

August 9

Behold the Nonviolent Lamb of God

Following is the homily delivered at the close of the Forty-Day Fast for the Truth of Gospel Nonviolence, at the Shrine of the Lamb in Knock, Ireland, August 9, 1988.

On August 21 of 1879, at the rear of St. John the Baptist Church in Knock, Ireland, four figures appeared: Mary, Joseph, St. John the Evangelist, and a fourth that was the visual, symbolic, theological, and spiritual focus of this apparition. The fourth figure was a lamb, standing on an altar, surrounded by angels. Today, the Shrine of the Lamb at Knock is Ireland's national shrine, and to fathom the meaning of this Irish icon, it is necessary to ponder the meaning of the figure of the Lamb.

Hebrew Scripture

The lamb is an unequivocal and universal symbol of gentleness, nonviolence, meekness, humility and innocence. "*As gentle as a lamb*" and "*as innocent as a lamb*" are clichés common to most cultures, yesterday and today. Hundreds of years before Jesus lived, the legendary Greek storyteller, Aesop, wrote this: "*The lamb prays to the Lord in the time of creation: 'Lord do not give me any weapons of defense, because if I have the means to hurt I shall wish to do so.'*" In addition, in the ancient world, sheep and lambs were money, currency; a medium of exchange used to pay the price for what was desired. The Latin word "*pecunia*," which means money, is derived from the Greek word "*pecus*" which means sheep.

To the Jews of Old Testament times, the lamb was the animal to be sacrificed to God for the benefit of the people. When Abraham, the Father of Faith, was taking his son, Isaac, up the mountain to sacrifice him, Isaac asked, "*Where is the lamb?*" Abraham answered in faith, "*God will provide.*"

When God told Moses that, on a certain night, an angel of judgment would take the firstborn of Egypt, God also told him that every Jewish household should kill and eat a lamb and put its blood on the doorposts, and that, if this were done, the angel would pass over that house and the Jewish people would be saved from death, and freed from Pharaoh. Hence, the Passover Feast that stands at the very heart of Jewish religion as a remembrance of God's saving, delivering, and rescuing power requires the sacrifice of a lamb that is eaten at the meal.

By extension, the lamb became the offering at other major Jewish Feasts, and also the offering of those wishing to make atonement for personal sin. The lamb was the twice-

daily sacrifice (morning and evening) in the Temple until it was destroyed in 70 AD.

Finally, in the Old Testament there is that mysterious figure in the Book of Isaiah, the “Servant of Yahweh” or the “Suffering Servant.” This figure is the Mount Everest of nonviolent love and the pinnacle of faith in the Hebrew Scriptures. He is gentle, does not raise his voice in the street. He is a man of sorrows, afflicted and thought guilty by others:

*Yet ours were the sufferings he was bearing
ours the sorrows he was carrying,
while we thought of him as someone being punished,
and struck with affliction by God
whereas he was being wounded for our rebellion,
crushed because of our guilt;
the punishment reconciling us fell on him,
and we have been healed by his wounds.
We had all gone astray like sheep
each taking his own way
and Yahweh brought the acts of rebellion
of all of us to bear on him.
Ill-treated and afflicted,
he never opened his mouth,
like a lamb led to slaughter...*

Isaiah 53:4-7

No one with even a slight familiarity with lambs, and no one with even a superficial acquaintance with the Old Testament could fail to grasp the qualities of character intended to be evoked when the first Christians named Jesus by the symbol of the lamb: nonviolence, meekness, humility, gentleness, innocence, and self-sacrificial love.

New Testament

In the New Testament, the Last Supper and the Crucifixion take place at the time of the Passover. The symbolism of the Last Supper as the new Passover Meal and of Jesus as the new Passover Lamb is obvious. Indeed, in the Gospel of John, Jesus is crucified at the very hour when the priests are slaughtering the lambs for the Passover in the Temple.

