



The Confessional Lutheran Letter

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Welcome to the first issue of the Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches’ *Confessional Lutheran Letter*. At our January 2009 conference it was decided the ACLC should publish a periodical. One purpose of this periodical will be to keep the congregations informed of ACLC news and current events. Its primary focus, however, will be ongoing instruction in orthodox Lutheran doctrine and practice. Thus, the content of this periodical will consist mostly of sermons and articles on a variety of theological topics, as well as topics touching the church’s worship.

At least for now this periodical is intended to be a quarterly electronic publication available for download or printing. *The editor is Rev. Robert Lawson, Jr., and the layout editor is Rev. Steven Brockdorf.*

This first issue is dedicated to Lenten themes and we had intended to publish it by the start of Holy Lent. But, with little time since the conference, it isn’t as timely as hoped. We pray, however, that as we enter Holy Week, you may be edified and strengthened in the faith by what you read here.

God bless your reading, and may He grant that we always remain faithful to His word, even as the concluding admonition of our bylaws states: (We) “direct ourselves and all members of the ACLC of all time to God’s word, and God’s word alone.” – The Editors

The following sermon was preached by Rev. Rolf Preus at a Wednesday evening Lenten Service in 2001.



Text: St. Luke 22:39-46
Theme: “Jesus Praying in Gethsemane”

Is it possible that we could have been forgiven of all our sins, set free from their power, reconciled to God, and given eternal life without Jesus going to the cross? Could God have saved us in another way? Was it so necessary for Jesus to bear all our sin, all our guilt, and all our sorrow and death?

“Father, if it is your will, take this cup away from me.” So Jesus prayed. And the Father’s will was made quite clear, wasn’t it? He had to die. There was no other way.

The love of God is not a sentimental thing. It is deep and strong and aggressive. It spans from eternity to eternity and it encompasses all of humanity. But if you really want to understand how much God loves you, look here at Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives. It is as if all of the love of God of every age and place is concentrated in that one moment when his dear Son in agony of the deepest sorrow prays, “Thy will be done,” and the will of God is done.

Jesus taught us to pray, “Thy will be done.” This was his prayer as well. God’s will was that Jesus drink the cup of human sin, suffering, and damnation. Consider this love! Look at it and marvel, because the world knows nothing of it. It is as Ibsen’s character Brand put it:

Of what the paltering world calls love,
I will not know, I cannot speak;
I know but His who reigns above,
And His is neither mild nor weak;
Hard even unto death is this,
And smiting with its awful kiss.
What was the answer of God’s love

Of old, when in the olive-grove
 In anguish-sweat His own Son lay;
 And prayed, O, Take this cup away?
 Did God take from him then the cup?
 No, child; His Son must drink it up!

Jesus prayed. A prayer is more than a petition or a request. Folks treat prayer as if it is wishing on a star and when they don't get what they want they assume that prayer doesn't work. But prayers aren't things that work. Prayers are the expression of the faith of God's child. If it isn't an expression of faith it isn't a prayer. Faith says that God's will is always good and gracious and right. So it was God's good, gracious, and entirely just will that the innocent man take the place of the guilty and go to the cross to suffer and die.

God didn't send Jesus into the world because he hated the world. He sent his dear Son because he loved the world. And look at his love as Jesus prays.

This struggle of Jesus in the Garden is as beautiful a portrayal of divine love as has ever been given to us mere mortals. I say "divine" love, yet it is in Jesus' humanity that it is seen. Jesus is a man and he is about to face pain such as no man has ever faced. He will face the physical torment of crucifixion. He will be hanged on a cross with nails in his hands and his feet. He will gradually suffocate as his legs will become too weak to hold up the weight of his body, and as his legs weaken he won't be able to breathe. So he will finally die of suffocation, but only after enduring extreme physical torment.

But more than that, he will be shamed. He knows it. Even as he urges his disciples to pray that they not succumb to temptation, he knows their weakness, indeed he feels it inside of himself as he bears on his own soul the failures of every sinner in the world. He feels inside the bitter shame of those who are guilty.

