

## Extraordinary Form – 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

### **1 Thess. 1: 2–10**

Brethren: We give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers, unceasingly calling to mind your work of faith and labor of love and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father, knowing, brothers loved by God, how you were chosen. For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the holy Spirit and [with] much conviction. You know what sort of people we were [among] you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, receiving the word in great affliction, with joy from the Holy Spirit, so that you became a model for all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For from you, the word of the Lord has sounded forth not only in Macedonia and [in] Achaia, but in every place your faith in God has gone forth, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves openly declare about us what sort of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to await his Son from heaven, whom he raised from [the] dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the coming wrath.

### **Matth. 13: 31–35**

At that time, Jesus spoke to the multitudes this parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that a person took and sowed in a field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, yet when full-grown it is the largest of plants. It becomes a large bush, and the ‘birds of the sky come and dwell in its branches.’” He spoke to them another parable. “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed with three measures of wheat flour until the whole batch was leavened.” All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables. He spoke to them only in parables, to fulfill what had been said through the prophet: “I will open my mouth in parables, I will announce what has lain hidden from the foundation [of the world].”

## Grace as Seed and Yeast

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany – Mt 13: 31-35

Ave Maria Catholic Church, Sunday, Nov. 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Fr. David M. Vidal

In his work, *Life is worth Living*, the Venerable Fulton Sheen writes: “*Grace divides the world into two kinds of humanity: the once born, and the twice born. The once born are born only of their parents; the twice born are born of their parents and of God. One group are what might be called natural. The other, in addition to having nature, share mysteriously in the divine life of God.*”

The gospel of today’s Sunday Liturgy teaches us about this new life, this second and better life, that is offered to all men and women. This is the life of grace, a mysterious reality that for us is difficult to comprehend. This is the reason why images and examples are so important.

In the first parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven or grace with the mustard seed. The mustard seed was the smallest seed ever sown by a first-century Palestinian farmer. And in that part of the world, the black mustard seed typically grows to heights of 12 feet, large enough to hold and support bird’s nests.

How does the image of the mustard seed apply to the life of grace? Grace seems to be small, and some may even consider it as if it were nothing. But why? It is because grace is invisible to the human eye. Grace is spiritual in nature, and therefore, we cannot touch it or see it. Some people only value what can be touched or can be seen through sensible perception and have no time for what is invisible. Grace is invisible, it is an invisible seed.

With our spiritual eyes, we will see that grace is actually a seed. A seed is a unit of reproduction of a plant, capable of developing. Grace is a spiritual unit of life, but this is not just any kind of life, this is *the intimate life of God*. This is what the theologians call *habitual grace* by which we are disposed for intimate friendship with God.

It is habitual grace that makes it possible for us, by “adoption,” to participate in the intimate life of God. And so, *habitual grace* is the source of divine filiation and friendship with God.

Though it seems to be small, this seed of grace has the power to become something great and wonderful: *we can actually become children of God*. And when *habitual grace* is in us, then – the birds of the sky – that is to say, virtues like faith, hope, charity, justice, prudence, temperance, and fortitude can dwell in us and build their nests.

The image of the yeast also helps us to understand what grace is for us. *Yeast* is a microscopic element that is essential for cooking basic food for our bodies, such as bread. Now, the image of the *yeast* tells us how grace works in us.

*Yeast* produces transformations in the dough made from flour, water, and salt, which are essential if the bread is to rise. Grace produces in us a transformation. It is the transformation from a state of injustice to a state of justice. *Habitual grace* transforms our spiritual life and elevates it in a way that would otherwise be impossible for us.

### **Gift and Responsibility**

The life of grace is a tremendous gift – the gift of those who are born twice – so marvelous that we can wonder together with Nicodemus: “*How can a person once grown old be born again? Surely, he cannot reenter his mother’s womb and be born again, can he?*” (Jn. 3:4).

Yes, this is a marvelous gift, and Jesus confirms the reality of this gift when he answers Nicodemus: “*Amen, amen, I say to you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit,*” (Jn. 3:5).

We are born again, to a life of grace given to us by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit gives us the graces that Jesus obtained for us through his passion, death, and resurrection. And this is a gift, as St Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans:

*“Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood,”* (Romans 3, 23-25).

However, the life of grace in us is not only a gift but also a responsibility, as St. Paul describes in his first letter to the Corinthians:

*“By the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me,”* (1 Corinthians 15, 10).

Who can say with Saint Paul, “*The grace of God in me was not in vain, but I worked harder . . .*”? These are challenging words, but so true. Grace is a gift and a responsibility.

What should be our response to the gift of grace? The answer can be summarized with one word: fidelity. Saint Teresa of Calcutta knew very well this answer, and for that reason, she left us these beautiful words: “*God has not called me to be successful. He has called me to be faithful.*”

God calls us to be faithful. This should be our real concern and the daily subject of our personal examination: *“Am I faithful to God’s grace?”*

### **1. Fidelity to grace requires a life of prayer.**

We need to pray. St Paul encourages us: *“With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity . . . be watchful with all perseverance and supplication,”* (Ephesians 6:12.18).

### **2. Fidelity to grace requires a firm determination to do good.**

Sin steals from us the most precious treasure that we can ever desire and possess: *God himself*. Therefore, determination is of the essence. The struggle to persevere in the life of grace is daily and persisting. Then, our answer must match the intensity of the adversity. We must have a firm determination to fight against sin until the end and to do good instead. Following the advice of Teresa of Avila:

*[We] must have a great and very determined determination to persevere until reaching the end, come what may, happen what may, whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether [we] arrive or whether [we] die on the road, or even if [we] don’t have courage for the trials that are met, or if the whole world collapses.”* (The Way of Perfection 21:2)

### **3. Fidelity to grace requires patience**

Every single battle is important, but what really matters is the final victory. And for that, we need patience. We need to be steadfast and patient, fighting one battle after the other, knowing that – as the great Teresa of Avila tells us – patience obtains all things:

*Let nothing disturb you,  
Let nothing frighten you,  
All things are passing away:  
God never changes.  
Patience obtains all things  
Whoever has God lacks nothing;  
God alone suffices.*

We were called to enjoy the divine life of God. It seems insignificant, like a mustard seed planted in a field or like the yeast kneaded into the dough. However, it produces a miracle in us. Let’s ask to be faithful to the work that God has begun in us, knowing that God’s grace is a gift and a responsibility. Amen