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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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THESE FIFTY DAYS

For most of us, the season of Lent looms large in the Church's year. A season dedicated to fasting and penitence, it begins with Ash Wednesday and then continues week after week until Easter. The little sacrifices we make, the extra prayer and charitable contributions we take on, these mark the season and help us mark the passing of the days. If we make a good Lent, we settle into the routine pretty quickly, but we are glad that each week brings us closer to Easter and the end of the Lenten season. Easter comes and it is a relief.

And yet Easter itself is not simply a single day's celebration. Easter Sunday, no less than Ash Wednesday, begins a season, and the Easter season actually lasts longer than Lent. In Lent we sing the hymn "These forty days of Lent, O Lord, with you we fast and pray," and for Easter, if there were an analogous hymn, it would have to go "These fifty days of Easter, Lord..." The wisdom of the Church's calendar is that Easter joy outruns and outpaces the penitential prelude to the resurrection. As such, it is a season with its own demands and rigors. If we think that fasting for forty days is difficult, we should try rejoicing for fifty days. It's harder, at least if we take it seriously and try it sincerely.

Which is probably why most of us don't do much with the Easter season, certainly not as much as we do with Lent. Maybe we notice the white vestments at Mass, and maybe we realize that the word *Alleluia* is much more prominent in our hymns, prayers and acclamations during this season, but beyond that there isn't much that we feel we need to do or can do. Lent we have to work at, but the Easter season we figure

will pretty much take care of itself. Besides, even if we wanted to do something special for Easter, what would it be? The Church is quite specific in her recommendations to the faithful of what to do in Lent; the trio of fasting, prayer and almsgiving gives a definite stamp to that season. Easter is accompanied by no such advice, so what are we to do if we wish to undertake a fifty-day season of resurrection joy?

Every year is different, but the Easter proclamation that Christ is risen is always the same. Every year is different, and this year's Easter season finds us winding up the jubilee year of the apostle Paul. Since June of 2008 and running through June of 2009 we have dedicated a year to the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Every year at Easter we are challenged to take the paschal gospel and see more deeply into how it has changed our lives and our world, but this year we may want to do this by listening especially to the voice of St. Paul.

In some ways he is the ideal guide for this endeavor, not only this year of his jubilee but every year. Unlike the four gospels, the letters of Paul give us very few details on the life of Jesus. They seem to want to focus on only that which is absolutely essential, and so they concentrate their energy on the proclamation of the death and resurrection of the Lord. The gospels give us the story of the resurrection – the discovery of the empty tomb, the appearances of the Risen Lord to his disciples – while Paul provides us with the significance of that event, a clear teaching on just how the resurrection has

become the foundation of our new life of grace and of the new creation. Spending some additional time with the letters of Paul, especially his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, is a good way to make a good Easter, to find the help and strength we need to bear up under a season of fifty days of rejoicing.

Throughout all of his letters Paul uses a variety of images and idioms, metaphors and parables, to teach “the word of the cross” (I Cor 1:18), the meaning of the Lord’s death and resurrection. In Romans and Galatians he chiefly employs the language and the symbols of law to proclaim this truth. In many ways his recourse to a forensic idiom is not only not surprising, it was nearly inevitable. In the Judaism of Paul’s day the Law was the dominant reality. Given to Moses on Sinai, the Law defined the people of Israel, for it contained not only God’s call to them but also their response to him, a response that was itself determined by him and was a necessary part of the gift and the covenant.

The very existence of the Law with all its precepts makes it clear who is a law keeper and who is a law breaker, and it also contains provisions for bringing the law breaker to justice and for passing judgment on him. Paul puts all of this to a new purpose, the explanation of what Jesus has accomplished and how we are different, how everything is different, because of his death and resurrection.

If the Law provides the framework of interpretation, then the only place to begin the story is with our offense against the Law. This is precisely what Paul does in his greatest epistle, the letter to the Romans. After seventeen verses of introductory and salutatory material, the apostle launches into his presentation with a reference to “the wrath of God [that] is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness sup-

press the truth” (Rom 1:18). Obviously, God’s wrath is not like our own. Paul does not intend here any kind of analogy to human anger, and still less to an out-of-control emotion, as anger so often is with us. The wrath of God, as he makes clear, is God’s response to sin, and so it is judgment and justice, and not whim or caprice. The most basic truth about ourselves, the truth we try to suppress and escape whenever we can, is that we have sinned, we have transgressed, we have offended against God. The Law itself accuses us of this, for it places

before us the path and the deeds of righteousness, and we know we have not kept to them. And then there is the voice of our own conscience, which speaks to us often and clearly of our faults and failings, and in doing so it speaks truly. For Paul – and in this he is in perfect accord with the words and actions of Jesus as recorded in the gospels – there is no understanding the person and work of Christ, there is no hearing the word of the cross, without knowing at the outset that we are sinners under judgment,

people who have earned the wrath of God. Paul, together with all the New Testament writers, testifies that Jesus saves us from our sins, he institutes a new covenant in his own blood for the forgiveness of sins, and herein lies our salvation.

