



Fifth Sunday of Easter B

April 29, 2018

- **Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation on our call to live a holy life (Part 2)**
- **The Vine and the Branches**

As I announced last week, Pope Francis recently issued an *Apostolic Exhortation* on our call to live a holy life.

In Chapter 3 of the Exhortation, Pope Francis tells us that observing the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12) is a fundamental way to work on living a holy life. In this week's column, we offer you Pope Francis' meditation on the first four beatitudes. In paragraphs 63-66, Francis has some introductory remarks to his reflection on the Beatitudes.

63. *There can be any number of theories about what constitutes holiness, with various explanations and distinctions. Such reflection may be useful, but nothing is more enlightening than turning to Jesus' words and seeing his way of teaching the truth. Jesus explained with great simplicity what it means to be holy when he gave us the Beatitudes (cf. Mt 5:3-12; Lk 6:20-23). The Beatitudes are like a Christian's identity card. So if anyone asks: "What must one do to be a good Christian?" The answer is clear. We have to do, each in our own way, what Jesus told us in the Sermon on the Mount. In the Beatitudes, we find a portrait of the Master, which we are called to reflect in our daily lives.*

64. *The word "happy" or "blessed" thus becomes a synonym for "holy." It expresses the fact that those faithful to God and his word, by their self-giving, gain true happiness.*

65. *Although Jesus' words may strike us as poetic, they clearly run counter to the way things are usually done in our world. Even if we find Jesus' message attractive, the world pushes us towards another way of living. The Beatitudes are in no way trite or undemanding, quite the opposite. We can only practise them if the Holy Spirit fills us with his power and frees us from our weakness, our selfishness, our complacency and our pride.*

66. *Let us listen once more to Jesus, with all the love and respect that the Master deserves. Let us allow his words to unsettle us, to challenge us and to demand a real change in the way we live. Otherwise, holiness will*

remain no more than an empty word. We turn now to the individual Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew (cf. Mt 5:3-12).

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

67. *The Gospel invites us to peer into the depths of our heart, to see where we find our security in life. Usually the rich feel secure in their wealth, and think that, if that wealth is threatened, the whole meaning of their earthly life can collapse. Jesus himself tells us this in the parable of the rich fool: he speaks of a man who was sure of himself, yet foolish, for it did not dawn on him that he might die that very day (cf. Lk 12:16-21).*

68. *Wealth ensures nothing. Indeed, once we think we are rich, we can become so self-satisfied that we leave no room for God's word, for the love of our brothers and sisters, or for the enjoyment of the most important things in life. In this way, we miss out on the greatest treasure of all. That is why Jesus calls blessed those who are poor in spirit, those who have a poor heart, for there the Lord can enter with his perennial newness.*

69. *This spiritual poverty is closely linked to what Saint Ignatius of Loyola calls "holy indifference," which brings us to a radiant interior freedom: "We need to train ourselves to be indifferent in our attitude to all created things, in all that is permitted to our free will and not forbidden; so that on our part, we do not set our hearts on good health rather than bad, riches rather than poverty, honour rather than dishonour, a long life rather than a short one, and so in all the rest."*

70. *Luke does not speak of poverty "of spirit" but simply of those who are "poor" (cf. Lk 6:20). In this way, he too invites us to live a plain and austere life. He calls us to share in the life of those most in need, the life lived by the Apostles, and ultimately to configure ourselves to Jesus who, though rich, "made himself poor" (2Cor 8:9).*

Being poor of heart: that is holiness.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

71. *These are strong words in a world that from the beginning has been a place of conflict, disputes and*

enmity on all sides, where we constantly pigeonhole others on the basis of their ideas, their customs and even their way of speaking or dressing. Ultimately, it is the reign of pride and vanity, where each person thinks he or she has the right to dominate others. Nonetheless, impossible as it may seem, Jesus proposes a different way of doing things: the way of meekness. This is what we see him doing with his disciples. It is what we contemplate on his entrance to Jerusalem: "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey" (Mt 21:5; Zech 9:9).

72. Christ says: "Learn from me; for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Mt 11:29). If we are constantly upset and impatient with others, we will end up drained and weary. But if we regard the faults and limitations of others with tenderness and meekness, without an air of superiority, we can actually help them and stop wasting our energy on useless complaining. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux tells us that "perfect charity consists in putting up with others' mistakes, and not being scandalized by their faults."

73. Paul speaks of meekness as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 5:23). He suggests that, if a wrongful action of one of our brothers or sisters troubles us, we should try to correct them, but "with a spirit of meekness," since "you too could be tempted" (Gal 6:1). Even when we defend our faith and convictions, we are to do so "with meekness" (cf. 1 Pet 3:16). Our enemies too are to be treated "with meekness" (2 Tim 2:25). In the Church we have often erred by not embracing this demand of God's word.

74. Meekness is yet another expression of the interior poverty of those who put their trust in God alone. Indeed, in the Bible the same word – *anawim* – usually refers both to the poor and to the meek. Someone might object: "If I am that meek, they will think that I am an idiot, a fool or a weakling." At times they may, but so be it. It is always better to be meek, for then our deepest desires will be fulfilled. The meek "shall inherit the earth," for they will see God's promises accomplished in their lives. In every situation, the meek put their hope in the Lord, and those who hope for him shall possess the land...and enjoy the fullness of peace (cf. Ps 37:9.11). For his part, the Lord trusts in them: "This is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word" (Is 66:2).

