Unveiling the Meaning of the Cross

This week, as we begin the final two weeks of Lent, we enter into a period formerly called “Passiontide.” One of the options during this time is to have all crucifixes and images covered in veils. This is done until the Triduum, when the statues are uncovered and the Triduum begins.

Though optional, I’ve always liked this tradition. We’ll be covering the crucifix behind the altar this week, along with our processional cross.

As for why we cover them, it’s to make us think a bit about the meaning of the Cross. We are so used to seeing it we can take it for granted.

Some think it dates back to Germany, when in the 9th century a large cloth was extended before the altar at the start of Lent, called the “Hungertuch,” or hunger cloth, which hid the altar from the people during Lent, and was removed during the reading of the Passion on Wednesday of Holy Week, at the words “the veil of the temple was rent in two.” It helped the faithful how to learn about Lent, especially those who were not literate. Later in the Middle Ages, the images of crosses and saints were covered at the start of the Lent; it was during the 17th century that it was moved to “Passiontide,” the last two weeks of Lent. Now it is completely optional.

What I like about it is that it helps us to think about how we can take our faith for granted. The cross is something we are so used to seeing; in homes, at our school, and of course in church. It is always there. But what does it actually mean? I think of a few things. Namely the reality of evil, the answer of God to that, and how we can, through our actions, also reveal the power of Good.

With respect to sin, as I shared in my homily last week when Jesus referred to pole with the snake that Moses held up and how He would be raised up, we look to the source of our suffering for true healing to happen. Snakes came and bit the people in punishment for infidelity to the covenant; the paradox was looking then at a snake on a pole they were healed. The Cross for us of course reveals love (more on that in a moment) but it also reveals sin. Humanity crucified our Lord; and next week when we hear the Passion from Mark’s Gospel and then John’s Gospel on Good Friday, we’ll hear of all kinds of sins people commit that result in the death of our Lord. We sometimes like to cover up our sins too; as I said they aren’t pleasant to think about, so we can bury them. But for true healing to happen, we have to reveal them, confront them, and deal with them. So when we think about the Cross, as tough as it is, we need to think about what the sins we carry in us and turn them over to God.

The Cross shows us though these sins are confronted. Jesus’ love envelops the evil in the ocean of Divine Mercy. When we look to the Cross, we see how God is with us; how He suffers with us, but takes our sins upon Himself too. As such, while we are reminded of our sins, we also take comfort that Jesus did not come to condemn, but so that those who believe may have eternal life (John 3:16). We look to the Cross and see love revealed. Sometimes when we are hurting; beaten up by life, embarrassed about our

sins, or just going through a tough situation it's worth looking at a crucifix and meditating on how we are not alone, but are loved by God.

Lastly though, the Cross also shows us how to act. Jesus could have walked away from the cup given to Him by the Father, but He was resolved to leave the garden and confront evil face on. We as humans do not sit passively by in the face of evil. We do something about it. For instance this Saturday, people from our own parish went peacefully to Planned Parenthood as a witness to life. We confront bullies and abusers. We forgive those who have wronged us. We visit the sick and imprisoned. We help the homeless. Pretty amazing isn't it, this thing we call grace? You and I have to be people of action, not silence. When we look to the Cross, we are reminded of how far God is willing to go for us and how much we are loved but also called to action.

During these last two weeks of Lent, I'd invite you to again think about the meaning of the Cross in your life. Remember, Lent is meant to transform us and we emerge on Easter a better person. As the cross is covered this weekend, perhaps we can think about how God's love is covered in our souls by sin; by our actions or inactions; or how we focus on other worldly things rather than on radiating God's love. Thinking of the Cross also challenges us to think about how we can love as Jesus loves - do we think of others and show them love in actions from our families under our own roofs to our greater human family, or do we hold back on love or have an asterisk next to the words "I love you?" Are we selfish or selfless? Are we cowards when we see evil in our homes or in the larger world? Loving as Jesus did, giving everything out of love and forgiving takes work. Use these final two weeks to grow by coming to Mass; celebrating the sacraments; finding time for personal prayer, and asking yourselves how can I become what it is I receive every time I come to Holy Communion.

When the veil is removed during the Triduum, maybe a deeper thing to ask is can we make sure come Easter, the veils are removed from our souls - permanently - that prevent others from seeing the love of God in us, and that prevent us from seeing how much God loves us and the response that it requires. Yes, sin is powerful, but far more powerful is God's response to it - love and mercy - which we bring into the world by not sitting on the sidelines but by being active in creating a culture of life, love and mercy.

God bless,
Fr. Paul