

Pentecost VII

Dearly beloved,

Today we mark the seventh Sunday after Pentecost. The Gospel is taken from the Sermon on the Mount, and the epistle from the Romans, and both speak of the fruits of good and evil lives. If we use the imagery of a tree as Christ does, each of us is a tree that produces fruit according to the inner principle at work in us, either sin and evil or the Holy Spirit and His grace, and the fruit we produce leads to a reward, either death or eternal life. But whereas a tree cannot choose what fruit it produces, good or bad, and therefore avoid being cut down, we can choose to bring forth fruit that leads to life.

The teaching of St. Paul in the reading from Romans is a stylized way of expressing the classic teaching on human morality: our actions serve as means to achieve some end or goal, and depending on the end we hope to reach, we act accordingly. Thus there are some actions called intrinsically evil, which can never be chosen as a good human action; they lead only to eternal death. Then there are others, the great majority of actions, which are good or neutral in themselves and remain or become good by our doing them with the right intention, love of God being the most perfect intention we can have, but others, like performing our duty, as also acceptable and good.

By way of these actions, we choose what kind of person we will be: either a person worthy of God and of eternal life, or a person deserving of separation from God and everlasting death. For by performing actions repeatedly, we become what we do, and thus we can be called by the name of our virtues or our vices. We say, he is a just man, or she is an angry person. Elsewhere in his letters, Paul gives us lists of things which lead to life and to death: works leading to death are fornication, impurity, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger and selfishness; and, as St. Paul says, “I warn you that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” Paul’s fruits leading to life are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These lead to eternal life and also help us to share in that happiness even now. If we are honest with ourselves, we realize that we have the potential to engage in all the works of death, and that we struggle to consistently bring forth the fruits of life. So it is appropriate to discuss the moral life in more detail.

Thomas Aquinas teaches that human beings, despite original sin, still have an innate tendency toward good desires and good actions. We all know, for instance, persons who have good hearts and are inclined toward good actions in a natural way, as if they were born with it. Each of us has some of these inclinations; rarely do people have all of them; Saints like Maria Goretti and Aloysius Gonzaga are exceptions in that they possessed all of the virtues at a young age, and were likely prepared for that by being given dispositions to all the cardinal virtues at their conceptions. Instead, most of us have tendencies to some virtues, like temperance and kindness, but lack dispositions to other virtues like chastity and meekness. For each of us it is different, and that is why to despise someone because they lack a natural disposition to a virtue is foolish and vain.

But such natural dispositions to virtue are only inclinations, they are not virtue. Virtue must be purposely chosen, and it is through trial that we learn whether we possess a virtue or only an inclination. For example, a person may be considered temperate because he is thin but when he is put in the presence of an abundance of food, or when he is troubled by other circumstances, he becomes a glutton. Thus he does not possess the virtue, but only the semblance of it. It is also the case that the person who is overweight can be more temperate than the person who is thin due only to a high metabolism rather than to virtue, for appearances deceive and temperance is not about being thin but rather about eating properly for one's state in life and one's type of body.

So also many think they are kind and patient but when they have children or enter a monastery they learn they are actually angry and mean. It is revealed to them that they appeared to be virtuous because they could avoid difficult persons and control their lives, but when they face adversity and trying circumstances, they are less holy than they thought. Such self-knowledge is good, because it reminds us that we've just begun in the lifelong pursuit of virtue. Better to be a beginner aware that he is just beginning the race than a beginner who thinks he's already finished.

When faced with one of these revelations, we must set about doing the good action necessary to develop the virtue in us, and that requires grace, hard work, and trials of every sort. Thus temptations and adversities are the means we need to grow and we should be thankful for them as often as possible. And the higher the virtue at stake, the more we should thank God. Sufferings which cause us to develop our faith, hope and charity are the most precious, for they increase in us the most important virtues for the Christian life and most perfectly prepare us to persevere in this life and fully live in the world to come. Thus when a tragedy or an intense trial befalls us, we should strive to see God working in it, bringing us from a weak faith to a stronger one, from worldly hope to supernatural hope, from love of earthly things to love of God and the things to come.

It is also good to consider that the persons who bring adversity into our lives are either knowing or unknowing accomplices in virtue. We grow in holiness both by working together with those who support us and whom we get on well with, and by those who try us and expose our vice and weakness. St. Augustine often made the point in his preaching that evildoers help the just by providing opportunities for them to grow in virtue, and even among good people pursuing holiness together, there are persons we don't get on well with who still assist by not allowing us to grow stagnant in certain virtues and by keeping us from growing in pride at our supposed accomplishments.

To help us in our pursuit of virtue, we should remember two final things beyond what I have already mentioned: first, our decisions for virtue or vice are decisions for life and death; while we should not obsess over them, which would not be productive in the long run, neither should we become complacent and satisfied with ourselves. He who despises little opportunities to do good and grow in holiness will lose what he has little by little, and then he will wake up with a vice he can overcome only with great suffering.

Second, the grace of Christ can overcome everything, our vices, our evil tendencies, our weaknesses. How many of us have labored against a principal fault for years and still see little to no progress? We are still angry, lazy, impatient, intemperate, unchaste. So we must rededicate ourselves to the pursuit of God's grace, to remember that one of the functions of the sacraments is to heal our interior wounds, and the greatest sacrament, the Eucharist, heals our greatest wounds. The Postcommunion prayer testifies to this: "By the medicinal operation of this sacrament, O Lord, mercifully free us from our perversities and lead us to the things which are right." We are sick, and the liturgy calls the Eucharist our medicine.

What we cannot do of our own power, Christ can do in us; we should not lose hope even when we wake up at the starting line day after day. If we are committed to humility and to never giving up, God will save us. And the Eucharist will be the food that sustains us, whether it seems that we ran with God or He carried us. And so if we can do nothing else, if we are discouraged and wearied by our evil fruits, we can frequent the sacraments. Christ will do in us what we cannot do ourselves, but only if we let Him work in us. Therefore if we sense in ourselves a vice or vices that do not go away no matter what we do, or which we have despaired of ever overcoming, we must commit ourselves to weekly confession and as many Masses a week as our schedules and duties permit. The Lord does want to heal us; we need only admit our illness and make use of the remedies He offers.

Today then as we strive to bring forth good fruit that will lead to eternal life and everlasting union with God and His Saints, let us consider the consoling words of Christ in Revelation: "I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to try those who dwell upon the earth. I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown. He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem." May we give our weakness to Christ, enter the door He opens to us, and thus be found worthy to bear the name of God and live in His heavenly city forever.