

Acceptance

Homily of February 1, 2004

by Fr. Michael Dibble

Rejection! Rejection! Rejection! The gospel you and I just listened to is all about rejection. Our Lord has just told them that He is the Messiah they have been waiting for. And they say, "Wait a minute! He grew up in this town." And Our Lord reminds them that they musn't take things for granted, that, in their ancient history, there were some incidents where they took prophets for granted, and the prophets went to other people. And they get so mad at Our Lord that they drag him to the hill. They want to push Him off a precipice. What a personality Our Lord must have had... just to shake them loose and walk away. Their time would come but not that day. So, that's all about rejection. "We don't want to hear ya!"

I don't want to talk about that or think about that with you this morning. I want to think about "acceptance," which is why you are here, listening to me babbling on a Sunday morning, early. Acceptance... You accept Christ. You accept His word. You're here. We accept. We don't want to reject Him. For about twenty years, I have been taking a survey every January, at survey time. (You know, January.... ten best movies.... ten best dressed) So I took a survey... ten reasons why people go to Mass! And I would ask them. I would ask students of mine in high school and in college. I would ask people in the parish when they went on Sundays, quietly, "Why do you still go to Mass? Why do you still accept? It is Sunday morning. You could be relaxing totally and yet here you are." And when I moved here four years ago, I started asking some of you when I would see you. Some of you are kind enough to drive me here. I don't have a car. Or if I would spot you in stores, I would pursue you down the aisle. Some people now duck down the aisles! They do!

When I was in the seminary... I was one of those benighted souls who started studying for the priesthood when I was 14! So, by the time I was ordained, several hundred years later, I thought that when people came for Mass they came for all kinds of etherial reasons, for example, "I come to Mass to study the Aristotelian thesis of matter and form, how they cohere in the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the Body...." I did!... "I come to see how the theological theme is threaded so delicately, but pungently and cogently through the three readings in Mass. I follow every syllable." Or... "I come to see you.... levitate." But fortunately people are much more candid and refreshingly honest when they answer the question, "Why do you still accept? Why do you still come to Mass on Sunday?" Now, it's a given that most people would tell a priest, "Oh, I love the Mass." And most of the time, when I hear it, I think there's a ring of conviction. I do. Some people say it because that's what a priest wants to hear. But many, "I love the Mass." But I have picked out, not ten. I cut it down to seven, seven reasons recently that I liked, when, in January, I asked various people, e-mailed former students, talked to some of you, phone calls to the East Coast, where I come from, "Why do you still go to Mass in the

Catholic Church on the weekend?" Here are just seven.

Number one I get a lot. "I feel better." I remember when I was a little kid in New York City, the pastor (His name was Father Ford.) would put up a sign every Sunday, on the upper West Side, "Come you apart and rest awhile." You know that quote. Our Lord said it to the apostles a couple of times in the gospels. "Come apart with me and rest awhile." And they would get in a boat and they would just be together. Even as a little kid, I liked that. Come apart together with Christ and rest awhile. Breathe! And I think that's what people mean when they tell me or others, "I feel better.... Most of the time I go to Mass I feel better."

Now there are others who don't feel better. I don't think it is terribly hard to feel better, most of the time, when you come to Mass here. I am not saying that because I want to polish the apple with the pastor. If he'd just fired me, I would say the same. There is a responsiveness and a warmth here I had never found in forty-three years of the priesthood, until I came here. There is! There is a great response. It is intelligent. It has feeling, and it's warm. It is communal. But there are a lot of people, especially back where I come from on the East Coast, that go to Mass because of dogged faith. I just got a dog a few years ago and I know now what that adjective means. Dogged! Following, going with you, depending on you. And these people who don't have the kind of warmth that I find here, they go to Mass out of dogged faith, to hear the word of Jesus, to receive Him in Holy Communion, dogged faith. I think we all admire that and honor it.

Number two: You get a lot of this back on the East Coast. "I owe God the hour." That's how my father would talk. He was, if you will forgive the stereotypical nomenclature, my dad was an arch conservative. "We owe God an hour!" I remember one woman sent me an e-mail recently, "How many minutes of the week and how many minutes at Mass.... This is what we owe God." There is a kind of judicial onerousness to that tone. "That's what we owe Him." One lady, on the phone, this week said, "What's all this stuff about 'East Coast?' What's all this stuff about 'Holy Day of Opportunity'?....Snort...." A great lady! "It's a Holy Day of Obligation!" I could hear her thumping her desk. "It's a judicial law which we follow." I don't sneer at that. I honor it. It has a chill to me. It reminds me of too much fear. But I honor it and it's a reason why still many.... We owe God an hour!

