

Opening Mass - Pope St. Pius X

Introduction

In this Holy Mass we look to the example and seek the intercession of Pope St. Pius X as we begin a new year of priestly formation here at Mt. St. Mary's Seminary.

Yesterday marked the 100th anniversary of the death of Pope Pius X. but his example remains as timely as ever for anyone who aspires to the altar. He is a model of that simplicity, poverty, and courage which should be the hallmarks of every bishop, priest, and seminarian.

Let me say a brief word about each of these qualities.

Simplicity

Beginning with simplicity, Giuseppe Sarto, the future Pope Pius X, was born in 1835 in Riese, a small village in Northern Italy in the Province of Venice. His father, Giovanni Battista Sarto, was a cobbler and a postman and his mother Margarita was, a seamstress. This large and devout family worked hard and lived simply. Their son Giuseppe would live the same way as priest, bishop, cardinal and pope.

But his simplicity went much deeper than mere externals. As a seminarian and as young priest, his life was open book. He possessed that new heart and that new spirit of which Ezekiel speaks, a heart that has been restored in Christ by baptism and made beautiful by prayer. His first pastor saw in the young priest an extraordinary pastor of souls and as did the seminarians for whom he served as spiritual director. He was blessed with extraordinary intellectual gifts but he allowed them all to be directed to Christ and the Church's mission.

As a result there were not two Giuseppe Sarto's, a private and a public one. Though the human heart can be very complicated indeed, his was straightforward. There were no doors in his heart shut off from God's grace, no zones without God. He allowed the Lord to permeate and shape his entire life, especially through prayer. This, I submit, is the sort of simplicity that people are looking for in a priest. When they encounter a priest, they want to see clearly the image of Christ.

Poverty

Simplicity and poverty go hand in hand. Giuseppe Sarto had few of this world's goods and he used them generously. When he departed from Venice for the conclave that would elect him Pope, he did not have enough money to buy a train ticket to return to Venice. I guess the Lord took care of that problem!

Whatever responsibilities the Church asked him to fulfill, Pope St. Pius X always loved and respected the poor. As a young priest he opened a night school for the poor to help them better their lot. He taught them Christian doctrine and Gregorian chant. Later as he became first a pastor then a diocesan bishop, his sisters kept house for him and he would drive them to distraction by giving away what little he had. As he rose through the ranks, he continued to reach out the poor - and perhaps at this point we are reminded of another Pope we know and love!

Throughout his life and ministry, Pope St. Pius X, lived by today's Gospel. He knew well that Jesus had invited the poor and the marginalized to his banquet but he also recognized that being poor in and of itself wasn't enough for salvation. So he helped them to overcome religious indifference and to reclaim their dignity and joy by becoming the Lord's disciples.

Courage

And there's one final quality for us to consider this evening, viz., courage. We tend to remember that St. Pius X courageously confronted the doctrinal errors of his age, collectively known as "Modernism", errors which, by the way, keep coming back in different disguises. Then and now he was roundly criticized as an ideologue. In reality he was a courageous and perceptive shepherd who understood well that deconstructing the faith is not the way to bring people to Christ, nor is it the way to advance the intellectual life of the Church. Convinced of this, Pope Pius X founded the Biblical Institute for the study of Sacred Scripture and arguably paved the way for a whole new generation of scholars who flourished in the 20th century.

Pope Pius X sought to raise up a new generation of courageous priests & bishops who would embrace the mission of 'restoring all things in Christ'. He urged bishops to strengthen seminary formation and pointed out the importance of a disciplined and well-formed clergy if the Church's mission of evangelization is to advance. Much like Pope Francis, he urged priests to be good preachers who would share the

essential truths of the faith in language everyone could understand, and in case anyone missed the point, he offered simple but beautiful instructions on Sunday at the Vatican. Along the same lines, he undertook many other pastoral initiatives so as to make the faith and the sacrament of the Church accessible to as many as possible.

What the Future May Hold

As we begin this new academic year, we are full of hope. Who knows, maybe a future pope is in this chapel this evening! But if we are paying close attention to Pope St. Pius X and asking his prayers, we will want the Holy Spirit to form in our hearts the same three qualities that made this Pontiff such a good shepherd: simplicity, love for the poor, and courage.

May God bless you and this seminary community in the year ahead!