But more than that, he will be forsaken by his dear Father. He will cry out in fulfillment of the Psalm, "My God, my God, why have

you forsaken me?" And that is what so burdens his soul so that he is in agony and begins to sweat drops of blood. Look at that agony and consider who that broken, bleeding, and suffering man is. He is your God! He who pleads to his heavenly Father for mercy receives no mercy, but instead he becomes the source of all divine mercy.

There is love! Not that we loved God but that he loved us! There is love! The only begotten Son of the Father asks for mercy but modifies the request with the most important modifier we can add to our prayers: "Thy will be done." It isn't the prayer of faith at all unless those four words are added to it, for true prayer must always be prayed in faith, and faith knows that God's will is far better for us than is our own.

The Father who loved his Son refused to take away the cup of wrath from his lips. When Jesus prayed, "Thy will be done," he was praying, confessing, agreeing that he really wanted to die. Despite his agony and the imminent pain, he wanted his Father's will. That was his greatest desire.

And that remains his greatest desire. Don't forget that when you pray. When we pray in Jesus' name, it's not as if we have to use Jesus to get God to change his mind about us and to be kind and gracious. It was the Father's will that Jesus die and so take away all of our sins. When we pray in Jesus' name and lay claim to his atoning sacrifice, we are reminding our dear Father of our Father's love. It was love that met with sin there in that olive grove. And how much Jesus loved his Father that he would be willing to drink up the cup of our sin. Poison, bitter, disgusting, nauseating deadly sin! Who could drink it? Who would drink it? Only Jesus. He could. He did.

We have the right to pray in his holy name. And when we do, should we doubt that heaven itself is opened for us? Did not an angel descend from heaven to strengthen Jesus in his time of trial? Surely these holy messengers of God strengthen us as well. We may not even know just what we need to ask, but we do know that

whatever we ask, we are asking as those who are loved by God. Do you believe that?

The church prays with her Lord. She watches him pray a stone's throw away and she stays awake and prays with him that God's good and gracious will be done. But it is no easy task. It is hard work. It is exhausting. It appears to be fruitless and useless and worthless. So we tire in sorrow of it and fall asleep. But Jesus does not. He keeps on praying. Then he comes to us, gently wakes us, and encourages us to pray with him. He knows temptation and he wants to spare us grief. He who bore all our griefs and carried all our sorrows knows what sorrow can burden us and this is why he invites us to pray with him.

And that is what we are here doing every Wednesday evening during Lent, every Sunday morning during the whole year. We come to pray with Jesus. We pray that God's will be done among us. We pray that we may be conformed by his grace to his holy will. That is no burden. It is the removal of burden. So we know what God's will is, we have seen Jesus pray for it in the Garden, and we know where Jesus went shortly there after. God's will is to take away our sin. This means that the God to whom we pray really loves us. He surely does.

Amen

Report on the Annual Meeting of The Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches and The Confessional Lutheran Free Conference

January 27-29, 2009

The third annual meeting of the Association of Confessional Lutheran Churches (ACLC) was held on Tuesday, January 27th at the Select Inn and Suites Conference Center in Burnsville, MN. Following the Annual Meeting, the ACLC sponsored a

Confessional Lutheran Free Conference with the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America (ELDoNA) and two independent Lutheran congregations. What follows is a report on both the Annual Meeting and the Free Conference.

The ACLC Annual Meeting opened at 9:20am on Tuesday with an opening devotion by the Rev. Steven Brockdorf, Pastor of Reformation Lutheran Church in Hillsboro, OR. Congregations represented by their pastors and delegates were as follows:

First American Lutheran Church, Mayville, ND

Rev. Rolf Preus; Mr. David Flitter

First Evanger Lutheran Church, Fertile, MN

Rev. Rolf Preus

Grace Lutheran Church, Crookston, MN

Rev. Rolf Preus

Saint Timothy Evangelical Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, IA

Rev. Karl Heck; Mr. Robert Schlesselman

Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Litchfield, ILL

Rev. Stephen Schmidt

Reformation Lutheran Church

Rev. Steven Brockdorf; Rev. Walter Anderson (Retired)

St. Paul Lutheran Church, Escondido, CA

Rev. Robert Lawson Jr; Dr. Scott Markel

Wayfarers Chapel Lutheran Church, Fillmore, CA did not have a representative in attendance.

