

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – September 11, 2016 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Sat., 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 840 words

Our first reading brings us right into the dramatic “golden calf incident”. The people of Israel had been following Moses and his brother Aaron; but when Moses went up the mountain to receive the tablets of the Law from God, the people, who had stayed behind with Aaron, quickly lapsed into their old pagan ways. And their fall wasn’t into some sort of generalized immorality; rather, they committed the grave sin of idolatry, requesting that Aaron make them a golden calf so that they could worship it, offering sacrifice and crying out, “Behold, your god!” All of this incites God’s anger toward his unfaithful people.

Moses, however, stands in the breach, interceding for the people; he thus shows himself to be a mediator between them and God. He stays the Lord’s wrath and pleads mercy for the Israelites. This certainly was not the first time that they had offended God, either – but it may well have been the most grievous time to that point. Even still, Moses begs on their behalf for a second chance. In this way, he foreshadows Jesus Christ, who is the “one mediator between God and man”; the Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus “always lives to intercede for [us]”.

In the New Testament, Christ willed that his mediation between God and men should be made present and visible in space and time through the priests of his Church. This is the essence of the priesthood: to be a mediator between God and the people, acting “in persona Christi” – that is, “in the person of Christ” – when celebrating the sacraments. If I were to lose sight of this fundamental aspect of my priestly existence I would be a failure in my vocation. I have a duty to pray for you all and so “bring you to God”, particularly through the liturgy – and to bring God to you through the sacraments. So it is for all priests.

The priestly role as mediator should be especially visible in the celebration of Holy Mass, for there, Christ’s sacrifice is renewed and he becomes truly present in our midst. In this regard, we do well to consider how it was the case for many centuries – indeed, for most of the Church’s history, up until only fairly recently – that the priest celebrated Mass on the front side of the altar, facing in the same direction as the people. He was turned toward the crucifix when praying to God, and he turned toward the people when addressing them.

Did you know that this is still what the rubrics of the Mass say to do? For example, at the Sign of Peace it says that I should turn toward you and say, “The peace of the Lord be with you always”. Well, why, if I’m already facing you, would it tell me to turn? The answer is that it still foresees the older way of celebrating, which was, in fact, never formally abolished. Indeed, there are several other examples from the rubrics of the Mass that I could give.

Recently, there has been a great deal of renewed interest in this venerable form of celebrating Holy Mass – in this way that better highlights the priest’s mediation between God and the people. But there has been no little controversy also. We owe it to ourselves to appreciate properly what was normal in the Church for centuries upon centuries, and indeed, remains normative even today. And soon, with the inauguration of our outdoor altar, this form of celebrating will be a more regular reality here in our parish whenever Mass is celebrated there, because of the way that altar is configured.

Thus I will be returning to this topic from time to time and providing additional catechesis on it. As I said, it tends to be controversial. But let us not fall into that trap, with all the polemics that accompany it. What was sacred and normal for countless generations of Catholics cannot now be considered “backwards” or the subject of ridicule. No, rather, let us strive always to be loyal sons and daughters of Holy Mother Church and cultivate a sincere love and correct understanding of all that her rich Tradition has to offer.

I am always touched when people approach me and ask me to pray for them. Even non-Catholics do so. People instinctively know: that man has been consecrated to God for the very purpose of being a mediator. And so I consider it my privilege to pray for you: not only so that God may hold back his wrath for your sins and certainly mine, like Moses did, giving us all a chance to repent and draw nearer to God; but also so that he may shower every good blessing and gift upon us and make us holy. And this spiritual exchange happens in a particularly powerful way here at Holy Mass. May Christ, the mediator between God and man, deepen our faith and spiritual insight and help us better to appreciate this great reality that is in our midst.