

HOMILY

SEPTEMBER 14, 2007

--Fr. Stanley Klores

“On this great feast and special day in the life of the universal church, let our thoughts first of all be directed to the victorious Cross of our savior – to the son of man who is lifted up! Today, the church makes special reference to the lifting up of Christ, as she celebrates the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy and Life-Giving Cross.” (Pope John Paul II).

What then does this “being lifted up” actually mean? In the epistle for today’s Mass, taken from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians, “being lifted up” means, first of all, “being brought low.” St. Paul writes that our Lord, “being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men.” The Word becoming Flesh. God taking on our humanity in the incarnation. This is the first dimension of “being brought low”; but, at the same time, it is also a “lifting up.” God is brought low, so that man may be lifted up! So that we may walk in the light; so that, believing in the light, we may be the children of light.

And then, St. Paul continues: “Christ was known to be of human estate, and it was thus that He humbled Himself, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.” This is the second and the definitive dimension of being brought low. It is the dimension of humbling himself, becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross, which confirms in the strongest way the truth of the words of the Gospel for today in the ordinary form of the Roman Rite, which we will hear sung at the offertory by the choir: “God so loved the world that He gave His only son.” In this gift of His Son, even unto death on the Cross, is the beginning and source of every “lifting up”; it is the source of the lifting up of all human life and culture.

To be crucified, humanly speaking, is, of course, to be disgraced and humiliated. But from god’s point of view, it means being lifted up; indeed, to be lifted up by means of the Cross. Jesus Christ is Lord; and historically he becomes Lord of everything and everyone in this elevation and exaltation by means of the Cross. Here then is the mystery of the exaltation of the holy and life-giving Cross!

There is an ancient phrase: “*Stat crux dum volverit orbis.*” (The Cross stands while the world turns) – in other words, it’s what makes the world go round. And Christians, throughout the ages, have waxed eloquent through their hymns and prayers, in the attempts to express the truth of this great mystery. “The royal banners forward go, the Cross shines forth in mystic glow,” as we sang in our processional hymn. “O Cross, our one reliance, hail. This sign of God’s unfathomed love, the hope of all our days.” But how very different our world today looks from the vision of a culture of life and a civilization of love revolving round the Holy Cross. And, yet, on the other hand, not too much different from the world of 2,000 years ago.

How similar are the attitudes of many today, in fact, to those of Nicodemus, the questioner, the prominent man of religion, who came to Jesus in the dark night – the dark night of his own soul; the dark night of his Jewish religion; the dark night of his world – in order to seek some light! It was a powerful, interpersonal encounter that, in the end, utterly transformed Nicodemus, and that has continued to transform countless persons throughout two millennia, as they have received the light into their own lives. And it would seem to be very significant that it was to Nicodemus that our Lord spoke those ineffable words: “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son. So that everyone who believes in Him might not perish, but might have eternal life.”

Contemporary secularism, of course, offers another vision – a vision based upon the love of power, rather than upon the power of love. And today, as we are so well aware, this secular vision dominates the western world; therefore, the world’s true center, the Holy Cross, no longer holds – it has been pushed to the margins. And as a result, the world no longer turns in measured, up-lifting, humanizing, civilizing movements, but is careening out of control. In the ever-memorable words of the great Irish poet, W. B. Yeats: “Things fall apart, the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned!”

On the other hand, to accept the Cross as our anchor of hope, as the healing and integrating center around which the human world is meant to turn, continually brings to our attention the fact that our lives, our personal identities as Christians, and our Christian culture, are on another plane, where time and eternity intersect in the form of a Cross. This is the plane of self-giving, crucified love, which alone can save and transform the world.

Of course, the church has consistently taught, from the very beginning, that the “lifting up” of our Lord on the Cross, which draws everything toward himself, remains ever-present, as often as the Sacrifice of Calvary is celebrated on the altar. In the Constitution on the Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, the Magisterium teaches as follows: “From the time of the apostles, the Church has never failed to come together to celebrate the Paschal Mystery, celebrating the Eucharist in which the victory and triumph of His death are again made present.” Yes, our worship must clearly reveal the reality and centrality of Christ’s sacrifice to us! And it is universally recognized that the extraordinary form of the Roman Rite, clearly, unambiguously and incomparably reveals the Paschal Mystery, re-presenting the sacrifice of the Cross, the “lifting up” of our Lord Jesus Christ, that He may draw all things to Himself, in every time and place, in every culture.

