3-2002

Letter of the Superior General: Lent 2002

Robert P. Maloney C.M.
To Vincentians throughout the world

My very dear Confreres,

May the peace of the Lord be always with you in this Lenten season!

John’s account of Jesus’ burial is very different from that of Mark, Matthew and Luke. Having told us that Pilate wrote a solemn inscription “Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews,” placed it over the head of the crucified Lord, and then defended this title against objectors (19:19-22), John gives Jesus a burial befitting a king. The significant difference in John’s burial scene is the arrival of Nicodemus, who does not appear at all in the Synoptic Gospels. In John’s account, he enters the stage at the side of Joseph of Arimathea (who is present in all the gospels), “bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about one hundred pounds” (19:39). Let me offer you three brief thoughts about this important Johannine figure whom the Church holds up before us every Lent.

1. Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in John’s third chapter is filled with baptismal allusions. That is why this dialogue is so often recounted in Lent and so frequently read in baptismal celebrations. Jesus tantalizes Nicodemus with the enigmatic saying: “I solemnly assure you, no one can see the reign of God unless he is born from above” (3:3). Then, after Jesus the teacher and Nicodemus the catechumen converse briefly about water and Spirit, John announces the central message of his gospel: “Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life” (3:16).

The longer I live the more convinced I become that we must continually be born “from above.” All true wisdom and all true love are God’s gifts. For us to be light in the world, we need the gift of God’s Spirit. But a death-bearing danger lurks in the darkness: that we will gradually slide into a self-sufficiency that blinds us to our need for others and their need for us. Unless we are continually born from above, the darkness, which never ceases to menace us, gradually prevails.

St. Vincent was quite aware of this. He urged us to see everything as a gift from God and to implore God’s gifts day after day. He tells us that the humble “recognize that all good which is done by them comes from God” (SV I, 182). A key Lenten question, as we renew our baptismal commitment, is this: Do we stand before God with gratitude, recognizing
that our birth and our continual rebirth are his gifts? Is thanksgiving our basic daily Christian life stance?

2. Nicodemus is a key figure in John’s gospel. He is a leader among the Jews, a Pharisee. But John reminds us twice that initially he came to Jesus only by night. He was one of those authority figures (John says that there were many) who actually did believe in Jesus, but who, out of fear, held back from confessing him publicly; they “loved human glory more than God’s glory” (12:43). But Jesus’ death transforms Nicodemus. With a surge of courage, he emerges from the darkness into the light.

During their first meeting, Jesus had spoken symbolically with Nicodemus about darkness and light: “Those who practice evil hate the light; they do not come near it for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But those who act in truth come into the light to make clear that their deeds are done in God” (3:20-21).

Few themes are more important in John’s gospel than acting in truth. Jesus is the truth (14:6). The truth sets us free (8:32). Those who act in truth come into the light (3:21). St. Vincent believed this Johannine teaching profoundly. He proposed simplicity — search for truth, hunger for truth, passion for truth, living in truth — as the first virtue of all of the groups he founded. It was his gospel (SV IX, 606). A second Lenten question is this: Is truth central in our lives, as it was for St. Vincent? Do we seek the truth continually and, like Nicodemus at the moment of the death of the Lord, do we act in the truth and thus enter into the light?

3. Nicodemus gave Jesus a stunningly royal burial, so stunning that in the course of history some scholars have tried to explain away, as a scribal error, the hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes with which he covered the body of Jesus. Today we recognize these spices as signs of Messianic abundance, like the 180 gallons of wine that Jesus miraculously produced at the wedding feast of Cana (2:6) and the 153 fish which Jesus directed the disciples to catch (21:11). A regal burial, in fact, corresponds quite harmoniously with the proclamation placed above Jesus’ head that he is “king of the Jews” (19:20).

At Jesus’ death, the once-fearful Nicodemus walks courageously into the spotlight on center stage and claims the crucified Lord as his own. He makes a public profession of faith in an abandoned king and gives him a royal burial. I encourage you this Lent to renew your commitment to the crucified and risen Lord who lives on in the crucified peoples of the world. A third Lenten question is this: “Is the Kingdom, inaugurated by Jesus’ death and resurrection, the core of our lives? Do justice, love and
peace, which are the beacons of the Kingdom, radiate out from us like light?

The German poet Bertolt Brecht begins one of his most famous works, “To Posterity,” with these words:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Truly, I live in dark times!...} \\
\text{The man who laughs} \\
\text{Has simply not yet had} \\
\text{The terrible news}....
\end{align*}
\]

These truly are dark times — times of international terrorism, of war in Afghanistan, of ongoing violence between Israelis and Palestinians, of threatened nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan, of unjust economic structures that oppress the poor in so many countries of the world, of political corruption that augments the ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots. In this context, the story of Nicodemus is wonderfully encouraging. He bursts from the darkness into the light.

John’s gospel assures us, from its very first chapter, that the light shines in the darkness and that the darkness cannot snuff it out (1:5). This Lent I urge you to believe deeply in the light and to witness by your lives to the peace, the joy, and the hope of the resurrection. Jesus, the Risen Lord, is light in the midst of darkness, joy in the midst of sorrow, hope in the midst of despair. Few messages are more important in the modern world than his gospel of hope.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General