

HOMILY ON ARK OF THE NEW COVENANT

Are you wondering what this Ark of the New Covenant is all about?

Make your life a healing journey and live as the People of the New Covenant.

The idea of the Ark that we see before us began with the International Eucharistic Congress that will take place June 15-22nd, 2008 in Quebec City. This will be the 49th International Eucharistic Congress. The reason it will be held in Quebec City is because 2008 will be the 400th anniversary of the founding of this first French speaking city in Canada – from which missionary activity spread to the rest of our country.

A youth summit was held in preparation for the Congress, and out of this summit came the idea of a symbol that would travel throughout the country, much like the World Youth Day Cross of 2003. The idea they came up with was the Ark of the New Covenant that would accomplish three objectives: catechesis about the Eucharist; fuller participation in the liturgy by the laity, and greater solidarity with the rest of humanity, especially the needy. In fact, the theme of this congress is: *The Eucharist, the Gift of God for the Life of the World*.

Designed and created by a Quebec artist, this Ark of the New Covenant is truly a work of art and a beautiful catechetical tool. It is first of all a boat that reminds us of Noah's Ark, a powerful symbol of baptism and salvation. It also alludes to Peter's boat from which Jesus taught the crowds. The Ark is also a symbol of the Church that can be seen as a ship sailing through history, inviting all of humanity to come aboard. The boat part itself is made of five different kinds of wood, representing the five races of humanity – red, white, yellow, black and brown. The Church is meant to serve and encompass all of humanity.

The meaning of the Latin word "arca," itself a translation of the Hebrew word "aron," is "chest" or container. The original Ark served both as a seat and a container. It held the proof of the covenant that God made with Moses, the tablets of the Law or Ten Commandments, and journeyed with the Chosen people through the desert and into the Promised Land. Today, this Ark, as we saw, contains the Bible, the Word of God that we proclaimed. It will also become for us a throne for the Blessed Sacrament, the Body of Christ that we will adore shortly.

The words *New Covenant* are important. This Ark celebrates the fulfillment of the Old Testament in Jesus Christ. God, who created us out of infinite love, has always wanted an intimate loving relationship with us, a covenant relationship. That desired relationship is best symbolized by marriage. St Paul describes the relationship of Jesus with the Church as a marriage relationship – Jesus is the bridegroom and we, the Church, are the Bride of Christ. That is why we speak of marriage as a covenant relationship between the spouses.

Throughout salvation history, God has always established covenant relationships with God's people. The very first covenant was with a couple, Adam and Eve. Live God's way, they were promised, and they would be in paradise. However, as we know it, they blew it. So God tried again, with a family this time. He told Noah to build an ark to save his family and made a covenant with him – the sign of that covenant was the rainbow. However, Noah's descendants broke that covenant. Then God made a covenant with a tribe, with Abraham, our ancestor in faith. He was told to take his tribe and set out on a journey of faith. The covenant with Abraham involved a bloody sacrifice in which the firebrand of God passed between the parts of the sacrifice. God promised Abraham he would be the father of a great nation. However, his descendants also broke that covenant.

Next, God made a covenant with Moses. We are all familiar with that story of slavery in Egypt, the plagues, the Passover lambs that were sacrificed, the blood put on the doorposts that the angel of death passed over, the death of the first born of Egypt that finally convinced Pharaoh to let the people go, and the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. Then came the theophany at Mt. Sinai in the desert, where the mountain trembled, there was fire and cloud, and God gave Moses the Law, the Ten Commandments. The people promised to live according to the Law, but we know that they too were unfaithful to the covenant. They wanted land, kings, wealth and power like the other nations. They did not trust the Lord their God. Theirs was the sin of infidelity to the covenant.

After all this, finally, what was God to do? God chose to send his very own Son, who would be faithful to the will of God, and give his life for us. Jesus is the Word made Flesh, who by giving his body for us and shedding his blood on the cross, would establish a new covenant with us, an eternal, perfect covenant. He would be the New Moses, the New Law, the perfect sacrifice, the new Lamb of God who would liberate us not from political oppression but from the power of sin and sinfulness over us. He would truly set us free and empower us to live a new way of life, as people of a New Covenant.

