

Second Sunday after Christmas
January 4, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 1:1-18

In the prologue to St. John's Gospel, which we just heard proclaimed, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." That is, in Jesus was life, and the life was the light of men. Our minds naturally race forward to the resurrection, when Jesus overcame death and the grave, and we begin to think about eternal life with our Lord in heaven. And this is certainly true, but John means to remind us that not just supernatural life comes from Jesus, but all life: he writes, ". . . all things were made through [Jesus] and without him was not anything made that was made."

Thus we have our Lord Jesus as the author of both supernatural life—life after death for all eternity in heaven, and natural life—life that is of this world, temporal and fleeting. How do we pass from the life Jesus gives to all men to that which is granted to those who believe in Him? How do we pass from natural life to supernatural life? How does believing in the name of Jesus make us children of God and thus able to pass from this life to the life to come?

The answer comes in the mystery of the Incarnation: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." To believe in the name of Jesus is to believe that He is God incarnate, He is God made man, eternally begotten of the Father, but also here in the flesh in the midst of His human creation. We must ask, then, how that faith is sustained. How does the Incarnation remain real to those like us who are two thousand years removed from when it first took place? John says, "We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father." St. John had the advantage of being one of the Lord's original twelve disciples, who ate with Him, spoke with Him, ministered alongside Him, and was a witness to the resurrection. How does that glory become real to us? How is the Incarnation, God made man in Jesus Christ, manifested to us?

We have access to that grace and truth through the Church Jesus founded, of which St. John was an apostle. This reality is made clear as the Gospel of St. John progresses. In it we hear Jesus declare that, ". . . unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God." Later, He says, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you have no life within you." And towards the end of John's Gospel Jesus tells the apostles, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." What we can easily conclude from the words of Jesus Himself is that access to Christ comes through Sacraments administered by the Church. If we want to know the truth we must become part of the Church and receive the graces she dispenses.

We see, in other words, that the only way we can be born anew is through baptism, the only way we can eat our Lord's Body and drink His Blood is through the Eucharist, and the only way we can receive forgiveness after baptism is if the Church pronounces absolution over us.

We need the Church all the more since the world has come up with substitutes for the Sacraments that are finally unsatisfying and inadequate in this quest for supernatural life. The desire for life is so strong that we tend to embrace that which we believe will enhance our life. The problem is that we can be easily fooled due to our concupiscence, that inclination to sin that we inherited from our first parents,

Adam and Eve. Thus, we are prone to accept as genuine those substitutes for the sacraments that lead not to supernatural life, but eternal death.

Therefore, I'm going to conclude my homily today by distinguishing each Sacrament from its substitute, in order that we may be discriminating, but also that we can help our neighbors to discern truth from falsehood. We need to be able to inform those around us about the fruits of the Incarnation and their value, how the Sacraments lead to life because they are the means to grace and truth. Anything less will in the end amount to death and lies.

We first need baptism for sanctity, that purity without which we cannot become one with God, without which we cannot be pure as He is pure. The world gives us not sanctity, but sanctimoniousness, the notion that if we're just better than the next guy, we're good enough. This false conception of purity leads to puritanism, self-righteousness combined with an intolerance for the faults and foibles of our neighbors, a lack of love that ends up very far from sanctity.

We often fall short of the sanctity to which we are called and that was given to us as a gift at baptism, so we need forgiveness, reconciliation to Him who sacrificed His life in order that we might live. Forgiveness is the means by which we leave behind the old life of sin and embrace a new life of virtue. The world's substitute for going to confession to receive absolution is seeking out validation and approval for the sins one has already committed. In this way the sinner seeks to justify what he has done in order to make forgiveness unnecessary, the refuge of those too proud to admit they are wrong. Not only does this leave the sinner unreconciled to God, but he also finds that the validation other sinners offer does nothing to bind the wounds of those he has hurt.

In the Holy Eucharist we receive the elation that is the fruit of joy. The world gives us intoxication, with a hangover to remind us it was false. In marriage we come to know true intimacy, a prefiguration of the union with Christ we will know completely in the life to come. The world gives us mere gratification of our immediate desires, with all the desperation that flows from the guilt that attends betrayal and superficiality. Confirmation gives us the assistance we need to become soldiers of Christ. The world offers affirmation, imagining high self-esteem is a substitute for actual competence and skill, devotion and ability. The Church offers the Sacrament of the sick to give strength to the suffering, while the world promises to ease the pain of the vulnerable by killing them.

And, of course, the Church ordains men to stand in the place of Christ, to be Jesus for those drawn to the foot of the cross, dispensers of the grace we need to get to heaven. The world gives us experts, who in their conceit imagine their great knowledge is the solution to all that ails mankind. Instead of servants, the world gives us masters whose authority is derived not from God, but from the degrees and honors they've received from mere humans. Impotent to save, they settle for persuasion and, if that fails, coercion.

What we find is that, lacking supernatural grace, the substitutes for the Sacraments not only fail to foster supernatural life, but they also fail to enhance one's natural life. While at first glance they may appear attractive, when they are actually put into practice, they leave in their wake alienation from both God and man. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." The genius of the Incarnation is that in the Church He dwells with us still, and His goal is not just to give us life after death, but life while we yet live.