

**“Creation, Fall and Restoration: Keeping the Ultimate Goal Always Before Us”
Homily – 1st Sunday of Lent, Year “B”**

Introduction

On October 16, 2002, Pope St. John Paul II issued his Apostolic Letter on the rosary, *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (“The Rosary of the Virgin Mary”). In it, he gave us the luminous mysteries of the rosary. These mysteries, he explains, are those that are manifested in our Lord’s public life. Whereas the joyful mysteries have us meditate on the infancy narrative and his childhood, and the sorrowful mysteries on his Passion and death, and the glorious mysteries on his glorification and the promise of his glory to the saints, these luminous mysteries, or “mysteries of light,” fill in the gap of his public life, from his baptism (the first luminous mystery) to the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper (the fifth luminous mystery).

Essence of the Message

The third of these mysteries is the “Proclamation of the Kingdom.” Unlike all the other mysteries of the rosary, this one does not refer to one specific moment or concrete action. Rather, it is a mystery that is repeated over a prolonged period of time, the three years of our Lord’s public ministry. But the point well taken, for the Proclamation of the Kingdom is the essence of Jesus’ message, the essence of that very public ministry, the very reason why he came into the world.

We see this portrayed in our Gospel reading for this First Sunday of Lent, which is always one of the accounts of our Lord’s forty days of fasting in the desert. Lent is the Church’s invitation to us to retreat with the Lord for these forty days into the desert, into the quiet of our inner life. In our Lord’s life, he takes this time away in preparation for his public ministry. Today we hear St. Mark’s version of this story. And we heard that, after emerging from this desert experience, our Lord began his public ministry by proclaiming: “This is the time of fulfillment. The Kingdom of God is at hand.” From the very first moment he appears in public, our Lord makes clear the essence of why he came.

In that apostolic letter on the rosary, John Paul refers to this passage in the Gospel of St. Mark in explaining why the Proclamation of the Kingdom is one of the luminous mysteries. He says:

Another mystery of light is the preaching by which Jesus proclaims the coming of the Kingdom of God, calls to conversion (cf. Mk 1:15) and forgives the sins of all who draw near to him in humble trust (cf. Mk 2:3-13; Lk 7:47-48): the inauguration of that ministry of mercy which he continues to exercise until the end of the world, particularly through the Sacrament of Reconciliation which he has entrusted to his Church (cf. Jn 20:22-23) [RVM 21].

The proclamation and establishment of the Kingdom is the essence of our Lord’s mission. And this, really, is the work of restoration. Going way back to the beginning of the Bible, we see that the life of our first parents in the Garden of Eden (before the fall) was one of harmony: all was in perfect harmony, the man and the woman with each other and with creation, heaven with earth. And we can see how that is prefigured here in St. Mark’s depiction of our Lord’s forty-day retreat in the desert: “He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.” After

the fall, when sin entered into the world, this harmony was destroyed. God's work of salvation, then, is restoring this harmony by reestablishing His Kingdom.

Implication

But there is more to this story. There is a certain implication to the Kingdom of God being at hand. Notice what else our Lord says right after this: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." These words should sound familiar, as we just heard them last Wednesday, the formula for when ashes are imposed on Ash Wednesday.

This call to repentance and belief indicate what are really the two implications to the Kingdom of God being at hand. "Repent" means a change of life, the ethical dimension of the life of faith, or as we say in colloquial speech, "clean up your act." But why? It is a consequence of the second implication: "believe in the Gospel." This indicates a change of attitude, toward belief, and since that belief must be put into action, it brings about the change of life, only made possible by great humility.

This is the purpose of Lent, a time of renewal: so we begin with the external sign of penance, ashes placed on the head (although this year we had to do it a bit differently, on the top of the head!). This is also the reason for emphasis on the Sacrament of Reconciliation: it is also a work of restoration, one especially in keeping with spirit of season of Lent

Baptism

Restoration is also the meaning of the story of Noah and the flood. It is all indicative of the cycle of creation, fall, and restoration. Notice the restoration that God promises after the flood subsides: "I will establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood." This cycle is something we experience in every day human experience. I recall, for example, how I once heard someone describe the stages of marriage (at least, for those couples who persevere and figure out how to be successful at it): "the ideal, the raw deal, and the new deal."

In God's plan of salvation, baptism is the new deal. The waters of the flood are a symbol of that, a symbol of the waters of baptism that wash away the old life of sin and corruption and open up the freedom to live a new, purified life with a new attitude of belief. This often happens, for example, to people who get deceived into indulging themselves in that corrupt way of life (deceived into thinking it was the ideal) and then eventually figure out that it was really the raw deal. They discover how much better is the new deal!

In our second reading, St. Peter explains this sacramental meaning that is prefigured in the story of Noah: "God patiently waited in the days of Noah during the building of the ark, in which a few persons, eight in all, were saved through water. This prefigured baptism, which saves you now. It is ... an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ." A clear conscience: that is the change of life, living the new deal, which begins with the external sign of the water of baptism.

Goal

And so the Church puts this vision before us on the First Sunday of Lent every year, in order to keep our eyes fixed on the goal: the celebration of Christian initiation at Easter, and the renewal of baptismal promises for those already initiated.

The Church gives us these constant reminders to help us keep the ultimate goal always before our eyes. We have this at the very beginning of Lent, on this First Sunday, as we will

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once again next Sunday, still early in the season, as the Gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Lent is always an account of our Lord’s Transfiguration (the fourth luminous mystery).

The rosary itself is another way to keep our eyes fixed on our final destination, as it is an opportunity for us to meditate on the saving mysteries of our faith in the life of our Lord and our Lady on this earth. This is why it is so important to pray the rosary every day. The Church encourages us to do this, as does our Blessed Mother whenever she appears anywhere in the world.

It is also part of the spirituality of living the consecration of our Archdiocese to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which I had the great grace to celebrate over three years ago now. We live this consecration by praying the rosary daily, by spending an hour of Adoration of our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament at least one hour a week, and by observing bodily fasting and other acts of penance – yes, most especially during Lent, but also on Fridays all throughout the year.

Conclusion

All of this is oriented toward helping us keep our vision always fixed on the ultimate goal: conformity to Christ in order to share in his life ever more abundantly in this world, and so to share in the fullness of that life forever in the world that is yet to come.

Allow me to conclude by turning once again to John Paul’s Apostolic Letter on the rosary, where he correlates the mysteries of the rosary to the life of the Christian, which also in its own way sums up the meaning of Lent for us:

Christian spirituality is distinguished by the disciple’s commitment to become conformed ever more fully to his Master (cf. Rom 8:29; Phil 3:10,12). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in Baptism ... makes [the believer] a member of Christ’s mystical Body (cf. 1 Cor 12:12; Rom 12:5). This initial unity, however, calls for a growing assimilation which will increasingly shape the conduct of the disciple in accordance with the ‘mind’ of Christ: ‘Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus’ (Phil 2:5). In the words of the Apostle, we are called ‘to put on the Lord Jesus Christ’ (cf. Rom 13:14; Gal 3:27) [RVM 15].