Perhaps now, we can begin to see why the Holy Father chose this particular feast of Exaltation of the Holy Cross to promulgate the *Motu Proprio* “*Summorum Pontificum*.” At the beginning of the document, the Pope gives us a brief historical survey, marking the concern manifested by the supreme pontiffs throughout the centuries to maintain the integrity and organic continuity of the Eucharistic Liturgy. He mentions particularly the 6th century Pope, St. Gregory the Great, who, he says, “commanded that the form of the Sacred Liturgy as celebrated in Rome be conserved. In this way, the Sacred Liturgy, celebrated according to the Roman use, enriched not only the faith and piety but also the culture of many peoples.”

As is clear from the *Motu Proprio*, and from his many books on the subject of liturgy, faith and culture, the Pope believes that the liturgy is the chief culture-forming activity of the church. He refers, in the document, to the ancient maxim: “*Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*” – the way we worship is the way we believe and becomes the way we live, our culture. It is an incontrovertible fact of history that Christianity has always been a culturally creative force. Indeed, the church, rooted in the sacrifice of the Cross, created and developed the most luminous culture and civilization that the world has ever known, a Christian culture and civilization of which we are all the heirs, and, though having been undermined during the past three centuries, is now actually deconstructing, and thus has been fast disappearing from the secularized West, during the course of the past 40 years.

In anticipation of the virtual prohibition of the traditional Roman Rite, following the Second Vatican Council, 40 years ago, a blue-ribbon group of cultural and intellectual leaders in the English-speaking world – writers, poets, artists, sculptors, architects, composers, musicians, professors and scholars of international repute – sent an appeal to the Holy See on behalf of retaining, as an option, the traditional Roman Mass. They pled for its retention especially on cultural grounds, stating: “The rite in

question, in its magnificent latin text, has inspired a host of priceless achievements in the arts – works by poets, philosophers, composers, musicians, painters, architects and sculptors in all countries and epochs. Thus, it belongs to universal culture as well as to churchmen and formal Christians.”

What is evident, from this short excerpt from the appeal of cultural leaders to retain the option of offering the classic Roman liturgy, is that these leaders of Christian culture clearly understood the meaning of the ancient maxim quoted earlier – *Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi*. The way we worship has a definitive impact on everything that we believe and do. As I said before, it is a matter of historical fact that the traditional Roman Rite, now known as the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite, gave rise, throughout the whole history of the church, to everything that we mean by the words Christian culture and civilization, a culture that produced the world’s foremost human achievements in every intellectual, artistic, literary and even scientific discipline and endeavor.

The times are now so desperate and the situation so critical, as far as our Christian culture and civilization are concerned, that on January 6, of this year, a group of contemporary cultural and intellectual leaders in the English speaking world sent another appeal, echoing the first appeal of 40 years ago, urgently requesting the Holy See to extend the option of offering the traditional Roman liturgy. Their appeal, this time, was matched by similar appeals sent by cultural and intellectual leaders of other nations, particularly the European nations that, in steadfastly denying their Christian heritage and identity, are falling increasingly under the sway of a rampant, aggressive secularism, with the resultant religious vacuum being filled, as we know, by the bold faith of a militant Islam! This is an important factor in the background to the *Motu Proprio* and to that phrase particularly associated with the Holy Father: “The reform of the reform.” For years, long before he was elected Pope or even made a cardinal, Pope Benedict has been deeply concerned about the integrity of the Eucharistic Liturgy. For him, the liturgy is not a “side issue.” It is the central issue! It is about the lifting up of man, both individual and social, and the lifting up of human culture and civilization, to God, oriented to Him and to His glory, which, as St. Irenaeus said so long ago, is the true fulfillment of our life.

Christianity came first into a pagan world, where the ancient society was already becoming decadent and exhausted. The church transformed and recreated this civilization, not by any program of social or political reform but by preaching Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and by celebrating together in the Eucharist the life-giving mystery of the Cross. By doing this, the church brought the light of hope to those who sat in pagan darkness and in the culture of death.

Today, everything depends upon whether the Christians of our time are equal to their similar mission – whether they are able to communicate their hope to a world in which men and women increasingly find themselves alone and helpless before the monstrous forces which have now escaped from our control and threaten to destroy us.

If a recapturing of the spiritual power of the traditional, classic, extraordinary form of the Roman Rite can assist, as it has done before, in effecting the rejuvenation of the faith in the west, and the resultant regeneration of a vibrant, creative, Christian culture and civilization, then the pontifical *Motu Proprio*, granting permission for the unrestricted celebration of the extraordinary form of the Roman Rite, will surely turn out to be one of the most important religious events of our time.

So, let us all give abundant thanks, this evening, to Our Lord Jesus Christ, and also to his vicar on Earth, Pope Benedict XVI, for this inestimable gift to the whole church and, indeed, to the world at large. Amen!