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Feasts of Our Lord during Ordinary Time (II)

The Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Transfiguration, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, and Christ the King are the four feasts of our Lord contained in the second part of this article.

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The various solemnities of our Lord offered to us in the liturgy throughout the year give us an opportunity to contemplate the

unfathomable mysteries of God from different points of view, and to let their light fill with meaning our Christian life in the world. The liturgical year centers on Easter, which in a way “spreads over three months—first the forty days of Lent, then the fifty days of Eastertide.” This is followed by “three feasts which instead have a ‘synthesizing’ character: the Most Holy Trinity, then Corpus Christi, and lastly, the Sacred Heart of Jesus.”^[1] The feasts of the Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi were the topics of a previous article. Here we shall look at the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, followed by those of the Transfiguration and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, and finishing with that of Christ the King.

Sacred Heart of Jesus

On the Friday following the second Sunday after Pentecost the Church directs our gaze to Christ with his

side laid open on the Cross, the expression of God's infinite love for mankind and the source from which the sacraments flow. Contemplating this scene has fed Christian devotion from the earliest centuries, providing an unfailing source of peace and security in difficulties. Christian mysticism invites us to open ourselves to the Heart of the Incarnate Word: *that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*^[2]

Popular piety in the late Middle Ages developed a deep, expressive veneration for the Sacred Humanity of Christ suffering on the Cross. Devotion spread to the crown of

thorns, the nails, the wounds... and to his open Heart that sums up all that our Saviour suffered for us. These pious devotions left a mark on the Church, and the liturgical celebration of the Sacred Heart was established in the 17th century. On 20 October 1672 a Norman priest, Saint John Eudes, celebrated a Mass of the Sacred Heart for the first time, and in 1673 the news of Saint Margaret Mary Alacoque's visions about this devotion began to spread throughout Europe. Finally Pius IX officially established the feast for the entire Latin Church.

The liturgy of the day is built on two theological pillars: the unsearchable riches of the mystery of Christ's love, and contemplation of his pierced Heart in reparation for sin. This is expressed in the two collects for this feast offered by the Roman Missal: "Grant, we pray, almighty God, that we who glory in the Heart of your

beloved Son and recall the wonders of his love for us, may be made worthy to receive an overflowing measure of grace from that fount of heavenly gifts”; and “O God, who in the Heart of your Son, wounded by our sins, bestow on us in mercy the boundless treasures of your love, grant, we pray, that in paying him the homage of our devotion we may also offer worthy reparation.”

The consideration of the depths of our Lord’s tender yearning for souls is also an invitation to mould our hearts in accord with his, to join our desire for reparation to the desire shown in deeds to bring more souls to him. “We have approached the fire of the love of God. Let us allow that fire to enkindle our lives. Let us feed the desire to spread that divine fire throughout the world, making it known to all the people around us, so that they too can experience the

peace of Christ and find happiness there.”[3]

Transfiguration of Our Lord

The Solemnity of the Transfiguration probably arose from the annual commemoration of the dedication of a Basilica of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor. In the ninth century the feast spread to the West and later, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it started to be celebrated also in Rome, in the Vatican Basilica. Pope Callistus III incorporated the feast into the Roman Calendar in 1457, in gratitude for the victory of the Christian armies against the Turks in the Battle of Belgrade on 6 August 1456.

In the Christian East the *Transfiguration of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ* is one of the greatest solemnities of the year, together with Easter, Christmas and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. It

expresses all the theology of divinization through grace by which human nature, clothed in Christ, is illuminated with the splendour of God's glory. If we are united to Jesus, as the office of readings in the Roman rite tells us, he "will give us a share in his radiance, renew our spiritual nature and transform us into his own likeness, making us for ever sharers in his Godhead."[4]

With Peter, James and John, in this feast we are invited to make Jesus the focus of our attention: *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.*[5] We have to listen to him and let his life and teachings make our ordinary lives divine. Saint Josemaria prayed: "Lord, we are ready to heed whatever you want to tell us. Speak to us: we are attentive to your voice. May your words enkindle our will so that we launch out fervently to obey you."[6]

Listening to our Lord with the sincere desire to identify ourselves with him leads us to accept sacrifice. Jesus was transfigured so that *the scandal of the Cross might be removed from the hearts of his disciples*,^[7] to help them bear the dark moments of his Passion. The Cross and glory are closely united. The forty days between the feast of the Transfiguration, 6 August, and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, form in some traditions a second Lent. Hence in the Byzantine tradition this period is observed as a time for fasting and contemplation of the Cross.

Exaltation of the Holy Cross

The feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross originated in the Church in Jerusalem. From the middle of the fourth century it was celebrated on 13 September, the anniversary of the dedication of the basilica erected on

Golgotha under Constantine.

According to the account written by a fourth-century pilgrim named Egeria, a relic of our Lord's Cross had been found on that date a few years earlier. The "exaltation" or "raising up" of the Cross took place on the second day of the octave of the dedication; on that day, according to a liturgical book of the time, *the venerable Cross is solemnly shown to all the Christian people*. At the present time the most characteristic rite of this feast in the Byzantine liturgy is the priest raising the Cross above all the people's heads, blessing them and turning to the four points of the compass, while the choir intones the *Kyrie Eleison* a hundred times at each point. Afterwards the faithful come forward to venerate the Cross and to receive one of the flowers decorating the place where the Cross has lain. In the Eastern Churches this feast is so important

that it is considered an Autumn Easter.

