

Pentecost XIV

Beloved in Christ, today is the 14th Sunday after Pentecost and the Mass liturgy presents us with a profound teaching in its lessons and prayers.

In his letter to the Galatians St. Paul encourages the faithful with urgency to make a definitive choice in their lives: “Walk according to the spirit and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh. For the flesh conspires against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.” The confession of our faith asserts upon us a moral imperative that we reduce this principle to act in our daily lives. In a word, St. Paul tells us to seek before all else the things of God. At the same time he would have us turn our hearts from an inordinate pursuit of the things of this world; that we should not exhaust ourselves on striving after things which are temporal, thus temporary – things that will disappear with the passing of time, things that have no enduring value for eternity.

Our preoccupation – perhaps we would do better here to admit, rather, our enduring *obsession* – with the pursuit of what this world holds out to us often draws us towards those acts which Paul calls “works of the flesh.” These actions give birth to bad fruit. Paul is speaking, certainly, not merely about fleshly impurity or marital infidelity, but that broad range of behavior which wars against the spirit: the malicious practice of bad conduct towards others: hatred and enmity; detraction of character; quarrelling, dissension, jealousy, envy. These are very often motivated by our inordinate desire for material things or achievement. A principal effect of such conduct is the bad fruit produced by disordering our lives towards such things: the disturbance and spiritual impoverishment which this engenders in the soul. No level of material wealth or prosperity, no achievement in business, finance, or worldly affairs – which so often comes at the price of our bad treatment of others – will ever yield *beatitude*: that supernatural happiness which derives from possessing the peace of God.

Is it not true that we find ourselves pulled constantly between the insistence of our passions and our weakened wills; and are we not driven by worries even in the light of good counsel given by right reason itself? Yet, at the same time *faith* commands us always to avoid sin, while seeking the moral and spiritual good of a life centered on a genuine search for God and the *eternal happiness* which He alone can give.

So why, then, do we hesitate? Why can we not act with conviction on the promises of Christ? And why does can't we make that definitive choice urged on us by St. Paul?

The reason, of course, is because we are wounded in our very nature, a human nature fallen through original sin and the more deeply inflicted by our own history of personal sins. This is a reality which we *do* live every day, and one which, alas, we live without any hesitation at all.

Today, in Matthew's Gospel, Our Lord speaks to us of the *divided heart*: “No man can serve two masters.” That is, no one can love God and at the same time pursue a life occupied in a disordered way with temporal things. And these are nearly *all* the things which our present society holds out – in a particularly deceptive manner – as means for achieving *happiness*. It is simply impossible to love God with an *undivided heart* – what monasticism has known for almost 2,000 years as *purity of heart* – while having an inordinate attachment to *things*. And such *things* can masquerade – with our fullest consent – under a huge variety of deceptive covers. Such as “that is *my* business” or “what I'm doing is not so bad” or, a great modern favorite, “on that point I disagree with the Catholic Church.” Let us make no mistake about it: any practice, position, idea or opinion where God is not allowed His fullest do-minion as Lord and Master is the playing field for moral evil. The true Christian lives a reflected life: and the eye of self-examination must necessarily be rooted in complete docility to Christ and His teaching, both of which are mediated to us by the Catholic Church.

We *all* live this interior dynamic of the Chris-tian struggle. What, then, should we *do* since we have to live in response to the true concerns of daily life here and now, *and* pass through the span of years God gives us to live? And yet through-out all that He also requires that we do so seeking Him first, and above all.

The answer is drawn from faith itself, and is well expressed in the opening collect of today's Mass, "We beseech You, O Lord, keep Your Church by Your constant mercy; and because without You human nature can only fail, may we, *by Your help*, be always led away from evil and directed towards that which is salutary."

Beloved, we must live, profoundly and with actuality, this providential mercy of God for which we have prayed: it is none other than the very impulse of Christ's divine economy for our salvation, and the purpose and mission of the Church. God is infinitely more conscious of our weaknesses than we are. He knows our needs before they have arisen. This is exactly why He sent His Son into this world. It was not to merely give Himself glory by the Jesus' fulfillment of the Father's will: the real glory comes from the fruit of that obedience: that in coming and dying for us, He has made it possible that, *with our willing cooperation*, God can *save us from ourselves*: save us from our slavery to disordered passions, slavery to sin and, above all from bearing the eternal death and condemnation of sins' consequence.

We must therefore, on the practical level, turn to God with conviction, with true humility, and lean completely on the divine goodness of His providential mercy. In effect Jesus asks us today, "Is your life your food? Or your clothing? Look around you at the splendor of nature itself. What excessive goodness flows from God who loves you so. So give yourself to Him with a confident and total abandonment of heart and will. He will give you all that you *really* need: for when His kingdom is allowed into your heart, it is there, in the depth of your very being, that He will work by the love of His grace. This, in its turn, will give you all that you need: all that is necessary so you may work – and, yes, suffer – according to His wisdom, to the end that you may come to possess Him forever in glory. This does not mean that we are to sit down and do nothing, nor give despairingly in the face of grave difficulties. Rather pos-session of the kingdom within gives us the divine impetus to persevere, knowing that nothing takes place without God's knowledge and will, and that even what is most arduous and painful, works unto salvation and happiness, when borne with a supernatural spirit and understood in the light of God and eternity.

Beloved, our faith is the one lasting treasure we have come to possess in this passing world. Let us give ourselves, therefore, without hesitation, to the God Whom faith adores. Let us break with sin – that fabric of worldly conduct which injures our union with God. In its place, let us seek God in *all* that we do. Then, the sublime harmony which is the fullness of the Paschal mystery lived with sincerity, will become for us, *truly*, our daily bread: our clothing: our reward: all in true foretaste – even in the present world – and a pledge for unending happiness in the world to come. By a true conversion to God, the pos-session of Him by with hearts which are pure and undivided, our lives will, *finally*, be rendered peaceful, our daily concerns will find their true perspective in eternity, and charity towards others be nurtured. In that we will come to the peace of God which passes all understanding:

Primum quaerite regnum Dei. Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all the rest will be given unto you. In this way we will, according to the mind of Paul, carry out acts, not of the flesh, but of the spirit. By our firm and constant decision to seek God, His grace will truly bear in us fruits of charity, joy, peace, patience, modesty and purity.

"Without You, O Lord, the frailty of human nature can only fail. May You guide us *ever* towards the things of heaven . . ."