

Quinquagesima Sunday, Usus Antiquior – March 3, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Blessed Sacrament Church, Birmingham, Alabama – 10:45am Low Mass – 900 words

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

This Sunday is Quinquagesima – roughly fifty days before Easter and the Sunday just before Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the holy season of Lent. I hope that you have all been using the pre-Lenten time well since Septuagesima, not only to think about what you will give up this year but also how you will seek greater union with our Lord thereby; thus, prayer and works of charity also figure in to this time of grace. It is so easy to fall back on standard penances like giving up chocolate or coffee creamer; but the Lord calls us to a heroic level of sanctity, which we must pursue in earnest. If you have not yet worked out what you will do for Lent, there are still a few days left, and I pray that our Lord will make it clear for you during this Holy Mass. Let us not come before him empty-handed.

This Lent, it is especially important that we offer up our sacrifices for the purification of Holy Mother Church. Without wanting to dwell on this unpleasant topic for long, I will at least remind you of the fact that the solution – always! – depends upon authentic sanctity. In every period of crisis in the Church’s history – and there have certainly been many clamorous crises before – it was the saints who preserved the true faith, who offered their sufferings to God, who helped pick up the pieces. This is a time of judgment: the Lord is sifting his Church and chastening us. Each one of us has a part to play in this terrible drama; for most, that role is of suffering – and of offering those sufferings to God. And as we will hear in the gospel of Ash Wednesday, “thy Father, who seeth in secret, will repay thee”.

The Epistle for Quinquagesima reminds us that whatever we offer to God is worthless, unless it flow from charity. St. Paul said, “...if I should distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I should deliver my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing”. But how do we know if we have charity? We read in St. John’s gospel, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love”. Charity is a virtue that we received from God at Baptism; it remains in us as long as we strive to do God’s will, which necessarily involves keeping the moral law. The presence of charity in us is thus connected with the life of grace. If I am in the state of grace, then I have the virtue of charity; thus, there is a value to the good that I do. If I am not in the state of grace, no good work of mine has any lasting value.

In our “do good”, “random acts of kindness” world, many have lost sight of these truths. Many have embraced the ancient Pelagian heresy that would have us believe that we could save ourselves by adding up good works. The pursuit of the good, in that case, is not truly directed at the love of God and neighbor, but at the love of self. Christ will speak to that on Ash Wednesday, also: “Amen, I say to you: they have received their reward”. We cannot save ourselves. St. John teaches us in his First Epistle that “we love, because he [– God –] loved us”. Charity is God’s initiative in us, and our keeping of the moral law is one of its fruits. It depends upon our living in his grace, not upon any work that we do. This Quinquagesima Sunday, we are invited to consider our life of grace and whether it is bearing fruit that will last.

This consideration, then, will hopefully lead us to ponder those Lenten sacrifices and other spiritual practices that will most help us to advance along the way of charity or love. We should all, of course, be going to confession on a regular basis. We should all be doing voluntary acts of penance and self-denial throughout the year, for they are part of the Christian life and necessary to pay our debt of temporal punishment due to sin. We should all be striving to overcome our inordinate self-love and to grow in our love of both God and neighbor, especially through prayer and works of charity. These are the basics. But what particular thing – on top of

what we should be doing anyhow – will you take on this Lent? Giving up chocolate may well be difficult – and it may also not be the thing that will help you make true progress.

All of this to say, sacrifice is not to be pursued for its own sake. We do not take on Lenten penances as a test of endurance or just to see of what we are capable; much less, to check a box. Rather, whatever we do should be carefully thought-out and ordered to our own deeper conversion. May the Lord, in this Holy Mass, grant to us all or renew in us the profound conviction that we are called to be saints and that the Church's reform is intimately caught up with our own.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.