

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR—Year A  
October 12, 2014

Our lectionary today offers a choice between the Gospel we just heard and a longer version containing four additional verses. I have chosen the shorter not because it would be too difficult to deal with the extra verses but because they almost certainly come from what was originally a separate parable and do not cohere very well with what we just heard. The parable we did hear was originally the evangelist's way of describing what happened to those who did not accept the teaching of Jesus, for the line about the burning of their city almost certainly refers to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70. It would be quite possible to reflect further on this point, and it would indeed be of some theological and historical interest to ask whether or not that is a helpful way of understanding why Jerusalem fell. I think, however, that it would be more useful for us to bring the Gospel passage to bear on our situation today.

To begin, note that the whole image of a wedding banquet can reasonably be applied to what is going on every time we celebrate the Eucharist, which for centuries has regularly been referred to as a banquet by spiritual writers, preachers, and composers of hymns. They may not often use the language of a *wedding* banquet to describe this sacrament, but even that would not really be far-fetched, for there is a sense in which the believing community gathered to celebrate the Eucharist could be said to be espoused to Christ. The truly significant point is that the parable ends with the king having everyone, bad and good alike, invited to share in the festivity.

This is also the case today, and in general has always been the case. The whole purpose of evangelization is to invite everyone into the fold. In the early Church, it was St. Paul who, more than anyone else, recognized that God did not want to limit the call simply to the Jews, so Paul traveled what in those days were tremendous distances, often at the risk of his own life, to proclaim the Good News far and wide. Not everyone accepted the invitation, but as far as possible he made it.

Let us now fast forward to the Church in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. We have all heard of “the new evangelization,” referring mainly to renewing and reinvigorating the call of the Gospel in lands that were once rather solidly Christian but are so no longer. From all I read, both in articles and in an occasional letter from a friend in Europe, the situation is especially dire on that continent. One can read statistics that American Catholics have, by and large, remained more faithful in the practice of their faith, but we ought not delude ourselves into thinking that all is going well enough here. There is a recent book titled *Young Catholic America*, whose lead author is a sociologist at the University of Notre Dame named Christian Smith, assisted by colleagues from two other universities and by one of his own doctoral candidates. A principal value of the book is that the many young adults interviewed now that they are between 18 and 23 years of age had also been interviewed five years earlier, so it was possible to see how their thinking, especially their commitment to the Church, has changed over those years. The results are sobering. As one reviewer wrote, now that these men and women are “eighteen to twenty three, their current status as Catholics might discourage even the most ardent evangelist. Only seven percent of these young adults who *might* have turned out Catholic can be called ‘practicing’ Catholics—if ‘practicing’ is tightly defined as attending Mass weekly, saying that faith is extremely or very important, and praying at least a few times a week.”<sup>1</sup> This means that the vast majority do not feel very much drawn to the Church at all. I expect the case is similar for many other denominations, but that is no real consolation.

When one asks the reason for such widespread withdrawal—for such responses as that of one young man interviewed who said, “It’s just easier not to follow a religion, is what it comes down to”—the interviews and the survey data seem to indicate that the major cause of dissatisfaction is with Catholic sexual teaching, especially with regard to premarital sex and birth

control. If such persons ever get married themselves, and many of them probably will not, it is hard to expect that they will pass much, if anything, of their earlier childhood faith on to their own children. One can immediately see that the subject of the current synod on the family being held in Rome could hardly be on a more important topic. No one of us, no one at the synod, dare claim to have all the answers, but at the very least we should do everything we possibly can to make young people feel welcome in the Church, not by watering down principles but by emphasizing that, more than anything else, the Catholic faith is a matter of relationship with a loving, merciful, saving God who doesn't ask instant perfection from any of us but only a genuine will to seek to live ever more faithfully as followers of his Son.

The other morning I was having a class with our two postulants and referred to St. Augustine's *Confessions*, written by a man who absolutely knew that he had often fallen short—even after he had been baptized and eventually named a bishop—but who nevertheless positively rejoiced and reveled in his faith because he knew that in the final analysis being a Catholic is what I have already mentioned—a relationship with a loving God. When Augustine asked himself what it was he loved when he loved his God, he answered in words that may indeed be of unsurpassed eloquence but are surely not beyond what any of us could and should affirm. Here is the way he answered his question:

It is not physical beauty nor temporal glory nor the brightness of light dear to earthly eyes, nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, nor the gentle odor of flowers, and ointments and perfumes, nor manna or honey, nor limbs welcoming the embraces of the flesh; it is not these I love when I love my God. Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace when I love my God — a light, voice, odor, food, embrace of my inner

being, where my soul is floodlit by a light which space cannot contain, where there is a sound that time cannot seize, where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. That is what I love when I love my God. (*Conf.* 10.7-8)

We ourselves might well use less florid language in answering his question, but we can surely affirm the rightness of what Augustine said. It is what has drawn all the saints to try ever more closely to put on the mind of Christ, to treat others as they would treat Christ himself, to realize that there are things far more important than one's bare life and that this life could rightly, even joyfully, be sacrificed for something greater still. Just saying this in a homily will not make much difference, but to whatever extent we can manifest it, radiate it, in our very lives, then some of those 18 to 23-year-olds may indeed want to give the Church a further look. May our participation in this Eucharistic banquet bring us closer to doing just that.

1" Thomas Baker, review of *Young Catholic America*, in *Commonweal*, Oct. 9, 2014.