The agenda for the day was dedicated, for the most part, to the reading, discussion of and editing of the proposed ACLC Constitution and Bylaws. All delegates present were encouraged to and did participate. This major work of finishing a Constitution and Bylaws acceptable to all ACLC congregations was completed by 7:00 PM on Tuesday.

Upon completion, each delegate was given the opportunity to speak regarding the document as a whole. It was determined by consensus that this amended Constitution and Bylaws is a document all of the delegates could recommend to their congregations. Though it may not always say something the way that each person desires it to be said, we believe that the entire

ACLC can live with this document and that it will serve us well, organizationally, as we seek to proceed according to good order. Thus, it was determined that following the Annual Meeting the ACLC would operate as much as possible under the amended Constitution and Bylaws in lieu of ratification by the congregations.

A final draft of the amended document and a ballot for ratification have, at this point, been distributed to all ACLC congregations by the Rev. Karl Heck. Congregations must return their completed ballots to the ACLC secretary, Dr. Scott Markel, by April 27 if they want their ballot counted.

Other agenda items discussed at the Annual Meeting were as follows:

The Selection of Officers: The following ACL officers were selected by consensus:

Superintendent: Rev. Rolf Preus

Assistant Superintendent: Rev. Robert Lawson Jr.

Secretary: Dr. Scott Markel

Treasurer: Mr. David Flitter

Fellowship Issues: Church Fellowship with other groups such as ELDoNA and the Confessional Lutheran Church of Finland took place. It was determined by consensus that the ACLC needs to wait for congregational ratification of our own Constitution and Bylaws before making any decisions with regard to church fellowship with other bodies. It was determined that this issue should be placed on the Agendas for this year's General Pastoral Conference and next year's ACLC Annual Meeting. Rev. Preus also reported that the Pastor who had contacted him from Denmark seeking further conversation and possible fellowship was not truly seeking fellowship based on the pure marks of the church. Thus, further conversation with that pastor and church body has ceased.

Finances: David Flitter raised concerns as the ACLC Treasurer in 2008. It is essential that congregations submit payment for their share of ACLC expenses in a timely manner when billings are sent out from the Treasurer. Congregations will be billed the amount

outstanding from this Annual Meeting and the Free Conference. It was agreed by consensus that a small additional amount be added to each bill so that we have a bit of a buffer in the Treasury.

ACLC Website: Rev. Steven Brockdorf was directed by consensus to establish an official ACLC website. The website will cost approximately \$100.00 to set up and the cost will be equally distributed among the congregations.

ACLC Periodical: It was determined by consensus that the ACLC will begin publishing a quarterly periodical to be distributed electronically so that pastors can download it and make copies for distribution in their parishes. Rev. Robert Lawson was appointed General Editor of the periodical and Rev. Steven Brockdorf Formatting Editor.

The ACLC also met briefly on Thursday afternoon (Jan. 29) after the Free Conference. After discussion of the Free Conference it was determined that at this time the ACLC will not sponsor any more Lutheran Free Conferences. We may do so again in the future if possible opportunities with other groups arise.

Rev. Karl Heck briefly addressed the group about revisions made to the Doctrinal Statement. It was determined by consensus to accept the minor changes. At this point hard copies of the statement have been sent to all ACLC congregations together with a ballot for ratification. Congregations must return their completed ballots to the ACLC secretary, Dr. Scott Markel, by April 27 if they want theirs counted.

The ACLC sponsored a *Confessional Lutheran Free Conference* on Jan. 28-29 with the ELDoNA and two independent Lutheran pastors who have recently left the LCMS with their congregations. The purpose of this conference was to deal with specific doctrinal issues that might divide us as we pursue official church fellowship with each other. The theme for this particular conference was, in fact, issues relating to the doctrine and practice of church fellowship. The six papers delivered over the course of two days were as follows:

What Does It Mean to be a Confessional Lutheran? – Rev. Les Lanier, ACLC (read in Pastor Lanier’s absence)

Parva Ecclesia Satis Est (A Small Church Is Enough) – Rev. Anthony Oncken, ELDoNA

Church Fellowship in the Post-Synodical Era: Identifying and Associating with Confessional Lutherans Stranded in Heterodox Synods – Rev. Robert Lawson Jr., ACLC