In Rome, from the beginning of the sixth century, 3 May was commemorated in the Vatican Basilica as a parallel feast, the Finding of the Holy Cross. In the middle of the seventh century the Vatican Basilica adopted the Jerusalem custom of venerating a fragment of the relic of the Cross (called the *lignum crucis*) on 14 September. Pope Sergius (687-701) transferred the custom to the Lateran Basilica, giving it extra solemnity, such that by the eighth century the feast had spread all over the Christian West.

In the Roman liturgy the preface of the Mass reminds us that since the tree of Paradise was the place of mankind's fall, God has wanted the Cross to be the new tree that would save us: "*ut unde mors oriebatur, inde*

vita resurgeret, so that where death arose, life might again spring forth.”[8] The readings emphasize the lifting up of Christ on the wood of the Cross as an anticipation of his being raised into glory, and as the “magnet” that would draw all creatures: *and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.*[9] The Cross is the place of Jesus’ triumph, and from it, he wants us to help spread his reign. “Christ our Lord was crucified; from the height of the Cross he redeemed the world, thereby restoring peace between God and men. Jesus reminds all of us, ‘And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all things to myself’ (Jn 12:32). If you put me at the center of all earthly activities, he is saying, by fulfilling the duty of each moment in what appears important and what appears unimportant, I will draw everything to myself. My kingdom among you will be a reality!”[10]

Saint Josemaria always wore a reliquary round his neck in the form of a cross containing a *lignum crucis*, a fragment of the True Cross. It was a manifestation of his devotion to the Holy Cross in the loving fulfilment of everyday duties. There are hundreds of ways, also small ones, to express this devotion in daily life, such as making the sign of the cross when saying grace before and after meals: “That moment of blessing, however brief, reminds us of our dependence on God for life; it strengthens our feeling of gratitude for the gifts of creation; it acknowledges those who by their labours provide us with these goods; and it reaffirms our solidarity with those in greatest need.”[11]

Christ the King

Christ’s lordship over the universe is commemorated in various ways in feasts of the liturgical year, including

the Epiphany, Easter, and the Ascension. With the Solemnity of Christ the King, instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in the context of the growing secularization of the world, the Church wishes to highlight even more clearly Christ's sovereignty over all creation, including human history.

Jesus' reign, as the liturgy of the Mass underlines, is *aregnum veritatis et vitae; regnum sanctitatis et gratiae; regnum iustitiae, amoris et pacis.*^[12] Truth, life, holiness, grace, justice, love and peace: these are the values that the human heart most longs for, and we Christians can contribute to bringing them about. We can do so especially through works of mercy done for the most needy, as the gospel for this feast in Year A tells us. *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you made me welcome.*^[13]

Nevertheless, Jesus himself warned us, *my kingdom is not of this world.* [14] His sovereignty will be seen in its fullness at his second coming in glory, when there will be new heavens and a new earth, and all creatures, *free from the slavery of sin, will serve and never cease to praise him.*[15] Now is the time of expectation, of working for his kingdom, confident that the final victory will be his.

Jesus is the center of history: not only the history of mankind as a whole, but also of each individual person. Even when it seems that everything is lost, it is always possible to appeal to our Lord like the good thief, as the gospel for Year C tells us.[16] What peace comes from the fact that, in spite of our past, with sincere repentance we can always enter the Kingdom of God. “Today we can think about our own story, the path of our life. Each one of us has our

history; we each have our mistakes, our sins, our happy moments and our sad ones. On a day such as this we do well to think about our own history, and to look at Jesus, and to say often, but from the heart, in silence, each one of us: ‘Remember me, Lord, now that you are in your kingdom. Jesus, remember me, because I want to be good, I want to be good, but I don’t have the strength, I just can’t. I’m a sinner, a sinner. But remember me, Jesus. You can remember me because you’re in the center, you’re right there, in your kingdom’.”[17]

This loving petition is made throughout the liturgical year when we put into practice in our daily lives what we celebrate in the Mass. The Sacred Heart of Jesus, his Transfiguration, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and the Solemnity of Christ the King do not just give shape to the liturgical year, but actually fill

with meaning the days on which they are celebrated.

[1] Benedict XVI, Homily on the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi*, 22 May 2008.

[2] *Eph* 3:17-19.

[3] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 170.

[4] Anastasius of Sinai, Sermon on the Transfiguration of the Lord. Liturgy of the Hours, Office of Readings for 6 August.

[5] *Mt* 17:5.

[6] Saint Josemaria, *Holy Rosary*, fourth mystery of light.

[7] Roman Missal, Preface for the feast of the Transfiguration

[8] Roman Missal, Preface of the Holy Cross.

[9] *Jn* 12:32.

[10] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 183.

[11] Pope Francis, Encyclical *Laudato Si'*, 24 May 2015, no. 227.

[12] Roman Missal, Preface for the feast of Christ the King.

[13] *Mt* 25:35.

[14] *Jn* 18:36.

[15] Roman Missal, Mass of Christ the King, Collect.

[16] Cf. *Lk* 23:35-43.

[17] Pope Francis, Homily, 24 November 2013.

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