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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals (March 14, 2010)

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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals

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FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
March 14, 2010

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MASS

Do we recognize that the Sunday Eucharist should be the high point of our week? A growing insight into the Paschal Mystery of Christ's death-and-resurrection should affect the way we consider the joys and woes, the trials and triumphs of our daily lives.

INVITATION TO REPENTANCE

"This man receives sinners!" (Lk 15:3). Jesus continues to invite us to listen to his words of forgiveness and mercy.

Lord Jesus. You seek the lost sheep. Lord, have mercy.
Christ Jesus, you lift our burdens from us. Christ, have mercy.
Lord Jesus, you send your Spirit to heal and strengthen us. Lord, have mercy.

HEADINGS FOR THE READINGS

First Reading (Josh 5:9-12). For forty years the people of Israel were sustained by manna; now they take up the responsibility of cooperating with God to feed their families

Second Reading (2 Cor 5:17-21). Jesus transforms the human situation in a profound manner; after forgiveness of sin and reconciliation we are a new creation.

Gospel (Lk 15:1-3, 11-32). The parable of the prodigal son assures us of God's forgiveness and challenges those in God's service to welcome back the errant brother.

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

President: As we recall the signs of Christ's compassion for sinners, we plead for his intercession for the Church and our world.

Reader(s):

May Jesus, the Good Shepherd, guide Pope Benedict and all bishops as they extend signs of divine mercy to repentant sinners.

May Christian parents be patient and prayerful when their children stray.

May those who suffer because of self-centered choices learn to discipline themselves and find healing from their ailments.

May those bereaved by anyone suffering a violent death be strengthened in spirit.

May all who die today express faith in God's forgiveness and reconciling power.

President: God of mercy, we unite our prayers with the Church throughout the world; may we be instruments of your reconciling love. This we ask through Christ our Lord.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LORD'S PRAYER

God has send Jesus as the Good Shepherd, so with him we pray:

INVITATION TO THE SIGN OF PEACE

As we offer each other a sign of Christ's peace may we be instruments of his reconciling mercy.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

As the Lamb of God Jesus offered himself to take away the world's sins. As beneficiaries of his Eucharistic presence, the medicine of immortality, may we share his mercy with those most in need. In quiet ways we are to be ambassadors of divine love through our patience and understanding with those whom we meet.

COMMENTARY

First Reading (Josh 5:9-12). As the successor of Moses, Joshua had the privilege of leading the people of Israel into the Promised Land. The rite of circumcision had not been performed in the wilderness, so males of the generation born there needed to be prepared to enter the land and to celebrate Passover. Those forty years were a time when God provided for all their needs but, at times, they complained and gave Moses grief. To cooperate with God in the Land they had to bear the sign of Abraham's covenant (Gen 17:1-14). By analogy, Christ's gift and our acceptance of Baptism is the foundation for our entry into the new covenant with its privileges and duties. Do our Lenten practices reflect an appreciation of this gift?

Psalm Response (34:2-7). Just as the Israelites enslaved in Egypt cried out for help and were heard by God, so the poor of every generation cry for divine mercy and are delivered. Throughout the pilgrimage of life the angel of the Lord cares for those who revere God.

Second Reading (2 Cor 5:17-21). As a Pharisee Saul had known about Jesus "from a human point of view" (5:16); then through a call to Baptism he became one with Christ. "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me..." (Gal 2:20). The renewal of intimacy with God the Father comes after the reconciliation accomplished by Jesus. For our sake the Father made him to be a sin offering so that we might become beneficiaries of divine mercy and recipients of divine righteousness. The Gospel challenges all of the baptized to become instruments of reconciliation in imitation of the Good Shepherd. Without judging those around us, can we think of someone who may be waiting for an invitation to return home?

Gospel (Lk 15:1-3, 11-32). This Gospel celebrates God's gift of saving knowledge through the forgiveness of sins, coming from the tender mercy of our God... (1:77-78). The command to imitate God is epitomized in the challenge of Jesus: "Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful" (6:36). After the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus asked the legal scholars which of the three (priest, Levite or foreigner) proved to be neighbor to the man who fell among robbers? The response designated the type of action rather than indicating his ethnicity. "He said: 'the one who showed mercy on him.' And Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise'" (10:36-37).

Commonly known in commentaries and art as "the prodigal son," this parable is intended to challenge both sons to reflect on forgiveness and reconciliation. The younger son departed from the security and the seeming restraints of a covenantal bond. Soon his extravagance brought woes and then the humiliation of caring for unclean animals. His prayer of confession acknowledges that sin brings

alienation for "Heaven" (a substitute for the divine Name) and his earthly father (15:18-19). He did not expect to be restored to equality with his elder brother. "Treat me as one of your hired servants."

What a generous forgiveness and welcome he received! "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (15:7). The older brother and all who feel that another person has not merited restoration to divine grace are invited to imitate God's infinite generosity. This is in our own self-interest because we too may fail.

REFLECTION

During the season of Lent we recall the important truth that "the salvation of the Church is mystically prefigured in the exodus of God's chosen people from the land of bondage" (Vatican Council II, *Declaration of the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions* #4). The reading from St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians for the third Sunday of Lent interprets for Christians the crossing of the sea and desert wandering after Israel's departure from Egypt. Our life of faith and the season of Lent itself are pilgrimages toward perfect union with God. Just as the Israelites passed through the sea, so Christians are baptized or plunged into liberating waters. Just as God sustained Israel with food and drink for their journey, so Christians are nourished through the sacraments as gifts of Christ and his Spirit.

The immediate preparation for entry into the promised land is proclaimed from the Book of Joshua so that we will become more alert to our proximity to Holy Week and Easter. Except for Joshua and Caleb, the generation that departed from Egypt died in the wilderness. Joshua circumcised all the men born in the desert as a sign that, having crossed the Jordan river dryshod, they were making a new beginning. Then they celebrated the Passover Meal and ate the produce of the land.

How often do I recall my Baptism? Every time we use holy water we should renew our commitment in faith and love. How carefully do I prepare for the Eucharistic banquet? These are the sacred signs of our incorporation into Christ and into God's people. As Holy Week approaches we should reflect on our personal journey of faith. The "parable of the prodigal son" is a superb example of the need to make a fresh start in our relationship with God and neighbor.

The parable is a familiar one. Many parents give in to a child's wishes, considering that to acquiesce is a sign of love. At times the burdens of immaturity weigh heavily on the person who dissipates his time and talents. At last the young man took the first step toward conversion. A prayer of repentance is rehearsed but the father's forgiveness anticipated it. The man celebrated his errant son's return with a banquet. Do I recognize myself as prodigal?

The older brother is insulted by his father's forgiveness and joy. Was he jealous that the younger man was the recipient of unmerited love? The father explained that being faithful and remaining in the bosom of the family, the older brother has untold benefits. Do I recognize myself as self-righteously proud of my efforts to remain "on the straight and narrow"? Do I compare myself with others and feel that my virtues are unlauded, my work unappreciated?

The parable has a message for all, but the great point on which Jesus wants us to focus is the mercy of God toward the sinner who humbly acknowledges the need for divine help in order to rebuild a decent life. The movement from spiritual death to a renewed -- and treasured -- life in communion with God should evoke a celebration in the community. None of us knows whether some day he or she may be like the prodigal. May we appreciate our Lenten journey as we turn to the heavenly Father through union with his Son's passing from death to life!