



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



“Recovering the Sacred”
Homily by Fr. Augustine Wetta, O.S.B.
Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Saint Louis Abbey, 9am Mass

In our first reading from the Book of Numbers, the Lord comes down on a cloud and speaks to Moses, then sends out his Spirit on seventy elders, transforming them into prophets. This is such a sacred, precious and astonishing thing that Joshua’s first instinct is to fear for it. When Eldad and Medad start to prophesy in the camp, he worries that the gift is being taken too lightly. He is afraid that if everyone starts acting like prophets, then pretty soon, people will begin to take prophecy for granted—will start to treat holy things and holy people with contempt. Moses, who knows better, stops him.

Ironically, however, Joshua turns out to be right. From Jeremiah to John the Baptist, the history of the prophets is a history of abuse and neglect. “Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute?” (Acts 7.52) says Saint Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles. “You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous one,” says Saint James. Indeed, it seems that whenever we are given something holy, we misuse it.

So...in one, final, last-ditch effort, the Lord comes down to us, not in a cloud, but in person. Bestows his spirit, not on seventy elders, but on every living member of His Church. Saint John himself is tempted to stop it: “Teacher,” he says, “we saw someone driving out demons in your name...we tried to prevent him” (Mark 9.39). But lucky for us, Jesus stops him. For by virtue of our Baptism, every one of us has been granted the dignity of a prophet. By virtue of our participation in this Eucharistic sacrifice, every one of us participates in the priesthood of Christ. By virtue of our adoption as his brothers and sisters, every one of us is a king. Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest thing you will ever see. And he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ is truly hidden, the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself...truly hidden.¹

And so, it is not entirely a bad instinct to want—like Joshua or John—to protect and preserve what is sacred. After all, “Whoever causes one of these little ones...to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were put around his neck and he were thrown into the sea” (Mark 9.43). There’s something to be said for acting with caution. On the other hand, it’s also not such a good idea to stand in God’s way when He’s handing out gifts. The trick is to know when to protect the sacred and when to share it.

One of my professors in the seminary told me a story about when he was first assigned to his own parish, that a Eucharistic minister came up to him and said, “I’m sure glad you’re finally here, Father. That tabernacle has been getting really low, and I’ve been the only one filling it for weeks now.” For years, apparently, he had been filling the tabernacle with unconsecrated hosts! This is, I pray, an extreme case—and one must acknowledge that this pious layman—whoever he is, God bless him—was trying to serve the People of God; but it does seem to me that we have lost—and must recover—a sense of the dignity and sacredness of our vocation as Christian prophets as well as the dignity and sacredness of our central and defining act of worship, which is the mass. We must

¹ C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory”



stop thinking of “The Church” as those men in Rome and take responsibility for the Church ourselves. Because we have a big, big job to do.

“We ought to get back the dimension of the sacred in the liturgy,” wrote Pope Benedict (back when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger). “The liturgy is not a festivity; it is not a meeting for the purpose of having a good time. It is of no importance that the parish priest has cudged his brains to come up with suggestive ideas or imaginative novelties. The liturgy is what makes the Thrice-Holy God present amongst us; it is the burning bush; it is the Alliance of God with man in Jesus Christ, who has died and risen again. The grandeur of the liturgy does not rest upon the fact that it offers an interesting entertainment, but in rendering tangible the Totally Other, whom we are not capable of summoning. He comes because He wills. In other words, the essential in the liturgy is the mystery, which is realized in the common ritual of the Church; all the rest diminishes it. Men experiment with it in lively fashion, and find themselves deceived, when the mystery is transformed into distraction, when the chief actor in the liturgy is not the Living God but the priest or the liturgical director.”²

As I was writing this homily, I was reminded of a story my sister told me not long ago about one of her children. She has two daughters, four and six; and she noticed that the younger of the two would whisper to herself during the consecration at mass. So she started listening very carefully, and discovered, to her dismay, that when the priest would lean over the host and say, “This is my body,” Mary would say, “Mmmm, no it isn’t.” And when he’d say the words, “This is the cup of my blood,” she’d say, “Uhhhh, no it’s not.”

So my sister spent the next several days trying to explain to her the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation. She wasn’t entirely convinced that she had succeed (and how could she have? It took Thomas Aquinas five volumes, and he was writing for adults); but then there was an ecumenical prayer service at Mary’s preschool (a “non-religious” prayer service actually, if I remember the details correctly. How such a thing is even possible, only God knows...) And afterwards, my sister asked her how it went. Mary thought for a minute and said, “Well, Mom, it was OK. But you know, Jesus wasn’t there.” For all her lack of sophistication regarding sacramental theology, this child did have a sense of what Cardinal Ratzinger called “the dimension of the sacred in the liturgy.”

How exactly we will recover this dimension of the sacred... is up to you, I think. No doubt, it will entail a return to the catechism, a return to the scriptures, and a return, in a special way to the sacrament itself. But for now, I’ll simply leave you with a quote. It’s from a book by a monk named Gregory Dix. He wrote it in 1951, and his description

² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to the Bishops of Chile, given 13 July, 1988, in Santiago, Chile.



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of the mass one of the most beautiful ever written. I'm indebted to Fr. Ambrose for showing it to me:

“For century after century,” he writes, “spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done, in every conceivable human circumstance, for every conceivable human need from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it, from the pinnacle of earthly greatness to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth. Men have found no better thing than this to do for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold; for armies in triumph or for a bride and bridegroom in a little country church; for the proclamation of a dogma or for a good crop of wheat; for the wisdom of the government of a mighty nation or for a sick old woman afraid to die; for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for Columbus setting out to discover America; for the famine of whole provinces or for the soul of a dead lover; in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia; for a village headman much tempted to return to superstition because the yams had failed; because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna...for the settlement of a strike; for a son for a barren woman; for Captain so-and-so wounded and prisoner of war; while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre; on the beach at Dunkirk; while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church; tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows; furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk; gorgeously, for the canonisation of S. Joan of Arc—one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them. And best of all, week by week and month by month, on a hundred thousand successive Sundays, faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom, the pastors have done this just to make the plebs sancta Dei—the holy common people of God.