

MONDAY IN HOLY WEEK

A note on the Collect (Opening Prayer) of the Mass

Grant, we pray, almighty God,
that, though in our weakness we fail,
we may be revived through the Passion of your Only Begotten Son.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Today we begin Holy Week against the background of the pandemic causing so much suffering around the world. As the threats mount against Jesus in the scriptures we are reading, so we feel the threat to our own well-being from this virus.

Today's Collect, in fact, compares sin to a kind of disease. Just as some of us have a weakness which the virus can exploit, so through moral weakness we fail, we fall into sin. So we pray that we may be revived through the Passion of the Lord. It is a co-incidence, but the Latin word used for "revive" is "respire" – to breathe again.

Just a coincidence – but one which may help us to understand the danger to our spiritual life posed by the contagion of sin, and the only source of salvation from it: Christ, who loved us even unto death.

The Gospel

John 12: 1-11

Six days before the Passover, Jesus went to Bethany, where Lazarus was, whom he had raised from the dead. They gave a dinner for him there; Martha waited on them and Lazarus was among those at table. Mary brought in a pound of very costly ointment, pure nard, and with it anointed the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair; the house was full of the scent of the ointment. Then Judas Iscariot – one of his disciples, the man who was to betray him – said, 'Why wasn't this ointment sold for three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor?' He said this, not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he was in charge of the common fund and used to help himself to the contributions. So Jesus said, 'Leave her alone; she had to keep this scent for the day of my burial. You have the poor with you always: you will not always have me.'

Meanwhile a large number of Jews heard that he was there and came not only on account of Jesus but also to see Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. Then the chief priests decided to kill Lazarus as well, since it was on his account that many of the Jews were leaving them and believing in Jesus.

Homily

As usual, John's text is rich in meaning. This morning I will pick out just one phrase: *the house was full of the scent of the ointment*.

Many of the fathers of the Church have understood this symbolically: that as the scent of the unguent filled the house, so the example of Mary's love has filled the Church. Mary's love knows no bounds: she pours out the precious ointment, and she lets down her hair without constraint to wipe the Lord's feet. Augustine says, "The house was filled with the odour; the world was filled with her good fame." Tertullian in the second century tells us that the pagans

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exclaimed, “See how these Christians love each other !” We might ask ourselves whether the same can be said of us!

We who are religious might reply that yes, we generously gave ourselves to Christ when we vowed “obedience to God, to Blessed Mary, to Blessed Dominic” and to the Master of the Order. Yet such is the perversity of human nature that while remaining fundamentally faithful to that gift of ourselves, we fall into contradictions of it in our daily life: little acts of selfishness and self-will, rebellions against the love we have publicly embraced. In short, we are still sinners.

And the same is true of everyone. Husbands and wives, for example, give themselves entirely to each other in marriage, but even the most faithful spouses have faults, have also those little acts of selfishness and self-will that mean that no marriage is perfect.

Today’s gospel, then, is a call to repentance and love after the example of Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus, as we approach the celebration of the greatest possible act of love, by which the Son of God reconciled the human race.

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