

Twenty-ninth Sunday (A)
16 October 2011
Saints Peter & Paul, Naperville

What belongs to Caesar to Caesar; what is God's to God. Some of you may know that this month mark's the fourth year anniversary of my helping on the weekends here at Saints Peter and Paul.

I have come to know, in these few years, how seriously your pastor, Fr. Milota, takes his responsibility of shepherding this parish. A good example of that can be found in the energy he and the parish staff have devoted to preparing the parish for the new edition of the Roman Missal that all English-speaking Catholics in the United States will be using beginning November 27.

He has provided workshops and bulletin articles, meetings and resources to help all of us understand more fully what is coming so that we can take advantage of this opportunity for growing in our faith and in the public prayer of the Church.

Another example of Fr. Milota's devotion to the care of your souls is the fact that he is preaching at all of the Masses this weekend. He has asked me to be his surrogate today while he speaks at the Masses in the Holy Family Chapel.

Here are some things he would want you to know.

First, what we do here in Church is completely bound up with our eternal salvation. Our celebration of Mass is not some Catholic form of weekly

entertainment, to be judged by the decoration of the building, or the beauty of the music or the cleverness of the preacher.

This is our act of worship for the God who made us, and saves us, and hopefully one day will welcome us to eternal happiness.

Second, to help us celebrate Mass in a way that puts our hearts, minds and voices in harmony, **there are three things that we must always remember:**

1. Who God is.
2. Who we are.
3. What Mass is.

Who is God? Thinkers have for centuries tried to describe, to put into words what God is like.

What is especially unique to Christianity is that we believe in a triune God, a Trinity who is a relationship of persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

You're all familiar with St. Patrick's image for the Trinity, a clover leaf.

Pope Benedict describes the Trinity as a *song of love*. He says that essential to God is the quality of *communication, communion*.

The Trinity is a dialogue, an eternal song of love. And what is song but a combination of word and breath. Here we have the most perfect word: Jesus. And the sweetest breath, the Holy Spirit.

Who are we? Another thing that we have got to remember, that we often forget, is that *we need not be*.

We are contingent.

We do not have to exist.

It is only God who keeps us in existence at every moment. And that is something we ought to be grateful for all the time.

What is the Mass? Why do we have Mass? What's its purpose? We answer this question *at every Mass*. At the *Orate fratres*, we say the purpose of Mass: For the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church.

That's it. We come to Mass to praise God (for what he's done for us in Christ—and for keeping us in existence) and to pray for our needs (ultimately that we will be united with him forever in heaven). The Mass isn't so much about what we can get out of it, but what we give in praise to God. Give to God what belongs to God.

Let us recall, too, Saint Paul's question to us, "what do you have that you have not received?" If we have received it, then why do we act as if it were our own? Everything, every moment is a gift from God. And it should constantly inspire us to give thanks.

Now let's face it, God doesn't *need* anything from us. But he is looking for the only thing he cannot take from us: our love. In order for love to be genuine, it has to be freely given. The Mass is the moment when we have the opportunity to do that: give ourselves, totally in love to God. We will say it in a few moments: "Lift up your hearts." And you will chime in, "We lift them up to the Lord."

Third, Father Milota would want you to know that this new translation of the Mass will help to make our relationship to God and the purpose of the Mass more clear to us.

It will put onto our lips, not our own puny human words, but the word of God, words taken from the Scriptures and spoken across cultures and generations.

With Saint Paul we will say "and with your Spirit." With the angels we will sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and Holy, holy, holy." With the saints we will chant the Great Amen and with John the Baptist we will point to the Lamb of God.

You might recall the parable from a few weeks about, the one about the man who had two sons: one who said "yes" to his father but did not do what he asked, the other who says "no" and later changes his mind.

The truth is that both sons disrespect the father; neither gives what he asks.

One gives lip service;
the other gives only lip.

The real question is not "which son did the father's will" but "what about me?"

"Do I give the Father what he asks?"

With today's Gospel, the question gets more poignant. If we render unto Caesar, do we really give to God, what is due. Or do we try to get away with as little as possible, thinking we can cheat God the way we might on our taxes.

The aim of Christianity is decidedly not to provide a comfortable place for ourselves here on earth, but to prepare ourselves to enjoy the life of eternity. The Second Vatican Council never intended that Church would be run over by twentieth century secularism. The mission of the Church is not to be changed by the world, but that the world would be transformed by the prayer and witness and example of faithful Christians.

Father Milota would want you to know that we must each claim our responsibility for making our world look more like heaven, rather than secularizing the Church. This is a mission we often forget.

In the liturgy, our deepest desire is to make what we say and what we do agree as an image of heaven.

This is something we should all linger over because I suspect we are all guilty of it from time to time. We rattle off the words. (Sometimes they're easier to remember like that.) The Rosary becomes a drone. The Act of Contrition is an exercise in inhaling and exhaling without pausing the prayer:

O my God I am heartily sorry for having offended thee and I detest all my sins because of your just punishments but most of all because they have offended the my God who is all good and desire serving of all my love. I firmly resolve...

So someday I am going to write a book. I haven't written much yet, but I do have a title: *Liturgy or Lip Service*.

The book would be partly inspired by these Gospels: We human beings say a lot of things, either without really meaning them,

or without really knowing what they mean.

The English-speaking Church around the world is preparing to use a new edition of the Mass, translated in a way that will help us to express more clearly, directly what we mean.

If you want to know what the Church believes, look at what she says when she prays. She says what she believes and means what she says.

This new translation of the Mass will result in our saying something differently. And so this project gives us a new opportunity to understand precisely what it is we mean to say.

Let's face it, we can have the most beautiful, poetic prayer and songs possible, but if what we say does not resonate in our hearts, then it is empty and meaningless. It is lip service.

Finally, Father Milota would want you to know that this new edition of the Missal will require more of all of us. One of the root words of the term "liturgy" is work, *ergon*. This is not a "sit back, relax and enjoy the ride" activity. It demands that we each be engaged in it. Otherwise, it is lip service, just empty words we rattle off.

For us, these words *mean something*. They mean no less than Jesus Christ. He is the supreme Word. The words we use in Mass echo and make present Christ the Word.

There can always be a temptation to tune it out, but then we deprive ourselves of the riches that are there. That is a choice we make individually, and we will each have to

answer for it someday. On the other hand, if we are willing to embrace it, the liturgy can be a great source of nourishment.

You see, these words of the Mass are not just words, they are Christ. Our songs are more appropriate and more authentic as they communicate not our own thoughts, but the word of God. This is why the Church insists that the Responsorial Psalm, for example, not be a paraphrase, or the words of some celebrity composer, but that they be exclusively the Word of God! These are not just songs, we must learn to sing the song of heaven.

The danger with familiar words is that we can take them too lightly—or that they can begin to sound like the Charlie Brown’s teacher.

New words pose the challenge of trying to understand them.

The task for all of us, especially in the prayer of the Mass, is to *mean* the words we pray.

To help us understand, we must be attentive to the words, listen to them, ask what they mean—for they are surely rich in meaning. We must try to deliberately make connections between what we say and do and believe.

Father Milota and the parish staff have done their homework and over the course of the next weeks will continue to provide opportunities to respond to questions, and to prepare, especially for the new music that will be sung.

The mission is now passed on to you. You have the task and the opportunity to make these words your own so that we can truly give due praise and worship to God. Knowing what we believe, saying what we mean and meaning what we say.

A life-time of lip service will only lead to exclusion from eternity. Harmony between our hearts and voices can enrich our lives today and prepare us for the unending song of heaven.