

## **‘SALT’**

### **HOMILY — FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME — YEAR A**

This past fall, Father Abbot and I had to go to England. He to attend a meeting for the English Benedictine Congregation and myself to make sure that Abbot Thomas made it from the front door of Saint Louis Abbey to the front door of Saint Benedict’s Abbey located in the Borough of Ealing located in the west of London with as little fuss as possible. Once Father Abbot was settled at Ealing, I was free to do what I wanted.

And so, one day I decided to visit Westminster Abbey to once again explore our Benedictine roots. Since I viewed this as a pilgrimage of sorts, I chose to wear my habit and so began my journey walking from the monastery to the tube station. Going across the park in the center of the town, a gentleman, who was probably my age, passed me by, pointed his finger at me and shouted, “PRIEST! PEDOPHILE!” and then blithely moved on as if nothing happened. Before the afternoon was out, two other gentlemen would call me a paedophile, though they whispered the epithet at me as they passed by.

I should add that at the monastery where we were staying there had been some monks who did some very sinful things, and so it was guilt by association.

That’s what I get for trying to be the salt of the earth as our Lord meant it to be from his preaching in today’s Gospel passage from Saint Matthew. But just what did our Lord mean when he said that we are the salt of the earth?

Perhaps we can gain some insight from Blessed John Paul II, who when speaking to a gathering of youth in 2001, reflected on this very passage. He said,

“One of the main functions of salt is to season food, to give it taste and flavour. This image reminds us that, through Baptism, our whole being has been profoundly

changed, because it has been ‘seasoned’ with the new life which comes from Christ (cf. Rom 6:4). The salt which keeps our Christian identity intact, even in a very secularized world, is the grace of Baptism. Through Baptism we are re-born. We begin to live *in Christ* and become capable of responding to his call to ‘offer [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God’ (Rom 12:1). Writing to the Christians of Rome, Saint Paul urges them to show clearly that their way of living and thinking was different from that of their contemporaries: ‘Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect’ (Rom 12:2).

“For a long time, salt was also used to preserve food. As the salt of the earth, you are called to preserve the faith which you have received and to pass it on intact to others. Your generation is being challenged in a special way to keep safe the deposit of faith (cf. 2 Th 2:15; 1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14).”<sup>1</sup>

Let me add that I believe that Blessed John Paul would agree that all of us in this day and age are being challenged to keep safe the deposit of faith that has been handed down to us, and which we have the sacred duty to hand on to those who come after us. And in order to keep safe this deposit of faith, we must first live the faith. We must live out our Baptism as children of God.

This living out of the faith begins by our feeling free to express our faith by doing something as simple as saying grace before enjoying a meal in a restaurant. Or by wearing a cross or holy medal for all to see. For myself, the wearing of the habit – the outward sign of my commitment to a particular form of religious life in the Church – has become almost second nature. That is, I am not self-conscious or concerned what other

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, Castel Gandolfo, 2001

people might think of me when they see me dressed like that. At least that's how it was before my encounter with those gentlemen on the village green on the outskirts of London.

When we wear outward signs of our faith or perform certain rituals that obviously point to our being people of faith, it is good to bear in mind that what we wear or what we do sets us apart as members of a world-wide community of faith. We are salt adding flavor to our world-wide community of faith and to the world as a whole.

My wearing of the habit does not simply identify me as a monk and priest. My wearing of the habit does not simply identify me as a member of the Roman Catholic Church. My wearing of the habit, whether I like it or not, sets me apart as a representative of the Roman Catholic Church. And so, when something good happens because of what another member of the Church has done, that reflects on me. When that happens, though, I should not get puffed up with pride but instead give thanks to God for His many blessings. Yet, when something sinful happens because of what another member of the Church has done, that reflects on me as well. When that happens I should not despair, for did not our Lord promise that even the gates of hell would not prevail against His Church?<sup>2</sup> For if I were to despair my salt would lose its flavor.

But because we have been salted through the grace of Baptism with the life of Christ, we are also – as we are reminded in today's Gospel – the light of the world. That is, we have been given the free gift of faith that is to be lived and shared with all those whom we meet. The Second Vatican Council teaches us that we “have countless opportunities for exercising the apostolate of evangelization and sanctification. The very witness of a Christian life, and good works done in a supernatural spirit, are effective in

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<sup>2</sup> cf., Matthew 16:18

drawing men to the faith and to God; and that is what the Lord has said: ‘your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father’ (Matt 5:16)”<sup>3</sup>

When Father Abbot and I were returning from our most recent trip abroad, we had what I would consider a most unusual occurrence going through customs at O’Hare Airport. I think for most of us, our experience of going through customs consists of an agent who takes our passport, scrutinizes our photo and our face, asks a few perfunctory questions, stamps our passports and sends us on our way. This last time was different, however. The agent we encountered took our passports, noted that we were priests, and then said, “Thank you for your service.” In that moment, it seems to me that this customs agent was being the salt of the earth and the light of the world as meant by our Lord Jesus Christ.

I’ll let Blessed John Paul II have the last word here this morning: “Our personal encounter with Christ bathes life in new light, sets us on the right path, and sends us out to be his witnesses. This new way of looking at the world and at people, which comes to us from him, leads us more deeply into the mystery of faith, which is not just a collection of theoretical assertions to be accepted and approved by the mind, but an experience to be had, a truth to be lived, the salt and light of all reality (cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 88).”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, n. 6

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, Castel Gondolfo, 2001