To use the word that Paul uses so often in Romans and Galatians, in Christ we have *justification*. As he says in Romans 5:8-9: “But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his own blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.” Within this legal discourse world, to be justified is to be acquitted and to be more than just acquitted. In the Anglo-Saxon judicial system, which is most familiar to us, the accused is innocent until proven guilty, although even to



us, at least in the popular mind, to be indicted and brought to trial carries with it a pre-stigma of guilt. In other legal systems, and these would be more like what Paul has in mind, to stand accused before the judge is to be guilty, and it is the person's innocence that must be established before the judge. This is what Paul sees as the achievement of Christ: we stand guilty before God, made guilty by our many sinful and selfish acts, and the blood of Christ justifies us, declares us to be innocent, makes us just in God's sight.

For Paul, this act of justification is no mere forensic declaration, an act of legal sleight-of-hand by which we are not substantially changed but only declared to be so by the action of God in Christ and by his loving and merciful will. The apostle insists that God's love in Christ works a genuine change in the life of the person such that he is not just declared to be just before God but is actually made to be so. God in this process does not simply avert his eyes from our guilt or refuse to take it into account – our guilt is actually taken away, we are restored to innocence, and now are just before God, made so by the justice and justifying action of Jesus.

The proof of this is that the person who is now grafted into Christ begins to live as Christ lived, according to the central precept of the Law, which is always the dual commandment of love. One who has been justified has been renewed in the image of God, and so does what God does, he loves: he loves God with all his heart, mind, and soul, and he loves his neighbor as himself. Of course this love is not perfect, not yet, and there are still the residual effects of sin to contend with, which at times can be quite powerful, as Paul states in his magnificent confession of his own interior conflict and difficulties in Romans 7:13-25. And yet even there, at the conclusion of his admission of his ongoing weaknesses and incapacity, he shouts out his thanks to God who has, in Christ Jesus, delivered him from the body of death so that he can serve the law of God with his whole heart. The fruits of justifying grace are neither fictitious nor merely imputed – they are real and gain for us the love of God. This may make it

sound like a fickle, changeable God goes from love (at creation) to hatred (for our sinfulness) and back to love (for the justification we have in Christ), but that would be to impose on God our temporal experience and categories. In God's eternity it is all there, all at once, and from that perspective we do not lose sight of the fact that God's love is eternal, it never wavers. In love we were made in God's image and in love that image was restored, as God sends us his only Son as our Savior.

Believing this is not easy, and faith itself is at once God's gift to us and our life's work. The one who believes in the fact of his justification lives a life of love and a life of hope in what God will yet achieve when the glory of Christ's resurrection is revealed in all its fullness. If we are looking for the perfect Easter season meditation, the passage from Paul that gives us his best clue as to the future glory and the present reality of human life transformed and recreated by the grace of Christ, we could do a lot worse than turning to Romans 8, the center and fulcrum of his greatest epistle. Here the apostle speaks of the life of the spirit that is the inheritance of all who have been set free from sin and death by the love of God in Christ. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us, giving us the justice of God now and the sure hope that even our mortal bodies, even our weak flesh, will come to the fullness of life that is Christ's in the glory of the resurrection.

I suspect that Lent is, for most of us, an easier season than Easter because it is less difficult for us to pass a time in the valley of repentance than on the dizzying heights of the resurrection. Yet we really have no choice. Even as there is no Easter without the preparation of Lent, so too there is no reality to Lent without that season's giving way to the dazzling light of the Risen Lord and the empty tomb. If we would follow Christ, then we must go all the way, not just to Calvary but through the cross to the central height of the resurrection glory. We do so now in hope so that we may do so then in truth, all so that we may behold his breathtaking beauty.

—*Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M*



MEMORIAL VOTIVE LIGHTS

The action of prayer is often accompanied by the gesture of lighting a candle. The candle becomes an offering to the Lord, a sign of the offering of ourselves that we make to God whenever we come before him with a special intention or petition. After a while, we must leave the church to be about other business, but the candle stays, burning constantly in the church even as our prayer remains in the presence of the Lord.

Your gift to Saint Peter's for the year-long memorial votive light helps to support all of our ministry and works. And on our part, you and your intentions are remembered daily in our prayers for our helpers and benefactors.

APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of: _____
Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by: _____

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.



MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRIARS LEGION *brings with it...*

- A sharing in all of the more than 40 masses offered at Saint Peter's each week
- A sharing in the daily Lauds and Vespers prayed by the Franciscans of Saint Peter's Friary
- A sharing in the Eucharistic Novena of nine Tuesdays before the Feast of Saint Anthony of Padua on June 13
- A special Eucharist offered for the living members on the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13 and on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29
- A special Eucharist offered for the deceased members on All Souls Day on November 2 and on the Commemoration of All the Deceased of the Franciscan Order on November 5
- A sharing in all the ministry and good works done by the Franciscan Friars at Saint Peter's, whom you support by your generosity



APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION

(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll: _____
as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*