

Fifth Sunday of Easter, 2008

“Blessed be the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy hath regenerated us unto a lively hope, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

(1 Pet 1:3)

On this last Sunday after Easter the liturgy still is filled with hymns of triumph and joy; the Church never tires of celebrating Christ's resurrection which brought to us redeeming graces that should have transformed our lives. And St Peter, in his first encyclical letter to the Church, leaves us in no doubt that our regeneration by holy Baptism must fill our souls with “a lively hope”, a hope that is living and vibrant, for by His resurrection we are assured “unto an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that cannot fade, reserved in heaven for us.” But being human with all the weaknesses of our nature, we can forget our better self so very easily. So the Epistle of St James today exhorts us to the serious practice of the Christian life, and the prayer of the Mass asks God, not only for the grace of thinking aright, but also for the grace of conforming our lives to the ideal that our faith sets before us.



This is an invitation to constant personal effort as Catholics, as well as to prayer, which most often is neglected, yet both of these are necessary for a properly balanced Christian life. This week the call to prayer is emphasised still further by the three rogation-days; the three days before the feast of our Lord's Ascension are days when the Church chants the Litanies — the Litanies of the Saints. Following the disasters that afflicted the diocese of Vienne in Dauphiny in the fifth century, St Mamertus instituted a solemn penitential procession on the three days before Ascension Day. In 511 the Council of Orleans ordered it for the rest of France; it soon spread to the whole Church.

Many now will not have seen the processions for the blessing of the fields to implore an abundant harvest. Strangely enough no one seems to think of such prayers even though present day disasters are on the increase. Personal prayer is necessary to all who really desire to know Christ; through Christ we know the Father, and by this knowledge of Christ and His Father we grow in our love of God. Let us remember that love means giving, love means sacrifice.

We must never forget the great gift that Jesus has given to us, the gift of Himself. In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, referring to Jesus as the Good Shepherd, Pope Benedict

XVI reminds us that the “Shepherd discourse” revolves completely around the idea of Jesus laying down His life for the “sheep”.

The Cross is the centre of the “shepherd discourse” ... And it is portrayed not as an act of violence that takes Jesus unawares and attacks Him from the outside, but as a free gift of His very self. “I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord.” Here Jesus interprets for us what happens at the institution of the Eucharist: He transforms the outward violence of the act of crucifixion into an act of freely giving His life for others. Jesus does not give something, but rather gives Himself. And that is how He gives life. Now this in no way cancels the actual suffering He endured for love of us in His passion and death — agonies and anguish beyond description. But it shows how Christ fulfils His promise of giving us life, and giving that life abundantly. Finally, it is by means of all this that we grown in our knowledge of Christ; that we hear the shepherd’s voice and recognise it. The discourse itself tells us that the Shepherd and His flock know each other: “He calls His own sheep by name and leads them out ... the sheep follow Him for they know His voice.” And how strong is this knowledge? “I am the good Shepherd, I know mine and mine know Me; as the Father knows Me and I know the Father.” The Shepherd knows His sheep because they belong to Him. They are not just things that he possesses; they belong to Him. It signifies an inner belonging that goes much deeper than the possession of things. They belong to each other not as property, but in mutual responsibility. They belong to each other precisely by accepting one another’s freedom, and by supporting one another in love and knowledge — and in this communion they are simultaneously free and one for ail eternity. In the same way the “sheep”, who after all are people created by God, images of God, belong to the true shepherd and for him, they are free in relation to truth and love; the Shepherd proves that they belong to Him precisely by knowing and loving them; by wishing them to be in the freedom of the truth. They belong to Him through the oneness of “knowing” through the communion in the truth that the Shepherd Himself is. This is why he does not use them, but gives his life for them — knowing and self-giving are ultimately one.

Once again, as the Church celebrates the 150th anniversary of Our Lady of Lourdes in this jubilee year of the Immaculate Conception, let us be more fervent as we pray our Rosary — giving a little more time to dwelling on the Mysteries of our Saviour’s life in the joys, sorrows and glorious rewards.

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