

FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT, 2023

Being able to see is good.

Very good.

The Lord Jesus gave the Man Born Blind a tremendous gift. He was born blind, so he really did not know what he was missing. The man was also content to be blind. Notice that in this Gospel from chapter nine of St. John, the Man Born Blind did not ask for sight. He had always been blind. He knew he was missing something, but lived well enough, he thought, without it.

Then suddenly a Man invaded his life. The Man grabbed his face, put spit and mud in his eyes, and told him to wash.

Of course he washed!

And after he washed, he could see.

Healing is sometimes aggressive.

The basic catechesis about this Gospel is as follows.

It is good to be able to see the truth about things.

The deep truth about things can only be seen by Faith.

Without Faith, people are blind about their true identity, the purpose of the world, the meaning of life, and the reality of God.

To begin to know our true identity, the purpose of the world, the meaning of life, and something of God, is good, very good, and eternally good.

The Lord Jesus offers people this vision, when He calls them to Faith.

People, however, are born without Faith. They are born unable to know their true selves, the purpose of the world, the meaning of life, or God.

Taken altogether, that means that people are born unable to be happy.

They do not, however, quite know what they are missing. They know that something is missing. As they grow up, they cannot fail to notice that they are not happy. Never having experienced true happiness, they can only guess at what it might be like, perhaps clutching, like the anti-hero of "Citizen Kane", to some fragment of childhood ("Rosebud!"), childhood being the closest most people ever come to happiness. Knowing that they are missing something, but unable to imagine what it is, they try to make their lives bearable in various ways, some healthier than others.

And so life goes on, bearably, but drearily.

Life goes on, bearably but drearily, until a Man invades their life.

This is the same Man as in the Gospel story of the Man Born Blind, our Lord Jesus Christ.

This Man invades their lives with a new message, the Christian Gospel.

This man puts spit and mud in their eyes, by making them hear a message unlike any they have ever heard before. This message tells them something that they know, but don't like hearing, namely, that not knowing their true identity, the purpose of the world, the meaning of life, or the reality of God, they are not happy.

The message promises that, by Faith, they can discover their true identity, the purpose of the world, the meaning of life, and God.

The message tells them that, by Faith, they can become happy.

Then comes the water, the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, poured out in Baptism, Confirmation, and Penance. The mud, the necessary mud, of admitting their errors is washed away, and now they can see.

Now they have Faith.

Thus, the basic catechesis.

Now, I will add to that basic catechesis a point about holy aggression, and connect that with a little bit about St. Patrick.

One of the most common mistakes of religious people down through the centuries is to equate aggression with vice, and passivity with virtue. Too easily, people imagine evil to be essentially active, and good to be essentially passive. In fact, much evil happens through inactivity, through letting people and human things fall prey to entropy and inertia. Much good happens through activity, going out and getting something done that needs to be done. Good needs to be aggressive sometimes. Moral and spiritual life is much more than just defending against the aggressions of evil. Sometimes good has to be the invader. Sometimes good has to go to where people are living in darkness. Sometimes good has to invade the valley of the shadow of death. Sometimes the disciples of the Lord Jesus need to do what He did to the Man Born Blind, invading his life with a new vision he needed, but did not consciously want, and certainly never asked for.

This holy invasion cannot force people, but it must put a choice in front of people. The saving invasion of the Gospel must be loud enough that people have to choose. To listen or not to listen, that is the question! The Church of Jesus Christ must speak, and speak loudly enough to compel that choice. Listen, or don't listen - but choose! There are consequences either way, new sight from listening, and continued blindness from not listening. The consequences of that choice rest on the chooser. Our part, as members of Christ's Mystical Body, is to speak.

There are highly refined Christians who find missionary work distasteful. It seems aggressive - how vulgar! Some want nothing to do with "Evangelization" Others try to make a distinction between "Evangelization" (good) and "Proselytism" (bad), but they never make such a distinction very clear and, in truth, I don't think it is a distinction that makes much sense. The Gospel message must be audible enough to be heard, and that requires someone, in God's name, to invade the familiar world of those used to being blind.

One such invader was St. Patrick.

St. Patrick, of course, was not Irish by birth, but by two aggressions. The first aggression was when some Irish slave raiders carried him off from his Romano-British home to slavery in Ireland. The second, years later, was when St Patrick invaded Ireland with a new hope, a new vision, and a new freedom.

About the Sons of Erin, there seem to be more numerous and more vivid stereotypes than about most other ethnicities. Some people complain about the stereotypes other people have regarding them; but the Irish, at least the American Irish, made the inspired choice to run with the stereotypes and have fun with them. Not even the most zealously and annoyingly dedicated acolyte of "Woke" would dare tell Notre Dame to drop the mascot of "The Fighting Irish"! Personally, in youth I discovered that I liked those "Fighting Irish" Americans with whom I had a couple of vigorous disagreements. Once, a good sized and extremely bright Irish American gent had an annoying habit of criticizing my English prose style, a habit that I thought needed strong correction. Another time, I had an annoying habit of mocking Irish folk songs and folk dancing, a habit that a different Irish American gent thought needed strong correction. In both cases, strong correction became kinetic correction - and kind of fun in its own right.

