

The Rector's Chronicle

A Newsletter of the Church of St Michael the Archangel

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Dear Parishioners and Friends,

One of the greatest practical challenges of Christian life is keeping Christ at the center. It is all too easy to focus on ourselves instead. When fasting, we are apt to think about how we are doing, or focus on our hunger or the next meal, instead of being reminded of Jesus' fast for us or His suffering on the Cross. In almsgiving, we may think about what it is costing us rather than the need of the other or the One for whom we are making the offering. In prayer, we are tempted to self-observation: how is my prayer going? Is it spiritual? Are there too many distractions? Am I having good thoughts and feelings?

In short, even the good things we can do badly. This is certainly true of our attempts to remain centered on Christ. This is our inheritance from the Fall: "Ye shall be as gods," Satan told Eve. And we are – in the sense that we perceive the world revolving around us, instead of around that true Center. Christian life is devoted to moving the center from self to God. It is a long-term project!

God, of course, knows this, and gives us the help we need, and many opportunities to practice. One opportunity which God gives us is service in its many forms. Suppose, for example, you take someone grocery shopping each week, as I know some of you do. The temptation no doubt arises from time to time to focus on self: the time spent, the inconvenience, the lack of expressed gratitude from the other person. Perhaps also the temptation to vainglory: I am better than others who don't do such sacrificial good deeds. Service can be a challenge. Even if such thoughts seem overwhelming sometimes, it is important to continue the service. As Chesterton remarks, if something is worth doing it is worth doing badly. The reason is not hard to see: the very doing of it is an objective act of love. We should seek to conform our intention (and attention) to that love. That will allow the love to be more clearly manifested to the one we serve. If, on the other hand, we are grudging about the time, the other may well pick up on our feelings, and feel more a burden than loved.

In serving, we should conscientiously love the one we serve. We should focus on the one we serve even more than on the service itself. Service is love made manifest. God no doubt intends to use our service to communicate His love to the one we serve. He wishes to love through us, and we are to love with the love He gives us. For this reason, we can be confident that we can always love the other: God supplies it even if we lack it. Over time, this is bound to change the one we serve. We may never see the change. And we should not serve for the sake of changing the other, but simply because serving is the loving thing to do. We should not expect quick results. Any needy person may feel shame at being needy – and shame can block love, at least for a time. The fruit of our service may be known only to God, but we may be sure that there is fruit, even if we cannot see it. But there are times when we can see the results: one example is the significant changes we have seen in our Sunday School children over time. I won't embarrass them by being specific, but it is clear that they have been changed (and for the better!) by the love which we have given them.

We serve others because Christ has served us – He took the form of a servant, and humbled Himself, even to the death on the Cross (see Philippians 2:7-8). This is the standard Christian life and of Christian love: we forgive because we are forgiven; we love because we are first loved by God. We share with others what we have been given by God. Remembering that serving others is serving Christ raises our material service to the supernatural plane. It makes service a spiritual act as well as a material one. More, our act communicates the love of God in Jesus Christ. And that is the love which converts souls and bring men to heaven. God (amazingly) gives us the opportunity to participate with Him in the redemption of others.

Jesus has told us that in serving the needs of another we serve Him – remember the the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. The "sheep" are baffled when He tells them that they have fed and clothed Him and cared for Him. They are unaware of doing any such thing. He explains that "inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." The same principle holds for those who failed to serve those in need (the "goats"): their failure is a failure to serve Christ. This parable, rather dauntingly, follows the parable of the talents. The servant who hid his lord's money is condemned not as fearful or stupid, but as wicked and slothful, and like the goats, he is consigned to hell.

This suggests rather strongly that service is an essential part of Christian life, and that we must be on the lookout for the opportunities God sends us, recognizing that these may be costly to us, especially in terms of time or comfort. Whatever form service takes – grocery shopping or running errands for one who is less mobile, teaching Sunday School, shoveling the neighbor's walk, serving on the vestry, giving a ride to church, being a friend especially to the lonely, tutoring at Homework club sending a card or calling a lonely person – service is as important to our Christian lives as prayer. We might well for God to show us what He has in mind for us, that we might serve Him by serving others in need. If we will not share the love God gives us with others, we will not be able to keep it for ourselves either. We have only what we give away.

Holy Week

Holy Week is early in April, so I give you notice now. The services of Holy Week are demanding, both in terms of time and in terms of spiritual effort. So start planning now to set aside the time to be in church, and so far as possible, arrange your other commitments to free up the week for spiritual things.

