

“The last error shall be worse than the first”: An Easter Sermon by a
Traditional Dominican Priest

Dear Faithful,

On Holy Saturday the chief priests and the Pharisees, the Gospel tells us, feeling somehow that their victory of the day before over Jesus was still precarious, came to Pilate together saying:

“Sir, we have remembered, that that Seducer said, while he was yet alive: After three days I will rise again. Command therefore the sepulcher to be guarded until the third day: lest perhaps His disciples come and steal Him away, and say to the people: He is risen from the dead; and the last error shall be worse than the first.” (Matthew 27:62-64)

Saint Augustine in the lesson we read at Matins yesterday, mocks these Jews, saying:

“How far will they go with their plots, which they plot in vain, so that even when the Lord is dead and in the tomb, they place guards at the tomb?” (*Quo perduxerunt illas scrutationes suas, quas perscrutantes defecerunt, ut etiam mortuo Domino et sepulto, custodes ponerent ad sepulcrum?*)

It is, indeed, a telling witness of their insecurity that they go so far as to do this: they obviously still fear this Jesus, even though He is dead and buried! It is also a proof of their bad faith, for as St. Thomas remarks in speaking of the naiveté of the Apostles who had no idea of the evil that Judas was plotting against their Master, good people are very slow to see evil in others because they don't think about doing evil themselves. The Pharisees, on the contrary, imagine that the Apostles are as liars like they are and so they take measures against the maneuver they would use themselves in their place, namely, steal the Body of Christ and then say that He rose from the dead.

But all these complicated intrigues merely serve to make more manifest the truth they want to combat. The guards sent to stop the Apostles from stealing the Body of Jesus become, says St. Augustine again, eyewitnesses not only of the fact that no one had taken the Body, but also of the miracle of the earthquake and the apparition of the Angel who rolled away the stone from the tomb.

The Jews, however, when they hear their report of all this, instead of finally admitting the truth and converting, plunge themselves even deeper into their lies. Lying, they say that the Apostles are liars and they pay the guards to lie with them, saying that the disciples came and stole the Body while they were asleep. It isn't surprising that they get entangled in all these webs they weave and end up, as St. Augustine finely remarks, making the guards witnesses of things that happened while they were asleep.

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“You tell them: “Say you, His disciples came by night, and stole Him away when we were asleep.” You bring forth sleeping witnesses! Truly it is you yourselves who are asleep, who plot such things in vain.” (*Dicite quia vobis dormientibus venerunt discipuli ejus, et abstulerunt eum? Dormientes testes adhibes: vere tu ipse obdormisti, qui scrutando talia defecisti.*)

But you are perhaps saying to yourselves: couldn’t Father speak about something else more encouraging on this Octave of Easter rather than these sad maneuvers of the Jews?

It is true that we need to be encouraged and that this feast we are celebrating today – the Solemnity of Solemnities, as the Martyrology called it this morning at Prime – is perfectly fitted for doing that. But Our Lord introduces souls into the joy of His Resurrection very discreetly, as the different accounts of His apparitions on Easter Sunday show us. The joy of His Resurrection is not a tidal wave that falls on everyone and sweeps them away (as His Second Coming will); it is rather like the tide of the sea that slowly but surely rises, with the whole weight of the ocean behind it, it filters into souls, one by one. Saint John sees the winding-sheets and believes. Saint Mary Magdalen hears her name: “Mary!” and turns and sees Him. The disciples of Emmaus recognize Him when He breaks the bread.

This discretion is expressed beautifully in the introit of the Mass on Easter morning. We might have thought that it would be some sort of triumphant, resounding hymn that loudly proclaims His victory, but instead we have this mysterious fourth mode, that is so ethereal, so supernatural, the farthest thing from a trumpeting clarion call that one could ever imagine.

Let us continue to follow this thread, then, with which we began and we will find joy there where He wants to lead us and the encouragement He knows we need. For God knows, we certainly do need encouragement in the present situation in the world and in the Church. But it is precisely in this that this sad story of the intrigues and maneuvers of the Jews on the occasion of the Resurrection of Christ is going to encourage us, because we see in this story that, in fact, nothing has changed in the 2000 years that have passed since then. On one side, there is Jesus, His miracles, His teaching, His truth as resplendent as the sun which, in themselves, ought to lead all men to His feet, to lead them to believe in Him, to adore Him, to obey Him, to love Him and thus bring salvation and happiness and peace to the world.

On the other side, there are the Jews, their lies, their plots, their money, their very clever and very powerful maneuvers, which succeed, to a large extent, as St. Matthew confirms when he says, with regards to this lie they invented about the disciples having stolen the Body of Jesus:

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“So they (the guards) taking the money, did as they were taught: and this word was spread abroad among the Jews even unto this day.”

