



Allocutio



Presentata Curia 27th November 2009

Allocutio: Own your own sins

A brief word on the Report just out. It does show a series of dreadful handlings of accusations of child sex abuse in the past; but it also reveals that we have improved greatly since the mid 1990s. And today our diocese has a way of dealing with such complaints that is as good as you'll get anywhere. Of course the pain of those abused will still be around for as long as those people live.

But lest we get absorbed in the sins of others it is worth remembering that God is not happy when we are looking out at the sins of others and not facing our own faults. That is what you and I have to do: own my own sins, embrace the fact that I am a sinner.

I was just thinking recently about that woman mentioned in the Gospels who came to Jesus in the home of Simon the Pharisee. Do you recall how she came up behind Jesus, shed her tears on his feet and wiped them with her hair? And how Simon was filled with revulsion, "If this Jesus were a true prophet he'd know what kind of sinful woman this is!"

Let us be slow to judge this woman. People presume she was a prostitute. Perhaps. But maybe she was the worst gossip for generations in the town. Perhaps she was a Billy/Betty Liar sort who had caused dreadful embarrassment over the years. Perhaps she was a kleptomaniac. All we know for definite is that she was a public sinner, someone known for her sins and someone who knew she had a bad reputation.

But there is something else about her. Because she knew she was a sinner she had turned to God time and time again to help her. Time and time again she had asked God to forgive her and to heal her of this dreadful compulsion that made her do what she did. And as she asked time and time again and as she poured out her grief to God over her weakness a relationship began and developed with God. And she learnt something that is said in the Scriptures, that God is full of compassion and love for the sinner. And because she had come to learn so much about God some deep instinct drew her to Jesus. Somehow she knew that that same compassion and love that God had for sinners was also in Jesus. So she poured out her tears of joy and sorrow on his feet.

Here is a strange thing. It is only by coming to know what a sinner we are that we can find that angle on God that shows us the depth of his love. The problem with the Pharisee in the Temple was that not knowing he was a sinner he could not look out on that vista of how deep God's love is. It was the sinner who had his eyes opened to see the depth of that love of God. Like the Prodigal Son who felt more deeply his father's love than the elder son.

That is the extraordinary paradox that the Gospels put before us. It is by stepping into that space that belongs to sinners, by owning our sins fully and without any justification, that we learn how much God



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loves us and we in turn begin to love him in return and grow in a deep sorrow for our sins. Because the more you sense the depth of God's love we come to realise that sin is an abuse of his love.

I cannot but think of those many saints who shed tears over their sins, of those saints who said they were the worst of sinners. But that is why they were saints. They first owned their sinfulness and through that came to learn the mercy of the loving and kind heart of our Good God. How I would love to shed deep tears over my sins. How I would love to sob over the misery I inflicted on Jesus who didn't deserve any thing of what he was put through.

As we approach the Feast of the Immaculate Conception I am thinking of Mary standing at the foot of the Cross. She was conceived without sin but would suffer as a result of sin and suffer very deeply. Can I suggest to you a way of praying given by St. Ignatius of Loyola. He asked us to stand with Mary at the foot of the Cross and there ask her to seek for me, by her prayers, a deep realisation of what sin in my life is and a feeling of distaste at my own sinful acts. And I should also ask her to obtain from me by her prayers the grace to see the disorder that sin brings into my life so that I may begin to know how to amend my life and bring order back into it. And finally to ask her to win me the grace of seeing those values in society which are contrary to Christ's so that I can begin to free myself from them.

In this season of preparing the way for the Lord let us focus on what is sinful in our lives and not block it out but face it for what it is: my sin.

Amen.

Fr Paul Churchill