

Church of the Sacred Heart

Oxford, Pennsylvania

Fr. Victor Eschbach – Ash Wednesday Homily

February 17, 2021

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Jesus didn't have much time for phonies. He was constantly calling out the Pharisees, Sadducees, and religious leaders of his time for 'binding up heavy loads to put on other people's shoulders. Here he is telling those following him that they can't be his disciples if they're in it to put on a show. He tells them don't do things just to have others think well of you. Don't be a show-off even in being generous to the Church because in so doing, you've already received whatever reward you're going to get from those who praise you. Likewise, if you're coming to church to be seen and well thought of by others, well that's all you're going to get out of your prayer. God hears and answers the prayers of the heart. Also, if you make a big show of your Lenten fast and want everyone to know of whatever sacrifice you're offering to God so that you may turn more to Him than being controlled by your wants and desires. Well, others might praise you, but you're not really praising God.

So, the Lord is making it really plain. If you are really going to be his disciple, you can't be a phony, or, as he calls it, a hypocrite.

Yet, truth be told. Most who criticize the church and those of us who are church-goers, whether fairly or not, are dismissed as hypocrites. Frankly, that's how people in the world view us.

Why is that? A survey taken a few years back might offer some insight. 100 members of various Christian churches, Protestant, Catholic, Evangelical, and non-Denominational, were asked this question: "Would it make any difference in your life if Christ had not died on the Cross?"

Here are the results:

45 said they didn't think it would make any difference; 25 said they thought so, but when asked what the difference would be, they weren't sure; 20 said it made all the difference in how they lived and believed; and 10 said they didn't know, because they didn't understand what the cross was all about.

How troubling is that. If this survey is representative of all of us who claim to be Christians, disciples of Jesus Christ, and only 20% of us recognize the Cross, which is the very center of

Christian belief, as making a difference in how we live and believe, what does that say about the state of Christianity in our world today.

In looking at the painful state we're in, our world surely needs a Savior. Our health and very lives are endangered by a pandemic. Millions have lost their jobs. Businesses are failing every day. Unthought-of violence, hate, and cruelty run rampant in our society. The world's got problems. It needs help...now!

The other night as I was flipping channels, I came across an old re-run of M*A*S*H, You may remember that the show is set in the Korean War. Hawkeye, played by Alan Alda, is on a bus with some wounded South Korean refugees. The bus comes very close to a company of North Korean soldiers. To avoid being discovered, the bus driver drives the bus off the road and hides it behind a clump of bushes. They are still in earshot of the North Koreans, though. An infant starts crying. Hawkeye directs the mother to quiet the child. The crying stops and the danger passes.

Later Hawkeye discovers that the mother has actually smothered the child so that the refugees will not be betrayed. Hawkeye is devastated. He is so emotionally distraught that he needs treatment.

This mother sacrificed her only child that others might live. It is something that you and I can hardly bear to think about.

A Father gives the life of His Son to die a savage death on a Cross to save all of us; to save each of us. Does that sacrifice still have the power to move us?

We've come to Ash Wednesday, to be marked with ashes that remind us of our own mortality, that our days are numbered. Therefore, there is a certain urgency for us to "repent and believe in the Gospel". The repentance calls us to turn ourselves around; re-orient ourselves to the Gospel truth that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

If we so believe and embrace this Gospel truth, in the words of St. Paul: "Brothers and sisters; we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us." That means, that in this world, here and now, we are called to do the saving work of Christ in this sorry, weary, broken world, by "working together".

This is our time! Now, in the time that has been given to us on this earth, there is a great urgency in our becoming the redeeming presence of God to all within the orbit of our lives. Now is your time! Now is my time! "Behold, now is a very acceptable time! Behold, now is the day of salvation!"

My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, too many of us feel either overwhelmed by the task or unprepared for it. That's what is wrong with our world. We are not doing our share of the redeeming work of Christ. Please be bold enough and humble enough to recognize yourself in the words of the one who said, "I'm just a nobody here to tell anybody about somebody who has the power to save everybody." "Behold, now is a very acceptable time! Behold, now is the day of salvation!"

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