

Homily for 2nd Sunday of Advent

December 8, 2019

The Stages to Fulfillment

I want to tell you a story about a beautiful swan that alighted one day by the banks of the water in which a crane was wading about seeking snails. For a few moments the crane viewed the swan in stupid wonder and then inquired:

"Where do you come from?"

"I come from heaven!" replied the swan.

"And where is heaven?" asked the crane.

"Heaven!" said the swan, "Heaven! Have you never heard of heaven?" And the beautiful bird went on to describe the grandeur of the Eternal City. She told of streets of gold, and the gates and walls made of precious stones; of the river of life, pure as crystal, upon whose banks is the tree whose leaves shall be for the healing of the nations. In eloquent terms, the swan sought to describe the hosts who live in the other world, but without arousing the slightest interest on the part of the crane.

Finally, the crane asked: "Are there any snails there?"

"Snails!" repeated the swan, "No! Of course, there are not."

"Then," said the crane, as it continued its search along the slimy banks of the pool, "you can have your heaven. I want snails!"

How easy it is to live on a lower level of existence in search of snails when God wants us to desire the food of heaven. Food that we get a foretaste of in every Eucharist. Food that we are to hunger and thirst for says Jesus because it is the food that will truly satisfy. The food we are to seek with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. Food that we can so easily forfeit when satisfied with the fast food of our contemporary culture that while easy to acquire will never satiate our deepest hunger. The fast food of pornography, drugs, gambling, adultery, greed, avarice, human respect, approval, pleasure, ease and social standing.

So the question is how can we live in a world where so many are satisfied with snails knowing that Jesus offers us so much more? How can we live through this world as we await heaven?

Within our Catholic Tradition, as expressed in the teaching of St. John of the Cross, we have the recipe that will satisfy our true hunger.

He describes the journey towards spiritual fulfillment. A journey containing three stages. Our three readings for today correspond to these three stages, as do the stages of the Liturgy of the Mass. The stages are known as:

1. The Purgative Stage
2. The Illuminative Stage
3. The Unitive Stage

The purgative stage includes the initial phases of the spiritual life, including coming to conversion, turning away from sin, bringing one's life into conformity with the moral law, initiating the habit of prayer and the practices of piety, and maintaining a relatively stable life in the Church.

The Gospel reading highlights the purgative stage. We hear St. John the Baptist call his hearers to repentance.

Repent. For the kingdom of heaven has come near.

This is the essence of the purgative stage. It is only when we have an awakening to the kingdom of heaven and therefore realize it is this kingdom that is to motivate how we live in the present because it is our ultimate goal that we will take repentance seriously.

The word for repentance in Greek is *metanoia* and means to change one's mind. It was this kind of repentance the swan invited to crane to consider but he rejected her offer and remained stubbornly set in his own ways. His mind was made up! He wanted nothing but snails.

Christian repentance has both an interior and an exterior dimension. It begins in the mind and heart, where the conviction of sin arises and where the desire to draw closer to God takes place. Although repentance cannot be reduced to a mental act, this change of perspective is essential to the redirection of one's life. The interior attitude thus leads to exterior actions that more fully reflect who we are becoming in Jesus.

In this stage, there is an association with the theological virtue of faith. For it only as faith is awakened that we can desire heaven and be motivated to repentance.

The illuminative stage is one of continuing growth. It is characterized by deeper prayer, growth in the virtues, deepening love of neighbor, greater moral stability, a more intentional surrender to the lordship of Christ, greater detachment from all that is not God and the increasing desire for full union. It is accompanied by various kinds of trials and purifications and sometimes by great consolations and blessings.

When we turn to the reading from Romans we hear St. Paul describe for us the illuminative stage:

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

If the purgative stage is associated with the virtue of faith, the illuminative stage is associated with the virtue of hope. Increasingly we are discovering the truth of the Bible's promises and consequently are inspired to be hopeful people. This is because we are encountering the encouragement of God whose steadfast love is more fully transforming us into people who live in harmony with others. This is essential to this second stage. There is an increasing experience

of unity in our relationship with others, and we discover more deeply the coherence of life because we are glorifying God with a singleness of purpose.

Such is the disposition of those who live in the hopeful illuminative stage.

The unitive stage is one of deep, habitual union with God, characterized by deep joy, profound humility, freedom from fears of suffering or trials, a great desire to serve God, and apostolic fruitfulness. The experience of the presence of God is almost continual; great insight into the things of God is experienced; and while not without suffering, suffering now becomes primarily the grace of sharing in the redeeming suffering of Christ rather than the suffering of purification. This deep, habitual union is variously described as a “spiritual marriage” or “transforming union.”

Now we turn to Isaiah where we have these famous words:

***2The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
3His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;***

Here the unitive stage is articulated where the soul is so joined to God that there is nothing distracting such a person. Here is the person who is infused with the theological virtue of love. It is this virtue that most fully anticipates heaven. It is this virtue that we can only imperfectly attain while in this life but the virtue we are to long for most of all. For it is in the unitive stage that we can understand poetry like this:

***8The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.

9They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.***

Here is a vision of perfect peace and serenity. Here is described the union of all things, where all creatures will be distinctly themselves but will live in perfect unity.

At every Mass we go through these three stages. With the Confession and Kyrie, we are in the purgative stage. With the Liturgy of the Word, we find ourselves centred in the illuminative stage. When we come to the Canon of the Mass and the Words of Institution we are entering into the unitive stage. A union that reaches its fulfillment when we come and receive Jesus, the very bread of heaven, that food alone that can satisfy our deepest hunger.

Let us never settle for a diet of snails but live with hearts and minds set on the food of heaven. May we travel the pathway of purgation, illumination, and union with God so we can pray with psalm 73:

What have I in heaven but you? Apart from you I want nothing on earth. My body and my heart faint for joy;

God is my possession for ever. To be near God is my happiness.” (Ps. 73: 25– 28)