

The Fourth Sunday of Lent - *Laetare* Sunday 15 March 2015

Dear brothers and sisters in Our Blessed Lord:

Today is known by the first word of the first chant of today's Mass, the Introit: "***Laetare ... Rejoice***"!

This is one of two days of the year we use rose coloured vestments. Traditionally during Lent there should be no flowers, decorations, or instrumental music. Today this can be relaxed as we advance along our pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem:

"I rejoiced at the things that were said to me: we shall go into the house of the Lord".

The tradition of these *rose* vestments grows from the history of the Roman Station churches in the Lenten season. The Station church today is the Basilica of the Holy Cross of Jerusalem, where the Emperor Constantine's mother St. Helena placed relics of Cross and Passion brought back to Rome from Jerusalem. At this basilica on this day, the Popes blessed roses made of gold to be sent to Catholic monarchs and other distinguished sons and daughters of Holy Mother Church.

Therefore *Laetare* was also nicknamed *Dominica de rosa*.... Sunday of the Rose. This appears to be how rose-colored vestments developed for that church on this Sunday. The colour spread to the rest of Rome, and then spilled over to the corresponding Sunday in Advent, *Gaudete*. Rose was diffused to the whole world with the promulgation of the Missal of St. Pope Pius V in 1570.

Today, we keep before our eyes the image of the catechumens preparing for Baptism at the Easter Vigil. They have experienced the Scrutinies, the toughest of which would have been during this last week. They were exorcized last Sunday the Basilica of St. Lawrence in Rome. They are now drawing close to entering the

safe-haven, the Jerusalem which is Holy Church. Today's Station in Rome, the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, with its relics of the Passion, was symbolically Jerusalem for the Romans, and therefore a symbol of Jerusalem – the heaven for which we all long.

According to very ancient Roman tradition, serious penance and fasting did not begin until Monday of the third week before Easter (that would be tomorrow). Thus, *Laetare* was the last day before the period of strict discipline. It was not until later that Lent was lengthened to forty days.

Laetare is a refreshment stop on our pilgrimage toward the Easter Festival: think of water-stations along the route of a Marathon race. Together with the joy of approaching-Easter, this Sunday is about the heavenly Jerusalem we long for, which is anticipated in the Church and the Most Holy Eucharist.

The feeding of the 5,000 reveals the mercy and power of Christ on a grand scale. It is a dramatic moment, the only miracle recorded in all four gospels. But even as it establishes divine pity and generosity, it also uncovers the imperfect affection of those who had just been the beneficiaries of Our Lord's kindness. The people recognize Our Blessed Lord as the Messiah, but they understand His sovereignty in earthly terms: He is a solution to the problems of today, and not first a God to be loved...and that is why He departs from them.

"My kingship is not of this world," Our Lord will later tell Pontius Pilate. And so after the multiplication of the loaves and fish, Our Lord escapes, having failed to elicit the right response in the hearts of the chosen people. "For the Kingdom of God," St Paul reminds us, "is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (Rom 14:17) In this episode from the Gospel, the enthusiasm of the people contrasts with the disappointment of their Saviour.

Our Blessed Lord lived an intensely happy human life, and His joy followed from a perfect and pure union of hearts with His Father, which expressed itself in His self-forgetfulness and self-gift. Since we are made in God's image and likeness, we can find our peace and joy, not in food and drink (themselves metaphors for all created goods), but in righteousness, or holiness, as St Paul said, which means imitating the Son and with the help of His abundant grace, giving our hearts generously...and not in a form of commercial exchange: "I will do this for you, and you will do this for me."

Let's return to today's Gospel. Our Lord flees the crowd in sorrow. He performs an act of love in the hope of being loved in return. But our eyes, fixed upon the gift, have forgotten the giver or benefactor. How much does each of us wish to be loved for who we are and not for what we can do! Should we not think the same of Our Blessed Lord...that He wants us to love Him for who He is, and not only for what He does for us? This is purity of heart.

Sacred Scripture is the story of a romance...the story of a pure and generous Heart, that came down from Heaven, mounted the Cross to free us from our selfishness and the burden of sin and a bad conscience to which that selfishness leads, that rises triumphantly from the grave and ascends into Heaven, and then returns at each Mass to give Himself to us in the Blessed Eucharist, which the miracle of the loaves prefigures. This is the quality of the love of Our Blessed Lord for me, for you, for us...a "love so amazing, so divine, [that] demands my soul, my life, my all.

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