

HOMILY LENT 4B 18 MAR 2012 HT-W/XII-PC

The attentive observer of current events should have noticed that the Catholic Church has a lot of enemies. I don't wish to sound paranoid or deny the legitimacy of some of the criticism. But if you look at how the Church is treated in the press, how she is portrayed in movies, how her role in history is narrated in classrooms, it is fair to say that the negatives are accentuated while the positives receive little attention. In order to understand this conundrum, a history lesson is in order. The present dilemma of the Church is the result of dynamics that have been unfolding the past few centuries as a result of a critical complex of events called the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment occurred primarily in the 18th century, reaching its apogee in the French Revolution of 1789. It was a broad cultural movement that strove to liberate the human race from the oppressive, obscurantist influence of traditional religion, most especially of the Catholic variety. The Enlightenment was partly a reaction of educated minds to the sanguinary wars of the previous century between Catholics, Protestants, and other Protestants. Many intellectuals were scandalized by the ungodly spectacle of men killing one another in God's name. So the fathers of the Enlightenment averred that the solution to mankind's miseries was to rebuild society on the rock solid foundation of human reason. The former fonts of knowledge-- Scripture, Tradition, ecclesial teaching--were dismissed as irrational superstition which impeded progress and fomented violence. The human mind, freed from this pious humbug, would be better able to grasp the good and true and thereby construct a better world. This attitude of suspicion, if not outright hostility, toward Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular still informs the mindset of many influential voices in contemporary Western society.

The positive contributions of the Enlightenment are not to be disparaged. It stimulated the scientific revolution which has made possible tremendous advances in medicine, communications, and so forth. A more acute sensitivity to human rights is another admirable component of its legacy. However, the story is not all joy and splendor. The process of social advance has been accompanied by glaring contradictions to its professed objectives. For example, the French Revolution gave rise to the Reign of Terror, in which thousands of alleged enemies of the state were sent to the guillotine. Moreover, the very technological advances it has enabled have been used against humanity on a mammoth scale: the bloodshed of the World Wars of the 20th century, the extermination of millions of Jews and other Europeans on the basis of racist ideology, the gulags of Soviet Russia--these atrocities were enabled by the technical advances made possible by the Enlightenment. These dangers are still present: nuclear power, genetic engineering, and globalization have been ushered in by the progress of human reason; these technologies put tremendous power over the fate of the world in human hands, but they do not bring the prudence required for their wise use. More fundamental questions, indeed the perennial questions, the most important questions, remain, to which human reason provides no answers. What is the ultimate good for human individuals, for the human race as a whole? What meaning, if any, can be drawn from the mysteries of life and death, suffering and joy, good and

evil? Is there an overarching purpose to our existence, and if so, what is it? Over 200 years after the Age of Reason dawned, reason remains unable to provide a satisfying answer to these queries. And so men and women of the contemporary era still grasp in the dark for answers to riddles which the Enlightenment cannot solve.

Providentially, the gospel readings this weekend deal with the theme of enlightenment, an enlightenment of the spiritual kind, illumination which sheds light on the big questions just mentioned. The selection for the Mass of the Scrutinies Saturday evening is the story of the man born blind. The gospel for Sunday is drawn from the encounter between Christ and Nicodemus. Both the blind man and Nicodemus are striving for enlightenment. Both encounter Jesus, who invites them to believe in himself and thereby find the light which reveals the answers to the most crucial questions of all. For Jesus himself is the true light which enlightens everyone coming into the world. He discloses the path that leads to God. He is the incarnate truth who shows the way to that eternal life which is manifested even here in this transitory world.

Believing in Jesus and the baptism into him that this faith entails grant enlightenment. Those who believe are adopted into the heavenly Father's house and come to share in his divine life. For this to happen, however, the one who believes must himself become a witness to the light. And here arises the fundamental drama of Christian life. Disciples must be transformed into light in a world where many crave the darkness. For the darkness provides cover for their sin. We see this dialectic happen to the man born blind. After he is granted his sight, he moves, step by step, from acknowledging Jesus to be a good man who healed him, to being a prophet, even to the point where he withstands the hostile interrogation of the religious authorities who revile his healer and cast him out of the synagogue. Finally, when he meets Jesus for the last time, he falls down and worships him, acknowledging him as God's divine Son. The man born blind grows into a living flame of faith that summons others to belief in Christ. Nicodemus' biography is less clear. He comes to Jesus by night, for fear of being revealed. He listens, he learns, but then retreats back into the darkness. Later he tries in vain to defend Jesus against his enemies in the Sanhedrin; then he does the charitable work of assisting with his burial. But his testimony is a muted one at best. Nicodemus is drawn to the light, but fears that he may be exposed to the animosity of the darkness. His light fizzles and sputters. At the end of the story he remains an ambivalent figure.

For us contemporary Catholics, and for those here aspiring to join our number, the good news is that our faith offers enlightenment about the most important mysteries of the human condition. There is a good and loving God who made us. He calls us to share in his eternal joy by believing in his only Son Jesus Christ. The challenge is that we must make this belief a public confession in the face of an antagonistic world. We are called to be lights which shine amid a hostile darkness. Let's pray that the Lord will strengthen our hearts to believe in his Son, to testify to his name, and to know the peace that only he can give.