

## Passion Sunday 2009

The liturgical mood of the Church has made a decisive swing today with the commencement of Passion Week. The mysterious veiling of statues and images signals the sorrow of the Church in this visual reminder of what our sins had done to our beloved Lord in His Passion. It's as if we were hiding *ourselves* in shame for contributing to our Lord's sufferings. This "we" here is the corporate-we of the Church, as if we were deputizing the Church to represent us for the personal shame that we did not have when we consented to our sins. Since pride is an *un*-veiling and promotion of our false, wicked selves, so the Church veils the images, symbolic of the violation of our dignity through our sins. It may seem that this is, in a way, inappropriate since we are covering the sacred things of the church. We now cannot see the crucifix and the face of our Lady at a time when our spiritual sensitivities—so we reason—might all the more benefit from seeing them at this more intense time of the liturgical year (Recall our Lord's words, "You will seek Me and you will not find Me.") Yet there's a reason for veiling what is sacred, whether it's in the protection of our bodies' privacy, or in the veiling of the tabernacle and the chalice. This manner of 'repression' (to give the thing a deliberate emphasis) is appropriate and indeed necessary, even though its logic may not immediately be discerned. That rash and specious openness that declares that nothing should be held sacred, nothing hidden, that we should 'show all and tell all' is a wrongheaded expression of a alleged 'honesty' that has got us into some rather serious trouble. Secrecy, silence, mystery, veiling, protecting, 'conserving pearls rather than casting them to swine' is a manner of reserve that is perhaps not popular, but is so necessary in order for the mind and the human heart to transcend from what is lower—sometimes even base—and attain to what is higher and more excellent. We have a hint of this in today's Gospel wherein our Lord was said to have hid Himself: an action that was symbolic of the very words He had just spoken: namely, that His true identity as God (His "I am") was *concealed* in his human body. The humanity of Christ, His human appearance, was the outward sign of the Divine nature concealed within it—concealed but yet also revealed, since His words and the miracles He worked proved His Divine identity. Without the covering, the veiling of the God-ness in His body, there would be no discovery of God in Jesus Christ and

thus acts of faith in Him as God would not be possible. In an analogous way our bodies conceal the high dignity of our human reason and those inner chambers wherein the Holy Spirit dwells. The veiling of our bodies is symbolic of this hidden dignity of ours as well as the cause of its preservation. Contrariwise, its shameful exposure is a loss of that dignity. (The sacred signs of the sacraments similarly have an inner reality concealed in their outward appearances.)

It is then a decisively anti-religious, sensual, deceptive and harmful slogan that prompts us to 'let it all out,' to 'show all, say all' without discretion or reserve. This has done immense harm, I believe, even in some areas of our worship. I find this evident in the all-out openness of many celebrations of the Mass: with the priest facing the people rather than God, with colloquial language and trivial talk, with pop music, with naked tabernacle and chalice, with Communion put in the hands. It is *not* true that this openness has led to a greater comprehension and appreciation of sacred meanings and the realities behind these things. Rather, the opposite is true: the more open the appearances, the externals, the less apparent their inner meaning and the grasp of their essences. As our worship has been the flung at us in this demonstrative and rather coarse manner, so our piety, reverence and even our ability to understand spiritual things has diminished. We have seen similar things happen in strange counsels derived from popular psychology that should have died out long ago for its ineffectiveness: for example in the advice to express all feelings of anger rather than to suppress them. So we have learnt to become a more self-centered people. So it is also in the violation of the sacredness of the body by its sinful exposure which has made us lose respect for human life and for ourselves as rational beings, as images of God; and we have, as a consequence, become more and more incapable of love.

Our Lord says something in this Gospel relating to this. Whoever hears God's word is "of God" and whoever hears it not is not of God. It takes a certain receptivity to be able to take in truth, religion, goodness and beauty. Our brutish selves have to be modified, tempered by grace, in order that we can become religious people, good people, and holy people. And this can't happen unless there's a holding in, a suppression, a repression, a veiling of

what's vulgar to allow the words of God and all that is higher, nobler and moral to enter in.

This is not the doctrine you get from the world, from TV and from many a book. The secular way is the doctrine not of reserve but of openness and exposure. It is, as you know, readily accepted and widely practiced—to our diminishment and ruin socially, psychologically and spiritually. With the disastrous consequences of perverse counsel of this kind, there ought to be a rethinking of the matter. 'Close the door and pray in secret;' show deference to the body's sacredness; humble the prideful urgings; suppress the ugly impulses; veil the body modestly; address God in words of holy fear; receive Communion with a chastened mind and humble heart.

These concealed statutes speak all of these things to us today. We are hiding them in order to give our Lord the central place so that He will relive in the Church His sacred Passion which redeemed us from the terrible expression and 'openness' of our depraved tendencies.