

Dearly beloved,

Today, with the wedding at Cana, we commemorate the final epiphany of Our Lord Jesus Christ to the world before beginning his public ministry. On January 6, we celebrated his epiphany to the world, when he showed his birth by means of a star, which the Magi followed to Bethlehem. Just yesterday, we marked his epiphany to his people, the Jews, when the Father and the Holy Spirit testified to his divinity during his baptism in the Jordan River. And today he manifests himself to his disciples by changing water into wine.

His epiphany to his disciples was a quiet one, a miracle which only a few noticed, but which changed their lives. There were many at the banquet who never learned of the miracle, but assumed there was some natural reason for the suddenly excellent wine. This was best evidenced by the remark of the chief steward of the banquet, who believed the cause of the good wine was not Christ, but the groom. “You have kept the good wine until now.” This remark was said to the new husband of the bride, but it should have been said to the heavenly Bridegroom, the spouse of each Christian soul.

“You have kept the good wine until now.” This is a truth of the economy of salvation as a whole—God saved his best until the Incarnation. He did not give mankind the greatest treasures of grace until his coming in the flesh, for although Adam and Eve had sanctifying grace and intimate friendship with God before the Fall, they did not have the many blessings that come to us from the Incarnation, principal of which is the Eucharist. If not for the Son of God becoming man, he would not be present on our altars, in our tabernacles and in our souls in the same way in which he is now, as he deigns to be present under the appearances of bread and wine so that we may have more abundant life in our souls, so that we may speak to him whenever we wish, so that he may console more frequently and palpably.

And yet the divine plan to keep the good wine until now is not just to be considered in the abstract or for the whole human race; it is also for each of us as individuals. In heaven we will say with utter peace and understanding, “You have kept the good wine until now.” And since this life is a preparation for the next life, and each increase of grace in our souls draws us closer to heaven, we also can begin to taste the good wine now; we can begin to experience the truth of what the chief steward says. As St. Paul says, “Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day.”

How do we experience this? Two ways come to mind. First, our relationships with others become more meaningful, more motivated by charity, more pervaded with mercy. Worldly friendships break down, secular marriages end in despising one another, but Christians learn to forgive one another and love the other as God sees him or her. Without grace, all our relationships would eventually unravel since sin is always easier to focus on when we are close to someone, and the more unlike we are to the other person, the more likely it is to end in loathing the other person. But the virtue of charity keeps us from declining in this direction, and makes our love for the other person more like God’s love—we acknowledge the evil, but focus on the good, and we rejoice in the conversion and growth of the other. Again, St. Paul: “Charity is patient, is kind: charity is not puffed up; it is not ambitious, does not think evil, rejoices not in iniquity, but rejoices with the truth.”

Secondly, our faith begins to be more and more operative, and so we see earthly events in light of the economy of salvation. Yes, I am suffering, but God is using my suffering to teach me patience and wisdom and at the same time, to save or comfort a soul somewhere else. How many times have I had a sleepless night and then learned the next day that someone I knew needed the prayers of that night! We pray, and God uses the prayers as he wishes, in a stunningly beautiful web of charity. This gives meaning to every moment of our lives, and it is faith that allows us to see it, it is faith that moves us to not waste any suffering or anxiety, it is faith that trusts God to make good on his promises.

This does not necessarily mean, of course, that our lives become easy or comfortable. We should remember that the lives of many saints did not get better as they got older, but rather got more difficult, both materially and spiritually. St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom both died in horrible material circumstances, Augustine

watching his work and his town being destroyed by the barbarian invaders, Chrysostom being exiled from Constantinople to the Black Sea and dying in route of hunger and fatigue. And saints of our own day, Mother Teresa and St. Therese, both experienced extreme periods of spiritual desolation for the last several years of their lives, so severe that St. Therese struggled to not lose her faith in the reality of heaven.

But it does mean that if we do not sense an increase within us of the truth of the steward's words that Christ has kept the good wine until now, we have likely drunk too much wine of a lesser quality. If we are receiving the sacraments regularly, confessing at least once a month, and have a regular commitment to real prayer, and do not sense a growing peace in our souls, something is wrong. We have either given ourselves over to worldliness or sensuality, or we have indulged in pride and despair. Worldliness and sensuality can either be blatant, as in lust and gluttony, or subtle, as in our delight in worldly things, but either way it keeps us from recognizing the things of God. It is like being presented with a Russian imperial stout, but having no room for it because of being intoxicated by Natural Light. It is not that one cannot appreciate it in such a state, but one is not sober enough to truly delight in the things of the spirit. The remedy for this drunkenness is to fast: if we are sensual, to fast from food; if we are worldly, to fast from the thing that drags us down to earth.

The other thing that clouds our experience of grace is pride, manifested either in lack of mercy or in despair. Unlike worldliness or sensuality, pride does not mean we are drunk, but that we prefer to drink vinegar rather than fine wine—even the driest wine is too sweet for us, because we would rather have acid. Pride shown in lack of mercy is obvious, for we dwell on others' faults rather than learning to live with their deficiencies or weaknesses; since we refuse to see in them the things that we also suffer, we block our growth in the theological virtues. The remedy for this intoxication is to pray for the other each time we have a negative thought about them, and to consider our own sinfulness and weakness.

Pride shown in despair is more subtle, but for that reason, perhaps more dangerous—it means that we have chosen to always be disappointed in what God gives us; our lives are not what we want them to be, and therefore we choose to be sad. We can even be sad about something good, like our lack of growth in virtue, but it is the choice to be sad--the choice to dwell on the negative rather than open our eyes to see the goodness of divine providence—that makes our lives bitter. God is ready to give us his finest wine, but we would rather drink vinegar in a corner. This is not to say that there are things in our lives worth sorrowing over; there are such things, and there is no one here who does not have something to grieve; it is to say that we belong to Christ, and he has overcome the causes of our sorrow. He says, "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." The remedy for this intemperance is to offer our sufferings to Christ, and ask him to use them for the forgiveness of our sins and for the salvation of sinners. There are always souls in this world in need of our sufferings; God mystically links us with them because they suffer the same thing we do, but without the benefit of faith and the sacraments. When we offer them, our suffering has meaning precisely because it is an instrument of someone else's salvation.

So today may each of us pray for one another that we may appreciate the good wine that the Son of God has given to us by becoming man. Some of us struggle more with sensing this truth than others; let those of us who find it more intuitive to be joyful pray for those who are more prone to being downhearted, and show patience in seeing the joy of the Lord slowly increasing in the other's soul. And thus encouraged and upheld by one another and strengthened by the Eucharist, may we come to the New Jerusalem, that abode of peace, where we shall say without end, "You have kept the good wine until now."