The one who is our model and guide in this New Covenant is Mary, our Mother. The Ark teaches us some beautiful Mariology. Mary is the Ark of the New Covenant. Just as the glory of God hovered over the ancient Ark, so too at the Annunciation, the Spirit of God overshadowed Mary and she conceived Jesus in her womb and carried him for nine months before giving birth to him for the world.

Just as David danced before the ancient Ark when it was brought back to Jerusalem and proclaimed himself blessed that the ark of the Lord should come into his presence, so too Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist, marvelled that Mary, the Mother of her Lord would come into her presence at the Visitation. Mary truly is the Ark of the New Covenant.

You will notice that this Ark of the New Covenant is decorated with eight icons. An icon is a sacred picture that teaches a spiritual truth. These icons are modelled on the ones that a group of Romanian Orthodox monks make and sell to support an orphanage in Rumania. The artist was so impressed by their work and their project that he incorporated icons into the ark.

The four larger icons, one on each side, are all about the Paschal Mystery of Christ that we celebrate every Easter Triduum. It is through this Paschal Mystery that Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant for us. The first icon is the Last Supper, during which Jesus took bread and wine and instituted the Eucharist, his way of sharing his love for us even after his death on the cross. The second one is the crucifixion of Christ, where Jesus, the Word of Flesh, gave his life for us on the cross. His Body was pierced for us; his Blood poured out for us. On the cross, Jesus was forgiving those who were crucifying him, something God alone could do. This amazing forgiveness, this living out of the love that he taught his disciples to the very end, is the core of our faith, the new way of life in the Kingdom of God.

The third icon is called the Vigil of Mary. Mary, at the foot of the cross, was doing what Jesus was doing on the cross, forgiving those who had tortured and now were murdering him. As the first and perfect disciple, she was not screaming out, fighting back or trying to prevent them from killing her son. She was simply the strong woman, taking in all that negative energy directed at Jesus, holding it, praying about it, pondering it, and trusting with powerful faith that somehow God would draw good out of this evil, and of course God did – through the resurrection of Jesus which is the fourth large icon.

In the resurrection, Jesus did not just come back to life again, but rose to a new life, eternal life, the very life of heaven. When he appeared to his disciples in the upper room, there was no trace of resentment or desire for revenge – there was only peace and joy. Jesus showed them the wounds in his hands and side. He did not deny or avoid his past, or try to medicate it as we so often do, which often is the source of our addictions. Instead, he showed them how to deal with evil, with that pain, through forgiveness. And he empowered them to do the same, by breathing on them the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of forgiveness. That now is the task of the Church – to live forgiveness, to be forgiveness for the world.

Again, Mary is our model in living this new life that Jesus would give to us through his Spirit at Pentecost. As the first believer and the perfect disciple, Mary was already living the life of the New Covenant, forgiving her enemies, even before the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. That is why we venerate her, pray to her and hold her in such high esteem as the Ark of the New Covenant.

The other four smaller icons teach us more about the life of Jesus in very significant ways. The first is the wedding feast of Cana. That is because this event celebrates the establishment of the New Covenant as the fulfillment of the Old. When Moses ratified the Old Covenant with the people, he sacrificed bulls and sprayed blood on the altar and on the people, blood that stains and is a sign of commitment. The people swore that they “would do whatever Yahweh would ask them to do.” So what connects this to the wedding feast at Cana? Mary saw the couple in need; went to Jesus who said it was not his hour, then, as the first true believer and perfect disciple, told the servants to “do whatever he tells you” – the same words as the people at Mt. Sinai, words that they did not keep. Mary, however, was true to the end. And now that is always her message to us,

as the ark of the New Covenant. We are to listen to Jesus, and to what he tells us. We are to do the will of Jesus, to live as God wants us to live, to do as people of the New Covenant, what the people of the Old Covenant could not do.