Number three: Older people (I asked a gent I thought was an elderly gent, in this area, elderly I thought. He's six years younger than I am!) Let me ask this elderly believer.... And he said he comes to Mass because he connects, immediately out of his mouth. He connects with his dead wife. He connects with friends who have died. He connects with them, he feels. And he says he loves this particular type of crucifix because it blends the suffering and the pain that we all go through on our cross with resurrection. There He is. He is on a cross but He is triumphant, as you and I will be. That's essential to our faith. We shall live again. And this elderly gent who is younger than I, comes to Mass. "I connect with my wife. I connect with people whom I shall see again."

Number four: "It enhances the twelve-step program I'm in." It's true, if you read twelve-step literature, it was guided by a Catholic Jesuit priest. And people will say to you in that program that, when they come to Mass, everything they hear at Mass solidifies and embellishes, burnishes bright, what they hear, the spiritual life of staying sober and emotionally clean. One lady, a former student, who is now an admissions officer at a very posh Ivy League College on the East Coast said, "I go to Mass to hear words I never hear anywhere else that I need to hear, like 'sin,' 'redemption' and 'mercy.' Those are very unfashionable words on the Ivy League Campus. But they are essential to my spiritual sanity. Sin, redemption (It's great that I have been redeemed!) and mercy!"

Number five: Now this young lady will probably be at the 10:45 Mass. And I didn't ask her if I could say this, but I am going to do it. She hasn't received her First Communion. She is a young adolescent. She is going to receive instructions and receive her First Communion, but she loves coming to Mass without being officially Catholic because when we all go to Communion, she loves doing this (crossing his arms over his chest.) She loves coming to Communion like this. And a lot of little kids here with their parents come the same way. It's refreshing. It's childlike in the best sense. When I taught high school all those years, it broke my heart (at the risk of sounding dramatic!) to see teenagers at a Mass at a Catholic High School when they all had to go to Mass on a Holy Day, coming down the aisle and chatting with each other. They receive communion and they resume their chat.... "She broke up with him?.... They broke up on the phone.... I don't believe it!" I finally, after I was teaching for awhile, asked the kids about it in class, right after a Mass. One kid said, "Well, what's the big deal?" And I tried to explain, "It's Our Lord." ... "Oh, we never heard that. It's just a symbol." As if it were some kind of transcendental triscuit! I tried to explain, "No, it's Our Lord, an inexplicable mystery but it is a Real Presence, the sacramental presence of Christ. He is with you for a few minutes. Talk to Him!" "Oh, we never heard of it."

Number six: I used to get this a lot on the East Coast. "My girlfriend says we gotta. We gotta go to Mass. And I say to huh (not her), 'No we don't. We don't got to go every Sunday.' And she says, 'Yes we do.'" And I've known some of them. And sometimes it's "My boyfriend says..." But there is such affection on the part of the Mass attender for the Mass and for the person to whom the person says it, that it is a great thing. "I go because my girlfriend says we should go." It's love. Why not?

Number seven: And this is the last. Again maybe it is embarrassingly personal. I mean embarrassing for you. I seem to have no shame. But a week ago yesterday, I was walking with my closest living blood relative, my brother. And he lives over in a town called Novato. We were walking around and he told me that he hadn't been to Mass in years. I knew that. And he didn't even know if he believed in a personal God any more or an afterlife. And I kind of knew that too. And the reason is, I surmise, a lot of suffering. He has had a lot of suffering. And now that things are much better, he still has the kind of suffering that some of you may understand, where even when things are OK, you are always facing impending doom. That's an intense suffering of the nervous system and I had just been reading Flannery O'Connor. This is not I. It

is Flannery O'Connor, that great Catholic writer in America who died at 39 of lupus, who was sick all her life, and one of our best writers. I love her letters, her great letters. And, out of the blue (I think the Holy Spirit just bopped me!) , I said, "You know, Ted, I was just reading Flannery O'Connor's letters she wrote just before she died and she said, "Suffering is not a problem to be solved on this earth. It is a mystery to be accepted." And then I thought, "Why did I say that? To a nonbeliever, that is just infuriating." But not to him. He whipped out a pen. He wrote it down. From a woman who had been sick all her life, one of our great writers, Catholic lady. Go to Mass every day, she did, with steel crutches. "Suffering is not a problem to be solved on this earth. It is a mystery to be accepted." It's true. And when you come to Mass you are sharing suffering, acceptance with a lot of other people. Even if you don't feel particularly great after this particular Mass, there is an alchemy, a spiritual "magic" (You know what I mean.) at Mass. The community gathers, your fellow believers, your fellow sufferers. Something solidifies a wavering faith. I wish he would come back to Mass. I do. I am going to kind of start praying for it and working for it. There is a spiritual "magic."

I honor Father Ford, whatever celestial condominium he is residing in now, for that sign when I was a little boy, "Come ye apart and rest awhile with Christ, together at Mass."And breathe.