

Dearly beloved,

Today we mark the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, and as is so often the case, the liturgy is taken from the Sundays after Epiphany since Lent came early this year. The Gospel for the sixth Sunday after Epiphany, which we observe now since we did not observe it before Septuagesima, is taken from a section of parables in Matthew's thirteenth chapter. Our Lord gives us two figures which explain the Kingdom of heaven: the mustard seed and yeast. These figures can refer to the Kingdom of God in two senses: first of all, the Church, for the kingdom includes both the King and His subjects—Christ and all those in friendship with Him. Secondly, they can refer to the individual soul, for in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Lo, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is within you." Due to the nature of the parables, it is easiest to move from the individual soul to the Church when thinking about the truths contained in the stories.

Since the mustard seed has been examined in past years, let us consider the yeast. There is a great deal packed into the one verse of Matthew 13:33. First of all, the woman takes the yeast (in our translation, the leaven). The Greek verb behind this action, and the corresponding Latin verb can mean 'take' but they are better translated as 'accept.' Faith is a gift, and so it is received rather than taken; it is something we can prepare for, whether in ourselves or in another, but both its beginning and its increase come from God. That is why the man in the Gospel says, I do believe; help my unbelief. It is not by willing ourselves to believe that our faith grows, but by asking God to increase it in us. Ultimately faith is about surrendering to God in a fundamental way in which we allow him to work in us.

The Greek verb *lambano*, however, means more than just 'accept' but to accept with initiative. We see this in the woman's action of hiding the yeast in the flour (in our translation, meal). Just as the man does not accept the mustard seed and put it on a shelf or in his pocket, so the woman does not set aside the yeast for later but puts it to immediate use. The verb 'hid' tells us something about faith and grace that we already know—they work within us largely in hidden fashion; we do not always see the fruit of our belief, for it grows inside us without us knowing. But we also know that though faith is hidden, it requires work; although God is the origin, we must cooperate. In the epistle for today, St. Paul says as much: "We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor, and charity, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." That the woman 'hid' the yeast in the flour is another way of saying that she kneaded it in. Kneading dough is not an easy task and bread must be made every day. So letting faith pervade our thoughts and actions is both an arduous and a repetitive act on our parts. It means taking the principles we already know—that God loves us as a Father does his children and that He does not abandon those who are faithful to Him—and applying them to each new crisis that erupts in our lives. The solidity and reliability of God and faith in Him must now be applied to this circumstance that seems too much for us to handle.

And then we let faith work. There is point at which the woman can do nothing more than provide the right environment for the dough to rise—she must wait on it to do what it naturally does. There must be enough heat but not too much, and she must knead it well but not overdo it; too much heat will kill the yeast prematurely, too much kneading will make the dough tough and

inflexible. So also we must provide conditions for our faith to grow: the heat is the willingness to undergo trials for the love of God and neighbor, and the kneading is the discipline of prayer and the sacraments. We should be willing to be tested by trials that seem to ask more than we can give, for Christianity is not an excuse to hide from everyday life, but a power to face it with courage. And yet we cannot take on too many things, for we will destroy ourselves in the process. With prayer, we must make the effort to knead the dough through regular daily prayer even when we don't feel like it (for the poor man needs to bake bread every day) but we must also fulfill our duties of state and not use prayer to avoid it. For the great majority of us, though, we use our duty of state to excuse us from prayer, and so there is little risk of overworking the dough, but of never working it at all. And our working of the dough should be consonant with our age and maturity; just as a child kneading dough looks different than an adult doing the same, so should our prayer be—the older we are, the more responsibility we have to pray with purpose, the more our prayer should be conversation with God.

These principles also apply to others as much as they apply to ourselves. Thus we can provide the right environment for faith to grow in another person, but we cannot force it. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "I have planted, Apollo watered, but God gave the increase." We do not necessarily make faith grow in others by exposing them to too many trials or by beating it into them—we have to allow for the natural growth that occurs. Dough rises on its own time; faith increases in God's time. After creating a place in which faith can grow, we should step back, pray, and trust God to work in the other person as He has worked in us, as a still small voice rather than fire or earthquake.

How does this analogy apply to the Church? After all, the Fathers unanimously interpreted it in this ecclesial sense. The Church could be considered, in a way of speaking, as a home where each us kneads his dough side by side with others, and also gives it time and heat to rise. But now in the Church, as has always been the case, certain prelates open the door or the window to let in the cold air of secularism, so that the dough cannot rise properly. When that happens, we should close the door or the window, so that the yeast of faith does not become dormant. Some of us, a very, very few of us, may be given a charism to confront the one who opened the door or the window, but for most of us, we are called to get on with our own business. The temptation to leave our own dough to knead someone else's is so often a trick of the devil—he wants us to be distracted, to engage in polemics, to let curiosity drive us rather than real desire for understanding. Polemics may give us a shot in the arm, a momentary burst of courage, but it is prayer that sustains us. We can judge our sincerity principally by seeing if our angst over another's sins or false teaching results in a renewed commitment to prayer and fasting on our part. If we will not pray with perseverance, if we will not fast in our sorrow, then we should question whether we are honest in our anxiety or whether we wish to be distracted from our real duties.

Above all, the image of the faithful woman, patiently and perseveringly kneading her dough and watching it rise with hope should pervade our memory so that we maintain our composure and focus even we are rightly frustrated by the cold air seeping in with disturbing frequency. We know that the yeast we have is real and effective; that it has been the source of the heavenly food that has fed countless generations of Christians and that it will never lose its vigor or its life-giving quality, and we also know that somewhere in the world martyrs are dying so that the

Church will never be without the nourishment of faith perfected by trial. The Church is far more than the Western world; the Church is far more than the visible Church on earth. And for every blast of arctic air in the bakery, there are hundreds more angels and saints warming the room through their charity, which we share in more palpably than we will ever know.

Finally, we should consider what happens when the dough does rise—it is fed to the fire to yield food for others. There are optimum conditions for allowing dough to rise, and there are optimum conditions for baking bread, and they are different. There are times when God raises the temperature and bakes us, as it were, not killing the yeast of faith as happens in the baking of bread, but elevating it to a new level, and thus making us able to feed others. The fire of the oven is the very intense trial that forces us to live our faith in a much more fundamental way that we are accustomed to, the time in which our daily murmurings take on a new perspective. Although our Lord does not mention it explicitly, dough is not allowed to rise just for the sake of rising; it happens so that it may become something that nourishes many. Our intense trials of faith do the same; when we are tested seemingly beyond our strength, when our talking about religion is forced into an act of worship, God uses us to give life to others. Having now lived through great suffering for love of Christ, we can now witness to others that God is indeed faithful.

It is this belief in the importance in our cultivation of a living faith that will change the world, rather than our willful distractions. I end with the words of Pope Pius XI, “Could anybody responsible for the extension of the Kingdom of God claim any other method but personal sanctification? Only thus can we show to the present generation, and to the critics of the Church that the salt of the earth, the leaven of Christianity has not decayed, but is ready to give the men of today the spiritual renewal they so much need. A Christianity which refuses every compromise with the world, takes the commands of God and the Church seriously, preserves its love of God and of men in all its freshness, such a Christianity can be, and will be, a model and a guide to a world.”

May we perseveringly knead the faith into the dough of our everyday lives such that we become that which we consume at this Mass, the bread of God. In the words of St. Ignatius, “I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ... Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice to God.”