We saw the same incredible bad faith in the Gospel read the Friday before Palm Sunday when these same chief priests and Pharisees held a meeting about what to do about Jesus and they said:

“What do we, for this Man doth many miracles? If we let Him alone so, all will believe in Him...” (John 11: 47-48)

O you foolish Jews, you perverse men! Yes, He is doing many miracles, He shows manifestly that He is the Messiah, the Saviour we are all waiting for, and you confess yourselves that if you don't do anything to stop Him, everyone is going to believe in Him, because it is obvious that He is the Messiah. Why then do you refuse to believe in Him? Why do you say: “What will we do?” Why do you have to *do* something? Don't do anything, follow Him yourselves and the whole world will believe and as Isaias predicted: “the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the covering waters of the sea.” (Isaias 11:9)

But no. They persist in their resistance to the truth that they know perfectly well by a malice that is hardly believable but which is very real and that we must all be careful to see and take note of. We must not remain in the naivete of which St. Thomas speaks, even though in itself it is good, because it comes from goodness. God wants us to know that evil exists, that malice exists, and that there are people who are malicious, who are God's enemies, and that that is what explains what seems inexplicable at times in the world and in the Church. Sometimes, if we are naive, we can be scandalized by the evil that surrounds us and even be tempted to suspect that God Himself is responsible for it, like the servants in the parable of the wheat and the cockle who say to their master:

“Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field? whence then hath it cockle?”

But the master responds:

Inimicus homo hoc fecit: “An enemy hath done this.” (Matthew 13: 27-28)

Yes, dear brethren, Jesus has enemies and that is what explains the present state of the Church and the world. However - and that is where we find the discreet but profound encouragement contained in this ugly story about the Pharisees recounted by Saint Matthew - all that these enemies do will turn out, in the end, for the advantage of the cause of God and for their own confusion.

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In his book on Christ the King, the Benedictine Dom (Jean de) Monléon quotes this passage of the Gospel of St. Matthew and makes a little remark on the instructing title the Jews give to Jesus: *Seducator ille* – “that Seducer.”

“Ah,” he says, “they didn’t know how well they spoke!”

And he goes on to explain how, indeed, Jesus was a seducer, the greatest Seducer the world has ever known Who succeeded in making Himself loved as no one else has ever done in the history of the world.

We could also make the same remark with regard to another affirmation they make to Pilate at the end of their discourse to him where they foresee the damage that would result from this pretended “theft” of the Body of Jesus by the Apostles and their “lying” to the people saying; “He is risen from the dead.”

“This last error, they say, will be worse than the first.”

Ah yes, we could well repeat here the remark of Dom Monléon: “They didn’t know how well they spoke!”

Indeed, the last error has become worse than the first, much worse. In the three years of His preaching to the Jews, Jesus made a great impression, it’s true and if the chief priests and Pharisees hadn’t opposed Him, as they say themselves, the whole people and even the whole world would have believed in Him, because He had done all that was necessary for that and much more. But, by the desperately perfidious malice of the leaders of the people and their political influence and their money and their lies and their maneuvers, instead of being acclaimed as the Messiah, Jesus was crucified as an impostor. The great impression He had made ended up simply fueling the contempt and hatred of the Jewish people, outraged at this false Messiah Who had fooled them. In the end He had no one with Him except His Mother and a few women and one disciple.

After the Resurrection, however, everything changed. He regains the allegiance of His disciples who now would no longer abandon Him, who would run with joy to meet the most cruel deaths for Him and they would be joined by others who would do the same, thousands of them, millions of them. And it would no longer be only in Judea or Galilee, He would be preached in the whole world, from India to Spain and it would no longer be just some Jews but whole nations, whole continents who would follow Him.

Yes, indeed the Jews didn’t know how well they spoke!

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Their perfidy would finally just end up serving to attain precisely what they wanted to prevent: the whole world believed in Jesus and He became the King of the nations, just as the Prophets had said He would.

Let us remind ourselves of all that, dear brethren, on this feast of the Octave of Easter. Yes, the world is in a pitiful state today, and the Church as well, and the world is in a pitiful state *because* the Church is and we all suffer from it. It is difficult to bear, especially because it has been going on so long and shows no signs of getting any better, on the contrary... And yet we must become discouraged by all that:

Inimicus homo hoc fecit: “An enemy hath done this.”

It is the enemies of God who have done this, and continue to do it, producing this spectacle of evil of which we feel ourselves to be the helpless spectators and at the same time the victims.

But God knows what He is doing. If He is allowing all this evil it is certainly for a greater good that we don’t see yet but which will certainly not be long in coming. All this feverish activity of the wicked directed against God will simply serve to magnify His triumph, the triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, which He has foretold to us precisely in order to keep us from becoming discouraged in these very discouraging times.

At Matins on Holy Saturday we heard some beautiful words from the Book of Lamentations with which we can conclude, for they express very well the attitude we ought to have during the present evils that have overtaken the Church and the world. After having loudly and longly lamented all the terrible evils that have fallen on Jerusalem, the Prophet, as if exhausted by his mourning, begins speaking in short little phrases of a few words which contain, nevertheless, an invincible hope in God and the help He will bring to His suffering people who wait for Him.

“The mercies of the Lord that we are not consumed: because His commiserations have not failed. They are new every morning, great is Thy faithfulness.

The Lord is my Portion, said my soul: therefore will I wait for Him.

The Lord is good to them that hope in Him, to the soul that seeketh Him.

It is good to wait with silence for the salvation of God.”