The Jesus of the New Testament is the new Passover Lamb, whose blood—that is, His giving up of His life, in love, for others—saves, delivers, and rescues people not from the evils of Pharaoh-like political and economic oppression, but from all the satanic powers of evil and death. As St. Paul explicitly says, "*Christ our paschal (Passover) lamb has been sacrificed*" (1 Cor. 5:7). As St. Peter explicitly says, "*You know you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as gold or silver, but by the precious blood of Christ the unblemished lamb*" (1 Pet. 1:10).

Baptism

It is in the Gospel of John, the Evangelist, that John, the Baptist, first speaks those words which billions of Christians over the centuries have heard, words spoken just prior to the distribution and reception of Holy Communion: "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world*" (John 1:29). John's next words are "*I saw the Spirit come down (on Jesus) like a dove from the sky.*"

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, when John baptizes Jesus, the Spirit descends on Him as a dove. Then a voice, a revelation from heaven, says, "*This is my beloved son upon whom my favor rests.*" It is universally understood by scripture scholars that this sentence directly refers to the opening lines of the Hymn of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah (Is 42:1). At His baptism, at the beginning of His public ministry, the identity which Jesus receives and accepts is that of the Suffering Servant, the gentle, nonviolent "*lamb led to slaughter*" for the salvation of the "*many,*" i.e., all the world.

In the Gospel of John, when John the Baptist proclaims, "*Behold the Lamb of God,*" he is communicating this selfsame truth, that Jesus is the Suffering Servant. The words, "*Lamb of God*" in Aramaic, Jesus' and John's native language, are exactly the same words in Aramaic as "*Servant of Yahweh,*" found in Isaiah, that is, the person we descriptively designate as the Suffering Servant. Therefore, when Christians "*Behold the Lamb of God,*" they are not only looking upon Christ, the new Passover Lamb, they are equally gazing upon Christ, the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the nonviolent "*lamb led to slaughter,*" into Whom they are baptized.

It is critical that we struggle to comprehend the fact that to be baptized into Christ is to accept to be baptized into the very baptism into which He was baptized—and no other. That baptism, as has been said, is explicitly connected, by references in all four canonical gospels, to the nonviolent, gentle, sacrificial lamb of Isaiah's Hymn of the Suffering Servant. The Greek word baptism means, "total immersion." At Christian Baptism one is totally immersed into the new Lamb-like life of the Suffering Servant Messiah (Christ). St. Paul explains this by saying that "*as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ*" (Gal. 3:27). To put on Christ is to put on the Lamb of God. Indeed, theologically and spiritually, personally and communally, it makes no sense to receive the Lamb of God in the Eucharist until one has freely committed to putting on the Lamb of God in Baptism and thereby united oneself with the Lamb and with one's fellow Christians in the Community of the Lamb, the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:1).

Eucharist

The Eucharist is the celebration of the community committed to the Lamb of God. The Passover Meal in the Old Testament is not bread, but the Passover lamb; the Passover Lamb of the New Christian Passover is the bread, which becomes the Lamb of God, the Body of Christ. In the ancient sister Churches of the East, Catholic and Orthodox, the consecrated bread is actually called "The Lamb." Immediately prior to Holy Communion in the Western Church, the community prays, "*Lamb of God who takes away the sins of*

the world have mercy on us ... grant us peace." The priest then raises the Sacred Host for the people to see and exclaims, "*Behold the Lamb of God. Behold Him who takes away the sins of the world. Blessed are those who are called to the Supper of the Lamb.*" This dramatic moment in the Mass goes back to at least the seventh century in the Western Church. The designation of the sanctified bread as the Lamb goes back well beyond that in the Eastern Church's liturgy.

The Lamb is and has been the Church's Eucharistic symbol *par excellence* because the Eucharist is the celebration of the Community of the Lamb, a community committed by baptism to living and loving as the Lamb of God lived and loved. When the Christian beholds and consumes the Lamb in Communion, it should be in order to deepen and to sustain the New Life of the Lamb within him or her and within the community. St. Augustine, commenting on the worthy reception of Communion, states, "*If you receive well, you are what you receive ... (therefore) be what you see and receive what you are.*" Each worthy reception of Communion draws the Christian ever more profoundly into the life of the Lamb. Every Eucharist that is what it is supposed to be builds up the Community of the Lamb through communion with the Lamb.

