the complaint about going to church, “I don’t get anything out of it”? Of course, you can’t get anything out of something unless you first put something into it!

Think about it: an astronomer will see far more in a starry night sky than one unschooled in astronomy; a botanist will see far more in a field of flowers than someone who knows no botany; someone who knows about art will see far more in a painting of one of the masters than someone who is quite ignorant of art; someone who understands music will get far more out of a symphony than someone who understands nothing about it. Always what we see and experience depends on what we bring to the experience. That is, it requires preparation. How can one realistically expect to “get anything out” of the Mass without putting anything into it?

If you are sharply feeling the loss right now by having to follow this Mass at home through technology, praise God for you: you put a lot into it! Your personal relationship with Jesus Christ is authentic, because of your relationship with the Church, of keeping communion with the Church. You do this in a whole myriad of ways: above all, by maintaining an active life of prayer and participation in the sacramental life of the Church; by fellowship with your fellow parishioners; by your service to the needy in your community; by continuing to learn more about the faith by reading, study, and especially through Bible studies; by teaching the faith and witnessing to it, to insure it is handed on to future generations and to those who are searching for God. You do all of this in the context of parish life. That, practically speaking, is what it means to keep communion with the Church.

Suffering for Jesus

There is one more important sign of authenticity in one’s relationship to Jesus Christ, and this is indicated for us in the second reading for Mass today, from the First Letter of St. Peter: “it is better to suffer for doing good, if that be the will of God, then for doing evil.” It is that suffering which we specifically bear because of our relationship to Christ that shows the integrity of our faith.

The suffering you feel at not being present at Mass is one example of that. An even more powerful example is the suffering one endures for publicly being known to stand for all that we believe in and value. In many ways the culture we are living in is very hostile to these core values, and those who are publicly known for living by them and defending them are often subject to all kinds of persecution, often subtle but sometimes more severe: being mocked, ostracized, sidelined in one’s career, even losing one’s job. The sign of someone who has truly accepted Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior is one who can bear all of this, as St. Peter says, “with gentleness and reverence.”

The temptation is to keep quiet, to keep one’s faith in one’s private life – which is exactly what some powerful forces in our society want us to do. But “personal” does not mean “private.” True, to be brazen in proclaiming the faith would be counterproductive; but without demonstrating one’s faith publicly, “with gentleness and reverence,” is to still be a long way from accepting Jesus Christ as one’s personal Lord and Savior.

Conclusion

He is the personal Lord and Savior of each one of us, just as he is the Lord and Savior of the entire universe, and the head of his Body the Church. Let us thank him for giving us the Church, so that we might know him, love him, and be in him and he in us, and share communion with the Most Holy Trinity forever in heaven. Amen.