

“Without Sunday we cannot live”

Homily for 22nd Week of Ordinary Time

Sirach 3:17–18, 20, 28–29

Psalm 68:4–7, 10–11

Hebrews 12:18–19, 22–24a

Luke 14:1, 7–14

During the persecution by the Roman emperor Diocletian, which started in 303 AD, many Christians were called to make the ultimate sacrifice for their faith. A particular group of 46 believers in Northern Africa, in a place called Abitinae, refused to stop meeting and partaking of the Eucharist. They freely admitted to their persecutors that they would not stop celebrating the Lord's Supper.

The trial took place before the proconsul Anullinus. He was amazed that these Christians would leave themselves so vulnerable and thus expose themselves to such danger.

Emeritus, who declared that the Christians had met in his house, was asked why he had violated the emperor's command. He replied:

"Sine dominico non possumus" – “without Sunday we cannot live”

He was referring to the Sunday celebration of the Holy Eucharist that the emperor had declared illegal, which they had chosen to celebrate, even at the cost of being tortured and sentenced to death.

Here were people who clearly understood what Vatican II stated when it declared that the Mass is the source and the summit of the Christian life. These early brothers and sisters in the faith professed this in life and by their deaths.

Our readings announce to us today that without Sunday we cannot live because:

1. The Mass is heaven sent
2. The Mass is the source of our lives
3. The Mass is the summit of our lives.

Let's consider each of these points in turn:

1. The Mass is Heaven Sent

The Reading from Hebrews teaches us that the Mass is heaven sent. In these verses the writer is contrasting two Mountains. Mount Sinai where Moses received the Law in a setting that was, for the people, terrifying. So shaken were they by hearing the voice of God that they insisted God not speak to them any further but that Moses be the one who would speak to them on behalf of God. But, says the writer, we have not come to Mount Sinai but to Mount Zion. Zion is another

name for Jerusalem. Notice however he is not speaking about the earthly Jerusalem but rather the heavenly Jerusalem. He says it is the city of the living God. And who is there?

There are innumerable angels in festal gathering. There are the saints, referred to as the first born. And of course there is God the judge and Jesus the mediator of the New covenant is also there. He also says that those who are still on earth have also come to the heavenly Jerusalem.

But the question is, how can this be?

The answer is stated in the last verse of today's reading. Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant, and his sprinkled blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Jesus mediates between God and human beings in such a way that the Covenant he established is the culmination of all the covenants that came before. It is instructive that mention is made of Abel. Abel was murdered by his brother Cain because of Cain's envy, pride and jealousy. This is an event that happens all the way back in Genesis 4. As a result of this fratricide alienation and separation continue to unfold in the Book of Genesis. All the covenants that God established in the Old Testament were to work towards reconciliation with God and each other. But all of them fell short. Only the covenant mediated by Jesus and established by his blood could bring about the reconciliation that heals the rupture that occurred in Genesis.

Clearly the writer in referring to the New Covenant is thinking about the Mass. Both Jesus and Paul speak of the New Covenant in relation to the Last Supper and here in Hebrews it is accentuated by the joining together of the language of the New Covenant with the sprinkled blood of Christ. Right at the end of Hebrews, in chapter 13, verse 20 the writer brings these two together again but makes the Mass connection even stronger when he speaks of the blood of the eternal covenant.

Here is the point. The writer to the Hebrews is wanting us to understand that the Mass is heaven sent. When we participate in the Liturgy we are actually joining with the community in heaven that has been completely reconciled to God. When we have this perspective on the Mass than like the Christians in Abitinae we will say:

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2. The Mass is the source of our lives

Not only is the Mass heaven sent, it is also the source of our lives. As the gifts are prepared for consecration the priest says over the bread:

Fruit of the earth and work of human hands.

Then over the wine he declares:

Fruit of the vine and work of human hands

What is needed in order for the fruit of the earth and fruit of the wine to grow? Soil, the very substance of the earth. From the earth, the very source of the wheat and grapes, we acquire the Eucharistic Gifts. They are then taken, blessed and transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ.

This action brings into focus that the earth is also the source of our lives. In Genesis we are told that Adam is made from the dust – the earth of the ground. Now the Latin word for “ground” is “humus” from which we get the English word “humility.” The Sacramental Gifts that we consume every time we come to Mass are taken from the ground. As we consume them we recall that we too are creatures of the earth, taken from the ground and to the ground our mortal bodies will return after death. Just as these gifts are taken, blessed and transformed so too God wants to do the same with us.

The more we understand and appreciate that these humble gifts of the ground become the Body and Blood of Christ, the more we will humbly perceive that we too are the body of Christ. Such people will recognize in the words of our reading from Sirach what it means to be grounded and humble:

*¹⁷My child, perform your tasks with humility;
then you will be loved by those whom God accepts.
¹⁸The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself;
so you will find favor in the sight of the Lord.*

To humble ourselves is to live with a right understanding of our strengths and weaknesses, gifts and shortcomings. It is to have a proper self-understanding, as this verse states:

*²¹Neither seek what is too difficult for you
nor investigate what is beyond your power.*

To be people of humility is to have the growing discernment to truly accept who we are. It is in the words of St. Paul from Romans 12:

To not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, but to think with sober judgment,

To be people of humility is to be people who are also wanting to grow in godly wisdom.

*²⁹The mind of the intelligent appreciates proverbs,
and an attentive ear is the desire of the wise.*

Proverbs are short pithy sayings often employing a comparison between every day experiences and the life of faith. Proverbs help us to understand how to live wisely and so grow in virtue. The ear that is attentive will want to acquire such wisdom.

Sirach ends with a Proverb:

*³⁰As water extinguishes a blazing fire,
so almsgiving atones for sin.*

Those who are learning the way of generosity are showing by their actions they are being freed of the self-centredness of sin by willingly giving to others. Such actions, say Sirach, are like the extinguishing of a fire. For just as fire burns up what is in its path so does sin, when left unchecked, consume the soul. But when generosity is taking root in a person's life then sin can be quenched and humility grow.

Those who see in the Mass the source of our life know:

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This brings me to my third and final point.

3. The Mass is also the summit of our life.

When the Abitinae Christians were interrogated another thing they said about the Mass was that the Mass made them Christians. In other words by partaking in this Sacrament they were being made every more like Jesus. The word "Christian" means "anointed ones". Those who know that we are to become ever more like Christ, the full anointed one, take to heart the teaching in today's Gospel parables. By choosing to take second place, by choosing to intentionally associate with those who are socially disadvantaged, the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind we are putting into practice the life of true humility.

Of such people Jesus says two things:

those who humble themselves will be exalted.

And

They will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Those who are growing in humility will have reaffirmed at every Mass that the Summit of the Mass celebrates the union we have with God and the reward that will be attained in the Resurrection of the Righteous. It will be the reward of those who in this life understood that humility is to the Christian life, what the chain is to the rosary. Humility holds the Christian life together. And humility is the summit that every Mass points to. For in it we remember that one who is the greatest, Jesus, too the lowest place, the seat on the Cross.

Those who attend the Mass with such an understanding will see it as heaven sent and the source and summit of our lives. A life grounded in humility. A life grounded in the Liturgy. A life grounded because we know:

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