Church

The Church is composed of Christians who choose to follow the Lamb, who is "*mEEK and humble of heart.*" The Church is set apart by God as a unique place where Jesus Christ can be recognized and encountered. The Lamb of God is revealed in time and space by a Church and by each of its members who follow the Way of the Lamb. Following the way of a killer lion in time and space does not reveal the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, God, to self or to others. The Church follows this Way because she believes that the values, attitudes, beliefs, and powers symbolized by the Lamb are the spiritual and moral rocks on which the Church, and indeed, all of life and history must be constructed if the will of the Father is "*to be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" She believes that the Lamb has conquered (Rev. 17:14), and therefore that the Heart of the Lamb—which is the Heart of Jesus and the Heart of Jesus' Way—is the Heart of the Universe, the Heart of God.

Three times Jesus asks Peter, "*Do you love me?*" Three times after Peter replies in the affirmative, Jesus says "*Feed my lambs,*" "*Feed my sheep.*" The Church is the "*little flock*" of Jesus that is given a "*new commandment*" (John 13: 34, 15:12) that each one should love the other, as the Lamb of God loves him or her, and thereby renew the face of the earth for all.

Social Responsibility

It is primarily through the Holy Eucharist that the Church feeds Jesus' lambs, and it is in the Holy Eucharist that the Church makes its greatest contribution to the creation of a truly human society. For if the Eucharist is allowed to be what it is supposed to be—"*become what you receive, receive what you are*"—then through the communicants'

Lamb-like lives, the Eucharistic Lamb of God becomes the divine leaven in the human dough. The legitimate fruits of communion with the Lamb are deeds of Lamb-like Love that release the power of God in history.

The time has certainly come for the Irish Christian Churches, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, and all Christian churches everywhere, to repent, and to stop using the Gospel and the Eucharist as a means of justifying, indeed as a means of promoting, the Christian absurdity of being baptized lambs in wolves' clothing. The time has certainly come to cast as discerning an eye on the fruits of the misuse of the Eucharist as has been cast on the metaphysics of the Eucharist, in order to determine if the Church is about what she is commanded to be about Eucharistically—“*Do this in memory of me.*” The time has certainly come for Irish Christians— indeed, for all Christians—to honestly struggle to *be* what we consume.

This totally biblical Irish icon at Knock is given by the Holy Spirit to the Irish Christian community, which for centuries has been devastated by its own un-Lamb-like behavior, in order to call it back to its right Christian mind and thereby to bring healing, unity, and peace where there has been sickness, division, and war. I am also certain that if the Irish Christian community responds to the cry of the Lamb to love as He loves and thereby allows the Lamb to be its Lord in deed, as well as in word and sacrament, it will be the beginning of the Universal Church's exodus from its 1700 years of enslavement to the evils of violence, war and enmity.

Let all Irish Christians work out the details for creating a Church resolutely committed to enfleshing the Spirit of the Lamb. Let all Irish Christians work out the details of disarming the hearts, the minds, and the bodies of all Church members and through them the disarming of the hearts, minds and bodies of the *many* who compose present-day Ireland. Let all Irish Christians, indeed all Christians, learn war and violence no more from the military, from the paramilitaries, from the television, from toys and games, from the boxing clubs and, in learning this no more, become instead faithful witnesses to *Jesus'* way of overcoming evil. Commit the Irish Catholic and Protestant Churches to becoming extensions of the Lamb of God in time and space—in deed as well as in word—and Knock will need an international airport to accommodate the numbers from around the world who will come to the Lamb's Shrine of Reconciliation, Healing, and Peace! For there is no holier land on earth than that place where ancient enemies have been reconciled. And, where the Holy is made visible by deeds, the miraculous is— possibilities beyond mere human imagination and calculation appear. Grace abounds.

Our Lamb has conquered! Him let us adore and imitate, consume and follow! Amen.

-Emmanuel Charles McCarthy