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THE THIRD WORD/CHRISTIAN PARENTING

In the first word from the cross ("Father, forgive them..."), the open arms of the Lord's charity embraced his enemies, those who caused him to suffer. In the second word ("To day shalt thou be with me in paradise"), his charity embraced those suffered with him in body, justly condemned, but turning to him in repentance and faith. Now in his third word his love embraces that faithful remnant of those who suffer with him, because they love him – his mother, and the disciple whom he loved: "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple standing by, whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son! Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! And from that hour that disciple took her unto his own home" (John 19:26-27). In his watchful care for those who love him, and who are gathered around them as he suffers for them on the cross, the "good shepherd" entrusts them to one another's watchful care, in a new spiritual family of common faith and mutual charity, which is his mystical body, the Church.

In this third word is revealed the mystery about which today's lessons speak of more fully – the love of the good shepherd who suffers for his sheep, thereby redeeming them, gathering them into the unity of his flock. "Ye were as sheep going astray, but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls". His good shepherding elicits their trusting faith and provides a template of trust in divine providence. For rather than commit sin, he patiently entrusted himself "to him that judgeth righteously", a trust triumphantly vindicated in his resurrection. Thus the sheep's sure trusting and obedient knowledge of the Son's good shepherding is grounded in the Son's knowledge of the Father's almighty and loving providence, the cosmic good shepherding by which all things in heaven and earth are governed, bringing good out of evil and life out of death: "The earth is full of the loving-kindness of the Lord, alleluia: by the word of the Lord were the heavens stablished, alleluia, alleluia" (Introit. Psalm 33. Misericordia Domini.)

CHRISTIAN PARENTING

Late this Lent (as is my custom) I had lunch with the younger Confirmation Class and their teachers. After we had had our fill of

pizza (anchovies next year, please!), I conducted an informal but systematic examination of the class on the chief pillars of the Church's Catechism – the benefits and promises of Baptism, the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and the Sacraments. In my examination I was looking not only for memory, but also for some level of understanding appropriate to their age. The readiness with which the children in the class responded to my questions was testimony not only to the diligence and devotion of their teachers – Mr. Randy Brooks and Mrs. Linda Sheahan – but also to the great benefits of active Christian parenting. For I know that these children come from families that are committed church-goers. As any school teacher will tell you, regular attendance is the foundation of real learning. Moreover, in various ways and degrees those parents are not afraid to share their faith openly with their children, in conversation, through family prayers, and through the reading of Bible stories. The result is children who know that they are Christians, and (in preliminary ways) what it means to be a Christian. No doubt there is much more to be learned: but a real foundation has been laid to grow up in Christ. And as Confirmation is the sacrament of Christian maturity, of growing up in Christ, we have reason to be thankful.

All of this is to say that parents are the Church's front-line evangelists. They have a unique opportunity to teach their children the faith, and to encourage them to do so from others. Parenting can be a most difficult and tiring chore, and on Sunday morning the Devil works hard to discourage Christian parenting. The temptation very often is "not to push it": but where that temptation is resisted, and the religious vocation of parents embraced, Christian parents have the joy and privilege of transmitting the priceless gift of faith to their own children.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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