Making a Clear Confession in Muddy Waters – Rev. Rolf Preus, ACLC

Guilt by Association: The Practice of Communion Fellowship When Synodical Boundaries have Become All but Meaningless – Rev. Eric Stefanski, Independent

Satis iam:(Enough Already!) – Rev. Michael Henson, Independent

The papers were very informative and lively discussion ensued after each. However, it became apparent that there is, at this point, some difference in the application of the doctrine of fellowship between the ACLC and ELDoNA (together with Revs. Stefanski and Henson). The conference was supposed to conclude on Thursday (Jan. 29) with a roundtable discussion. The purpose of that discussion was to have each group list those issues that divide us and begin to talk through them. However, ELDoNA declined to participate and thus the roundtable discussion did not take place. Talks are presently on hold between our two groups.

The Customs of Holy Lent

By Rev. Robert Lawson Jr.

Ceremonies and rituals created by human beings are not necessary for salvation. They are never to be observed in order to make up for our sins or earn God’s grace. Jesus has done everything necessary for our salvation. He has paid for our sins, appeased

God’s wrath, and earned heaven for us. Through the Gospel and Sacraments the Holy Spirit distributes to us all benefits of Jesus’ death and resurrection freely. We receive those treasures (forgiveness of sins, life and salvation) through faith in Jesus alone.

Are churchly ceremonies and rituals, however, useful for other reasons? Certainly. Lutherans confess in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession that ceremonies instituted by the church are necessary so that things are done decently and in good order. For instance, we need to have set times when everyone meets together. Also, our worship services shouldn’t be conducted in a chaotic way. Rather, everything should be done decently and in good order

Most importantly, outward ceremonies and rituals are useful, even necessary at some level, for the sake of instruction about Christ and what He had done for us. The Apology puts it this way: “traditions have been instituted for the sake of order and so that order may instruct people about the history and benefits of Christ. For it is much more effective to instruct the common people using concrete things as depicted in rites and customs than using writings. Traditions have the purpose of demonstrating and illustrating things for the people.”

Outward ceremonies and rituals are useful, even necessary for the sake of instruction.

The outward customs and rituals of Lent and Holy Week are particularly useful to that end. There are some ceremonial customs in Lent that are more or less common in our churches. I would like to list them and explain their significance and instructional value. Again, your parish may not observe any number of these customs. You might, however, wish to implement some of them after reading this article.

1. The most common Lutheran custom during Lent are the midweek Lenten devotional services (usually Vespers). Each

Are Ceremonies and rituals useful?

week a portion of Passion History is read. A topical sermon series on an appropriate Lenten theme is also preached. Most significantly, these Services provide an excellent opportunity to sing our great Lenten and Good Friday hymns which preach the cross of Christ so well. It is good and right that during this holy time of year we take a break from our busy schedules to meditate on what our God did to overcome our sin and death, so that our faith might be strengthened.

2. The worship services themselves reflect the more somber mood of Lent. In many places the organ does not play except to support congregational singing. At the very least, the bright sounds of the organ are toned down for the season. The joyous Hallelujahs are customarily not sung in any of the Services and the *Gloria in Excelsis*, that joyful song of the angels, is silenced. It is quite striking to go directly from the *Kyrie* into the Collect for the Day. When the *Gloria* is missing it is noticeable. Then, on the 5th Sunday in Lent, it is customary to drop the *Gloria Patri* (“Glory be to the Father and to the Son ...”) from the Introit and Psalms.

This gradual stripping down of the liturgy is meant to help us reflect on the gradual descent of our Lord into the depths of suffering and death. The great “Stripping of the Altar” that many churches practice on Maundy Thursday is a very vivid reminder of how Jesus’ clothes were stripped from Him as He was prepared for crucifixion. At the end of the Service the communion vessels, candles and paraments are reverently removed from the altar and pulpit as Psalm 22 is read. For the Good Friday Service, then, the altar is left bare and decorations in the church are kept to a minimum.

What a contrast all of this provides to Easter. On Easter Sunday the liturgy is restored completely. The Hallelujahs sound forth and the *Gloria in Excelsis* is sung with great gusto, reflecting our Lord’s triumph and the great joy that is now ours in His resurrection.

