

By Father Benedict Ehmann

The chief emphasis of our diocesan Lenten preaching this year was on the new Rite of the Sacrament of Penance. The key word was "reconciliation," a new name for this sacrament. One thing at a time is, I suppose, a good rule, so there was no chance in this year's Lent to review for the people the sacrament which is fundamental to Easter — namely, Baptism. Every Easter is a feast of baptismal resurrection. The fire and water of the Easter Vigil are symbols of the illumination and washing of our Baptism. It is our Baptism which initiates us into Christ's "paschal mystery." His passover from death to life. To prepare us for this Baptism festival, each Lent is meant to be a kind of retreat when, through prayer, study and penance, we extend and intensify the dimensions of our Baptism, and so enter more deeply into our sharing in Christ's paschal mystery.

It was strange to have a Lent with all the emphasis on the sacrament of Penance and with no attention to the sacrament of Baptism. You ask, Why strange? You say, We're already baptized, so what preparation do we need for that? But it's not preparation I'm talking about: it's development. And by all that's holy, if there is one thing the contemporary community sadly

INSIGHTS On Pastoral Liturgy

lacks, it is a developed conception of what it means to be baptized. Baptism is at the central control point of Christian faith and life. "Christ has died, Christ is risen." In Him we have died; in Him we are risen.

The early Christians were intensely conscious of their Baptism, not as a once-for-all sacrament, but as an ongoing power in their lives. Easter was the summit festival of their year, as Passover for the Jews. There was no competition with Christmas; there was no feast of Christmas until the fourth century. Easter was the day for Baptisms, or rather the night, because it was at the Vigil that the converts were baptized and the community renewed their baptismal promises. St. Augustine eulogized it all in clarion words: "We are Easter people, and Alleluia is our song."

The converts (catechumens) received instructions all through Lent, concerning the life of Christ and the Creed. At the start their names were officially entered on the Church's roll, and they were

signed with the cross. During all the Lenten Eucharists they joined the company of the faithful, but only for the Liturgy of the Word. They were dismissed before the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Their share in that was to wait until their Baptism. Further along in their progress, they underwent certain exorcisms and were handed the Gospels and the Lord's Prayer. But at no point did they have the baptismal ritual explained. This was part of the "discipline of the secret" and it explains why the sacraments were known as the sacred mysteries.

When at last Holy Saturday came, the day for their Baptism, it is easy to imagine their anticipation. At the Vigil that night they would be baptized. In the presence of the community they would descend into the baptismal pool, and be thereby "buried with Christ." Then ascending from it and being vested with new white robes, they would be "rising with Christ" to a new life — so new in fact, so changed, that many of them delayed their Baptism until later life when, with passions less ardent and wills more steady, they might not be in such danger of falling away. Joyfully they were now acclaimed by the assembly and introduced for the first time to the eucharistic banquet.

Then came seven days of celebration and further instruction, this time on the practical meaning of each of the baptismal rites. The early Church fathers have left to us some really wonderful Easter sermons, which were to help clarify for the newly baptized what was done during the sacred mysteries. This came to be called "the mystagogic catechesis," namely a catechizing which led them inside the mysteries of Baptism and Eucharist.

suspect it when it becomes a "heavy" religion.

Our first conversion, therefore, must be away from passivity. Modern culture seems to cultivate passivity. Our recreation is passive — spectator sports, watching TV. Our education is passive — objective tests rather than essay type questions that require thinking. Our religion is passive — "Every parish," somebody said, "has pillars and caterpillars. The pillars hold up the Church; the caterpillars just crawl in and out — these are the many."

The apostles were such wonderful witnesses of their faith, because they had first experienced Christ. Once they had, they just couldn't stop talking about Him. Instead of our worrying about how to testify about Christ, the words to use, we should first strive to break through our cool reserve, an insulating barrier, and make contact with Jesus, touch Him through an experience of our faith.

The apostles took every opportunity to give witness to Jesus. Peter and John did so after having cured the lame man. Peter told the Jews, "O.K., you murdered Jesus. But you didn't really know what you were doing. You acted in ignorance. God took that into consideration. But now the issue is clear. Jesus is risen from the dead. Excuses must cease. Refuse to accept Jesus, and you put yourselves on the side of the impenitent leaders who put the Lord to death. Believe in Him and reform your lives and He will wipe away your sins and one day raise you from the dead."

We too are invited to be witnesses. How can we, unless our faith is first an experience? It is significant that the renewal movements in the Church — teen seminars, Charismatic groups, Marriage Encounters, Cursillo — are all profound experiences of the Christian Faith. Everyone can tell just by meeting those who belong to one of these renewal groups that they have touched the Lord and been touched by Him. Because they have, they can be, and are, witnesses indeed!

WORD FOR SUNDAY



Fr. Albert Shamon

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Lk. 24:35-48; (R1) Acts 3:13-15; 17-19; (R2) 1 Jn. 2:1-5.

In Our Lord's last appearance to His disciples, He explained the significance of His death and resurrection. It was this — He who conquered death conquers death-dealing sin. The mastery over sin is the message people want to hear. So Jesus told the apostles that the remission of sin is to be preached. "You," He said, "are witnesses of this."

Witnessing involves two things: seeing something happen and then testifying about it. It includes both an experience and a proclamation.

The apostles experienced the risen Christ. Sunday's gospel is Luke's narration about how Christ took pains to convince the apostles that He was real. "Touch me," He invited them. "Give me something to eat." He asked. Ghosts, phantoms, the stuff dreams are made of aren't tangible — much less do they eat. Their eyes were opened! Then He explained the scriptures to them. Their minds were opened! So convinced, so instructed, they could be witnesses. Witnesses of what? Resurrection only? Yes, but not just the resurrection of God, but the resurrection of man — everyman — from sin. He who had mastered death, masters death-bringing sin.

There are two reasons why we may not be enthusiastic witnesses of our faith. One is we may not have experienced our faith. That is why we may need to withdraw, like the apostles, to the cenacle of a teen seminar, a charismatic group, a marriage encounter, a Cursillo, a retreat, and so on.

The other is we may be nervous about an enthusiastic Christianity. Catholics in particular, I think get nervous about any form of religious enthusiasm. Christianity has for so long been from the neck up — a "heavy" religion — that we almost

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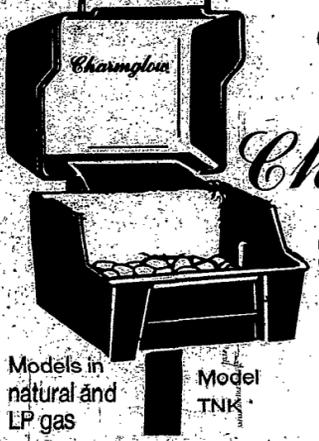
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