St. Patrick knew full well (having been enslaved there in youth) that he was going to work in a land with a strong warrior culture - "Fighting Irish" indeed! He came intending, with God's help, to correct several things: slave raiding, head hunting, idolatry, servitude to demons, ignorance of God, and blindness to eternal truth. He came, unlike my youthful self and my friends, not to attempt any kinetic correction. His correction would be entirely spiritual. Still, it would not be timid, or "meek" in the usual sense of the word. He would speak his mind and soul. He would speak the message entrusted to him. Let others react as they chose; but he would speak what the Spirit of Jesus Christ had given him to speak.

Most of the later myths about St. Patrick disturb my historical sensibilities. Rather wonderfully, however, we have two documents certainly from St. Patrick himself, his "Apology" and his "Letter to Coroticus" In those two documents, two things about the man's personality shine through. He deeply and profoundly loved God, and he was naturally aggressive. Put those two things together, and you get the man who may well have been the Church's greatest missionary since the Apostles.

Patrick's "Apology" ("Confessio") is anything but apologetic, but the modern English word "confession" would be even more misleading. In his "Apology", Patrick attempted to explain to his superiors, who seem to have been a rather dull and unimaginative lot, just what he was doing in Ireland, and why He was doing it. What he was doing was announcing Jesus Christ to as many Irish as he possibly could, bringing those who responded to his announcement to the Sacraments of Eternal Life, and, with God's help, starting the Church in a new land. He was doing it because God told him to do it. Period. End of story. His superiors seem to have been annoyed because THEY hadn't told him to do any such thing. Apparently, they had sent him to Ireland to minister to the land's few and enslaved Christians. He turned that into a mission to make the whole land Christian. On at least one occasion, an Irishman tried to kill him, but that didn't much disturb a man like Patrick, who rather expected some trouble like that. What disturbed Patrick was a determined effort by officials of the Romano-British Church to shut him up and shut his mission down, on the grounds that it was unauthorized, and was being carried out in an irregular manner. Patrick's response, his "Apology", probably did not help those irritated officials calm down. Patrick said, in effect, that God's Grace had done marvelous things

in him, that God's Grace was doing marvelous things through him, and that he had no intention of ceasing or desisting. The Irish probably liked this. Most likely his superiors did not. The history of the era is obscure, to put it mildly, but I suspect that his superiors in the Romano-British Church, who sent him to Ireland, changed their mind when they saw what he was doing and how he was doing it (to some minds, heroism and success matter less than bureaucratic correctness and fussy propriety). When the Irish annals say that Pope Leo the Great "approved" Patrick, I think that this does not refer to his dispatch to Ireland by the Roman-British Church to care for the small Christian community there, but to his unexpected and highly personal campaign to evangelize the entire country. His immediate superiors could not or would not understand what was going on; but Pope Leo I, called "The Great" for good reason, could and did understand, and approved. It was a work of the Lord, and it remains wondrous in our eyes.

Ah, how I could go on about St. Patrick! But, even though I don't feel obliged to heed advice about keeping the homily under 10 minutes, I do feel obliged to keep it under 15! I remain in awe of what he did (there is a board game about it, "Banish the Snakes", in which the players compete to make Ireland Christian, which I regret not having ordered in time for St. Patrick's Day). It really was a work of the Lord Jesus, the same work he did for the Man Born Blind, invading his darkness, and shattering his blindness. It was a healing aggression. It did not compel, but it made an invitation that could not be ignored. People had to notice it; and, noticing, they had to respond.

The work of Evangelization is surely needed in Ireland today, as it is in America. I won't give up on either. Neither will St. Patrick, or any of the American Saints. Evangelization must be, in one form or another, active. That is to say, the Church and Gospel of Jesus Christ must be loud enough to be noticed. Movies and television have a role to play in this. Many things have a role to play in this. I am even prepared to say that tattoos have a role to play in this. The essential thing is that we, as Christians, make ourselves a fact in people's lives, something to which they must respond. This is not compulsion, but it is aggressive. We aren't going to be quiet, and just stay at home.

The blindness and darkness in which so many people live (and, surely, purely secular statistics about suicide and addiction shout out how many lives are dead!) will not be dissipated by wishing for it to go away, nor merely by praying about it. First of all we are to pray, for only the Lord's power can shatter spiritual blindness and replace it with saving Faith. Then, in one way or another, God helping, we are to make noise.

It is through His Mystical Body that Jesus does today what He did for the Man Born Blind: breaking in and invading the darkness; and then giving both the the Vision of Faith and the Light Of Eternal Life.