3. The liturgical color of the season is violet. Violet was the color for royalty in Jesus’ day. The use of violet reminds us of the “royal” robe Jesus was clothed in as He was mocked and

beaten. It reminds us that our Lord, Who suffers and dies for us, is truly our King.

4. In some places all crosses, statues and pictures are veiled throughout Lent, but customs vary. Here at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Escondido, CA both of our crucifixes are veiled beginning on the 5th Sunday in Lent, which is customarily called “Passion Sunday.” They are veiled in violet through Maundy Thursday and in black for Good Friday.

Why is this done? Well, explanations abound. We certainly do NOT put veils over the crosses in order to hide the cross (the fabric used is of the see-through type). Rather, it is a reminder that in the Person of Christ, the glory and majesty of the Son of God are hidden ever more so under suffering and death. The ultimate glory of God is seen as He suffers upon the cross.

These are just a few of the major ceremonial customs that have been a part of the church’s practice over the centuries and are still practiced today. The Augsburg Confession reminds us (article 15) that it is not necessary for the true unity of the church that ceremonies be everywhere the same. Thus, in the Lutheran Church customs vary from congregation to congregation. The number of customs observed also varies. Some observe more ceremonies, some less. Whatever the practice in your congregation, have a blessed Lententide hearing and believing the gracious forgiveness of sins in our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

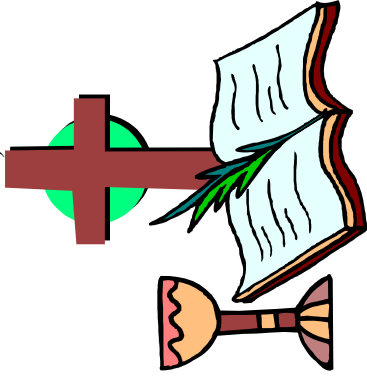
Meditating Rightly

On Our Lord’s Passion & Death

By Rev. Robert Lawson Jr.

Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ* was released on Ash Wednesday, 2004. Though it has been five years since this movie hit the box office like a storm, people are still watching it and benefiting from it. I received the DVD as a Christmas gift from my children three years ago. It has been my habit ever since to watch this movie at least once during Lent and Holy Week, and I will do so again this

year (though not with my children. They're still too young for such graphic violence, even if it is Biblical).



If you haven't yet seen this movie, be warned: It is extremely violent. The R rating is well deserved. The violence is part of the film's realism. Also, the director (Mr. Gibson) does take some artistic license in portraying the events of the Passion. Over all, though, the film accurately portrays the events as they are recorded in the gospels.

When the movie initially came out, many who saw it told of how sorry they felt for Jesus. Some described how they could actually feel themselves standing in the mob on Good Friday shouting, "Crucify Him, crucify Him." This was Gibson's intent. He made it clear that one of the points he wanted to drive home was that even though the Jews and Romans were the historical characters who hammered the nails into Jesus' hands and feet, it was the sins of all people of all times (yes, my sins and your sins too) that actually drove Jesus to the cross. Gibson's intent had its effect. I remember how I actually wept quietly while sitting there in the theatre.

Do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children

Now, sorrow over seeing a "good" man brutalized is certainly an understandable human emotion. Let us not, however, forget two crucial truths as we again meditate on the Passion and Death of our Lord this Lenten season. First, remember Jesus' words in Luke 23:28. As He marched to the cross, several women followed Him mourning and lamenting. Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me, but weep for yourselves and for

your children." Why did He say this? Because, it was their sins that led Him to this point.

The horrible death that Jesus suffered, which included above all the eternal death of hell (a reality which no movie can depict), was what they should have suffered. It is what we should suffer. Jesus, however, became the sin-bearer. All of our evil and rebelliousness; all of our idolatry and corruptness was laid on Jesus. Indeed, we should feel sorry! We should repent! We should acknowledge our sins and confess them. It was for our sins that Christ was punished.