The next icon is the multiplication of the loaves. That is where Jesus took a few loaves and fish and fed a multitude, with baskets leftover. The teaching here is that only Jesus can answer our deepest needs. This icon is a powerful one for youth especially, who are searching for love in all the wrong places. It is not alcohol, drugs, sex, or money that will satisfy our deepest cravings, but only a loving relationship with Jesus, the Son of God, who truly loves us in a pure and perfect way.

The third smaller icon is the washing of the feet. For the evangelist John, the meaning of the Eucharist is best symbolized by the washing of the feet, which replaces the account of the institution of the Eucharist in his gospel. Pope Benedict in his first encyclical stated that to celebrate the Eucharist without linking it with unselfish loving service of others is hypocrisy. To be a member of the New Covenant established through the Body and Blood of Jesus is to give of ourselves in committed, loving service to our brothers and sisters, especially those most in need.

The last of the smaller icons is that of the disciples walking to Emmaus. This icon is very fitting, because this account mirrors what we do each time we celebrate the Eucharist. First, the disciples were running away from Jerusalem, sad, disillusioned at the death of Jesus and probably returning to their former sinful way of life. Jesus met them on the road as a stranger who asked them what they were talking about as they walked along. He listened to them as they shared their burden. This is what we do during the penitential rite – we share with Jesus our burden, how we have messed up in our lives during the week. Jesus listens to us and accepts us as we are.

Then, Jesus explained to them the scriptures that were all about himself. That is what we do in the Liturgy of the Word. We listen to God's Word and apply it to our lives. They then went into the inn, and recognized him at the breaking of the bread. And that is what we do around the table of the Eucharist. Finally, their hearts were burning within them. They were transformed, healed, and filled with courage to return to Jerusalem, the place of danger, to join the others and recount their story of encountering Jesus on the road. That is what the Eucharist is meant to do for us – to heal us, strengthen us and empower us to go out to be bread broken for the world.

At both ends of this Ark are angels bowing in adoration. The original Ark had cherubim at both ends, bowing towards the glory of God that hovered over the Ark. These angels symbolize the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises in Jesus Christ. They are focused on the icons that tell the story of the Paschal Mystery, the way that Jesus brought about the new eternal covenant between God and humanity.

Ultimately, this ark is a boat because to follow Jesus as a member of the New Covenant is to be on a journey, a healing journey of faith. A boat is not meant to stay in a harbour – it is meant to sail. The original Ark journeyed with the Chosen people throughout their

years in the desert right into the Promised Land. A cloud by day, and fire by night, signalled the presence of God with them in the ark.

The Ark of the New Covenant calls for even greater faith – faith that the presence of the Holy Spirit is with us as we walk with Jesus through the ordinary events of our lives. Our challenge is to allow Jesus to heal us through his Word and through the Eucharist by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are empowered to go out to the world and to be bread broken for a wounded world that needs to see and experience God's love.

Finally, the hold or chest of this Ark is built not just to hold the Word of God or to be a throne for the Blessed Sacrament. It is also a container for commitments or pledges that we are invited to make and place in the Ark. Near the Ark is a table with pieces of paper on which we are invited to write out a commitment, a way that we can live out the Eucharist more fully in loving service to others. This will help accomplish one of the purposes of the Ark, to build greater solidarity with the world, especially the needy.

At the end of the service tonight, the Ark will stay in place for a short time. We are all invited to write out a commitment, and to come forward and place it in the Ark. There are four holes in the deck of the boat in which we can place our commitments. At the same time we can touch the Ark, venerate it, study the icons and learn from them. Let them speak to you about the great mystery of God's love for the world made known through Jesus Christ, the new Moses, the New Law, the Paschal Lamb, who transforms us into his Body, the Church, sent to be bread that is broken for our very wounded world, teaching it this new way of life.

So, once again, the message to us from this Ark of the New Covenant is to make our lives a healing journey and to live as the People of the New Covenant.