Palm Sunday is April 5th, with the blessing of palms before each Mass (also the procession at the ten o'clock). On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, there are low Masses at the rectory Oratory: 6 p.m. on Monday and Tuesday, 10 a.m. on Wednesday. On **Maundy Thursday**, April 9th, there will be a Sung Mass at West Laurel Hill at 6:30 p.m., followed by the Procession to the Altar of Repose and stripping of the Altar. Because of the situation with West Laurel Hill, **the Watch** before the Altar of Repose will be on Friday morning only, beginning at 7 and lasting until the Good Friday service begins at noon. We will do this if there are people willing to come and watch, as there were last year. A sign-up sheet is in the porch on Sundays: please sign up for an hour now, so that we can be sure we have the people to do this. The Watch, as you recall, commemorates Jesus' time in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He asked Peter, James and John, to watch while He prayed – and they fell asleep. It is a wonderful time of great intimacy with our Lord, and if you have never tried it, I encourage you to do so. It is worth the effort.

Good Friday (April 10th) is a day when we should all be in church, even if it means taking a vacation day from work. The service is at noon at West Laurel Hill, and consists of the Good Friday Liturgy (lessons and reading of the Passion, Solemn Collects, Veneration of the Cross and Mass of the Pre-sanctified), followed by hymns and preaching on the Seven Last Words from the Cross. At three hours, it is the longest service of the year. But don't let that deter you! From gratitude if not from duty, we should be there to observe with the Church the decisive events of our redemption. On **Holy Saturday**, there is the short Altar Service at 10 a.m. at the rectory Oratory. Then the Easter Vigil begins at 8:30 p.m. at All Saints', Wynnewood. This is in many ways the primary service of Easter, providing the transition from the tomb to the resurrection. It begins in darkness with the lighting of the new fire and the Paschal Candle. The Candle is blessed with the singing of the Exsultet. Old Testament lessons are read, including the creation story, the sacrifice of Isaac, the crossing of the Red Sea, and Ezekiel's vision in the valley of the dry bones – all of which point us to the resurrection. The font is then solemnly blessed (with litanies during the processions). Baptism has long been associated with Easter, because it is through baptism that we are raised from death to life with Christ. Then comes the First Mass of Easter, and with it the beginning of Paschaltide. The Masses are on the usual schedule for **Easter Sunday**. At a minimum, you should plan to attend the services Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Easter Vigil, as well as the Sundays.

Quiet Day

The Lenten Quiet Day is Saturday, March 14th, 9:30-2 at All Saints', Wynnewood. As usual, it begins with Mass in the Chapel. After coffee and a light breakfast (provided), silence begins with three addresses, which I will be giving. Please bring whatever you would like for lunch (observing the Lenten fast, of course). We conclude by 2. There will be opportunities for sacramental confession. I encourage you to make this a part of your Lenten observance this year: it is a fine opportunity to spend time with our Lord, especially in preparing for Holy Week and for Easter.

Events

The **Friday Lenten Devotions** are beginning. Stations of the Cross will be observed at All Saints at 7p.m. on March 6th, 20th, and April 3rd. On March 13th and 27th, instead of Stations, there will be a service at the rectory: I will give a meditation, followed by silence before the Blessed Sacrament and Benediction. These will be at 7:30, and will last less than an hour. I hope the change will enhance our Lenten devotions, without adding too much confusion. Please come!

The monthly **Sunday Adult Forum** will be on Rose Sunday, March 22nd, following the ten o'clock Mass. This month we'll do a little church history, and spend a half hour with the Apologists. These early Christian writers (second century, for the most part) wrote about the faith for unbelievers, both to explain the faith, and to show why Christians should not be persecuted. I think you will find some of their arguments intriguing.

Meanwhile Lent continues. I encourage you to persevere in the Lenten fast and whatever other devotions you have undertaken. I can assure you that your loving efforts to better serve our Lord will be more than amply rewarded.

Kudos

Thanks this month to:

- Hal Denton finished his term of service on the Vestry last month, and I omitted mention in last month's Chronicle. In addition to serving on the Vestry from the beginning of St Michael's, he was also our first Accounting Warden, and did yeoman's service in getting us off on the right foot financially.
- those willing to serve on the vestry
- those who give others rides to church.

Faithfully,