Second, remember that Jesus could not be forced on to the cross by anyone. He went willingly because He loved us. This was God's plan from all eternity to atone for our sins and redeem us from sin, death and hell. Willingly our Lord Jesus became "the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world" as we sing in the communion liturgy. The great Lutheran hymnwriter, Paul Gerhardt, puts this so well in one of his wonderful Lenten hymns:

A Lamb goes uncomplaining forth, The guilt of all men bearing,
 And laden with the sins of earth, None else the burden sharing!
 Goes patient on, grows weak and faint, To slaughter led without complaint,
 That spotless life to offer;
 Bears shame, and stripes, and wounds and death, Anguish and mockery,
 and saith,
 "Willing all this I suffer." (TLH 142:1)

We should not, therefore, feel sorry for Jesus in such a way that we almost wish the brutalizing hadn't happened. Rather, let us rejoice and be glad! "[God] made Him Who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). God made Christ *the* sinner in our place. Christ Jesus, very God of very God, was bruised for our iniquity and wounded for our transgression. Because of that we are free. If Jesus hadn't suffered and died for our sins we would be lost forever.

Because He died for us we can never truly die. Rather, we shall live forever. We shall rise again out of the ashes of our death even as Jesus rose triumphant from the tomb. In His resurrection, God publicly proclaimed His victory over death and hell and His justification of the whole world for Christ's sake. That is the great

Easter truth that we look forward to during all of Lent and Holy Week, yes, throughout the entire Church Year.

Jesus, true God and true Man, shed His holy and precious blood *for you*. He absorbed God's punishment *for you*. In death He marched into hell and proclaimed God's victory over Satan, death, and all the evil host *for you*. By His rising to life again God has declared *you* together with the whole world "not guilty."

So this Lent, let us rejoice in the cross of our Savior and give thanks to God for providing us with the way of escape. Let us hear and believe the Word of holy Absolution that declares our sin forgiven for Jesus' sake. Let us go to the Lord's Supper where the true Body and Blood of Christ, sacrificed for us on the cross, is given to us for the forgiveness of sins. Let us also look forward to the feast of the Resurrection, which brings the proof of our eternal life as our Savior comes out of the tomb in triumphant glory.

And when Thy glory I shall see
And taste Thy kingdom's pleasure,

Thy blood my royal robe shall be,
My joy beyond all measure;

When I appear before Thy throne,
Thy righteousness shall be my crown,
With these I need not hide me.

And there, in garments richly wrought
As Thine own bride, I shall be
brought

To stand in joy beside Thee. (TLH 142:1, 6)

Principles for Understanding the Bible

- † Begin with prayer: The Holy Spirit promises to lead us into all truth.
- † If God is really worthy of worship, then it is his job to tell us about Himself and His will for us, NOT for us to tell Him about Himself and His will for us
- † Let Scripture interpret Scripture. That is, let other passage clue you in on what a particular passage means. Remember that the understanding of one passage cannot contradict the understanding of another passage. Also:
- † Let easy passages shed light on difficult passages, and not vice versa (concentrate on the Gospels first, then the Epistles, then the Prophecies).
- † Let the Scriptures say what they say.

- † No passage can mean two contradictory things.
- † The Scriptures are written in human language, they use all the figures of speech that human language uses e.g. alliteration, double-entendre, and hyperbole.
- † Parables are figures of speech used to explain doctrine; they do not establish doctrine.
- † Context, context, context! Pay attention to context—both the immediate context of a section of Scripture and the wider context.
- † Pay careful attention to whether the passage is merely telling what someone did (describing), or giving direction on how something is to be (prescribing).
- † Ask yourself, "What does this passage NOT say?"
- † Do not "buy into" any one translation—consult several translations. Yet the teaching of the Scriptures is accessible even in the poorest of translations.
- † Do not be bound to Biblical commentaries, though they can be useful. It is good to find out what those who went before us and reared us in the faith have said, especially Martin Luther and other orthodox Lutheran fathers. Do not be afraid to consult them.
- † Read a chapter of the Bible every day. You must know the Scriptures in order to understand the Scriptures. There is no good substitute for this.
- † Read the Lutheran Confessions! Read a little each day. The Confessions are a faithful exposition of Holy Scripture because they teach what the Bible teaches.
- † Remember that the end purpose of all of the Scriptures is to present Christ as our Lord Himself says, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39) and as St. Luke says, chapter 24:27, "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself."