



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Homily for Friday of the 23rd Week of Ordinary Time, Year A: Memorial of St. Peter Claver

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If you were to ask most people the meaning of the word “hypocrisy,” they would probably tell you that it means saying one thing and doing another—that it means falling short of one’s declared ideals or convictions.

But they are very much mistaken. What hypocrisy actually means is the **lying pretense** to a degree of virtue one does not have. The reason our Lord condemns hypocrisy with such severity is because it is a deception—that is, a form of lying to others and even to oneself. Christ did NOT mean to say that anyone who fails or falls short or commits a sin is necessarily hypocritical. He knew well that his disciples would stumble and fall: indeed, in today’s gospel he says that the disciple will never be the Master’s equal, and yet that the disciple must become like the Master he follows.

This is clear from the example of St. Peter the Apostle, the rock upon which Christ built his Church. Peter failed through weakness and denied his Lord three times: he sinned—he faltered—but he was in no way hypocritical. He repented and came back to his Savior and eventually gave his life for Christ.

Perhaps you wonder why it matters if people misuse the word hypocrisy and misunderstand its real meaning. And, in general, it wouldn’t matter much. Except for one thing: nowadays, the accusation of hypocrisy is used as a club with which to beat down anyone who believes in something and seeks to live accordingly: if a believer falters, the words of Christ are twisted in order to dissuade people from seeking to follow Christ at all. Surely this is not what our Lord had in mind!

I recall an occasion when I was involved in an argument with someone, on some controversial issue. This person soon began to use my various failings in order to discredit anything I might say, accusing me of being a hypocrite. And this is what I answered: “Well, it’s very easy for you to accuse me of hypocrisy: you don’t believe in anything or have any convictions at all. So what? That’s like saying that you can’t fall off the floor. That’s nothing to brag about.”

And so, our Lord’s words about the blind leading the blind have been misunderstood and misused as a way to discourage any serious discipleship, for fear of the accusation of hypocrisy. No one wants to be called “the blind leading the blind.”

But consider for a moment how often Christ healed the blind, opened their eyes and restored their sight—and how he connected his physical healings with the forgiveness of sins. The state of blindness is representative of the state of



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unredeemed humanity: for our eyes were crusted over by sin, unable to see the Light of God's truth or to live it; and therefore we were unable to remove neither the splinter nor the beam from our own eye, or from anyone else's.

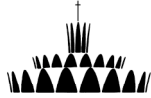
Remember how even Moses could only behold God as if from the back—for to see God in all his glory would be the death of a mere man. But the good news of the gospel is that the Lord has not left us in this sorry state. St. Bernard, the great monastic reformer, says that God saw that our eyes were weak and dim, and that we could not bear the unapproachable light of his glory. And so the Lord enclosed Himself in the lantern, so to speak, of the pure and holy flesh that was formed in the virginal womb of Mary. He condescended to our need, veiling his splendor, in order that our eyes made blind by sin might be opened to the Light. He took the form of a slave, not clinging to the glory of his divine essence, and even dying a bloody death on the Cross for our sakes.

This mystery is still present among us: for the Incarnation and the Cross are still mysteriously present in the holy and living Sacrifice we offer at this altar: for the very same flesh and blood that was formed in Mary's womb is offered and received here, as it was on the altar of the Cross. God is still accommodating himself to our blindness and finitude by enclosing his power and glory in the veil of the sacraments and the liturgy. When I first visited this church—so bright, so white, so high, I thought of the words of Scripture: "God dwells in unapproachable light." But though we cannot approach him on our own, he approaches us first. When the Word of God is proclaimed, its light opens our darkened eyes; when the Sacrifice is offered, our sins are expiated; and when we receive Communion or go to confession, we receive the most intimate union with God through our Savior's mediation. Still, even now, he is taking the form of the Suffering Servant, in order to bring us to himself.

This brings us at last to the saint whose memorial we celebrate today: St. Peter Claver. He was one whose eyes were opened by Christ to the horrors of the slave trade in the 17th century. Peter Claver had been a brilliant student at the University of Barcelona and could have stayed in Spain, and had a brilliant career. Instead, he chose to answer the call of Christ in the New World, as a Jesuit missionary at Cartagena, in what is now Colombia, where tens of thousands of Africans were bought and sold in the vast slave markets.

Peter Claver vowed to be "the slave of the slaves, forever". He went down into the very slave ships themselves, enduring the mockery and opposition, in order to do whatever he could to help these men and women who were in darkness and chains because of other men's sins—and who were themselves in the darkness of paganism.

St. Peter Claver brought them food and medicine, he catechized and baptized them. He spent his entire life, for forty years, ministering to the slaves: for Peter



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Claver wanted to follow his Master and to take the form of a slave himself, for the sake of those who were reduced to the most terrible misery and bondage.

This is the true disciple, whose eyes and heart have been opened by Christ! This is the true disciple, who freely surrenders his own freedom for Christ's sake, and for those whom Christ has redeemed by his most precious Blood!

By the intercession of St. Peter Claver, let us belong wholly to Christ, who took the form of a slave, of a willing servant, in order that we might not belong to ourselves but to him who has saved us.