Reacting with meekness and humility: that is holiness.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

75. The world tells us exactly the opposite: entertainment, pleasure, diversion and escape make for

the good life. The worldly person ignores problems of sickness or sorrow in the family or all around him; he averts his gaze. The world has no desire to mourn; it would rather disregard painful situations, cover them up or hide them. Much energy is expended on fleeing from situations of suffering in the belief that reality can be concealed. But the cross can never be absent.

76. A person who sees things as they truly are and sympathizes with pain and sorrow is capable of touching life's depths and finding authentic happiness. He or she is consoled, not by the world but by Jesus. Such persons are unafraid to share in the suffering of others; they do not flee from painful situations. They discover the meaning of life by coming to the aid of those who suffer, understanding their anguish and bringing relief. They sense that the other is flesh of our flesh, and are not afraid to draw near, even to touch their wounds. They feel compassion for others in such a way that all distance vanishes. In this way they can embrace Saint Paul's exhortation: "Weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15).

Knowing how to mourn with others: that is holiness.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

77. Hunger and thirst are intense experiences, since they involve basic needs and our instinct for survival. There are those who desire justice and yearn for righteousness with similar intensity. Jesus says that they will be satisfied, for sooner or later justice will come. We can cooperate to make that possible, even if we may not always see the fruit of our efforts.

78. Jesus offers a justice other than that of the world, so often marred by petty interests and manipulated in various ways. Experience shows how easy it is to become mired in corruption, ensnared in the daily politics of *quid pro quo*, where everything becomes business. How many people suffer injustice, standing by powerlessly while others divvy up the good things of this life. Some give up fighting for real justice and opt to follow in the train of the winners. This has nothing to do with the hunger and thirst for justice that Jesus praises.

79. True justice comes about in people's lives when they themselves are just in their decisions; it is expressed in their pursuit of justice for the poor and the weak. While it is true that the word "justice" can be a synonym for faithfulness to God's will in every aspect of our life, if we give the word too general a meaning, we forget that it is shown especially in justice towards those who are most vulnerable: "Seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Is 1:17).

Hungering and thirsting for righteousness: that is holiness.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.”

80. *Mercy has two aspects. It involves giving, helping and serving others, but it also includes forgiveness and understanding. Matthew sums it up in one golden rule: “In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you” (7:12). The Catechism reminds us that this law is to be applied “in every case,” especially when we are “confronted by situations that make moral judgments less assured and decision difficult.”*

81. *Giving and forgiving means reproducing in our lives some small measure of God’s perfection, which gives and forgives superabundantly. For this reason, in the Gospel of Luke we do not hear the words, “Be perfect” (Mt 5:48), but rather, “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you” (6:36-38). Luke then adds something not to be overlooked: “The measure you give will be the measure you get back” (6:38). The yardstick we use for understanding and forgiving others will measure the forgiveness we receive. The yardstick we use for giving will measure what we receive. We should never forget this.*

82. *Jesus does not say, “Blessed are those who plot revenge.” He calls “blessed” those who forgive and do so “seventy times seven” (Mt 18:22). We need to think of ourselves as an army of the forgiven. All of us have been looked upon with divine compassion. If we approach the Lord with sincerity and listen carefully, there may well be times when we hear his reproach: “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” (Mt 18:33).*

Seeing and acting with mercy: that is holiness.

Allegory of the Vine and the Branches

In today’s Gospel (Jn 15:1-8), we listened to the allegory of the Vine and the Branches which stresses the unity that exists between Christ and his disciples. Christ is the vine; the disciples are the branches. Vine and branches need each other. The vine cannot bear fruit without the branches. And the branches cannot have life if separated from the vine.

The Father is the Vinedresser. The branches need to be pruned (by trials) in order to become fruitful (Paul is a good example). By their fruitfulness, they will bring glory to the Father and show themselves to be good Disciples of Christ.

Reflecting on today’s Gospel, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

Christ wrote no books. He left no buildings or monuments behind. Yet he did something far greater and more necessary, though less ostentatious—he built a community. That was his ‘monument.’

He said to his apostles, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” This was the image he used in talking about the community he had founded. It is a simple but profound illustration of unity, closeness and interdependence.

In spring the branches of the vine teem with life in the form of leaves and blossoms. In autumn they are loaded with grapes. But they have this life, and are able to produce this fruit, only because they are connected to the vine. Cut off from the vine, they would not only become barren, but quickly wither and die. Just as the branches need the vine, so we need Christ. Separated from him, we have no life and are unable to bear fruit.

But the vine also needs the branches—it is the branches that produce the fruit. Which means that Christ also needs us. We are his branches. Vine and branches need each other. Together they form a unity. From this we can see how great is the trust he has placed in us. We may feel inadequate. But we must remember that the vine is sturdy and full of life.

Christ depends on us to produce fruit in the world. There is a big difference between successfulness and fruitfulness. Success comes from strength, control and respectability. Success brings rewards and sometimes fame as well. Fruitfulness, however, often comes from weakness and vulnerability, and frequently goes unrecognized and unrewarded.

Christ didn’t ask us to be successful, but to be fruitful. Each of us has some gift. By developing, using, and sharing that gift with others, we become fruitful. The world is waiting for fruit. What is important is to love. God will make our love fruitful, whether we see that fruitfulness or not.

During the winter months the branches are pruned. Pruning is a painful process for a fruit tree. The pruner rids it of suckers and excess shoots which use up a lot of energy but produce no fruit. The aim of this surgery is not to inflict pain, but to help the tree to produce more and better fruit.

We, the branches of the True Vine, need some pruning too. There is much that is useless and perhaps harmful in our lives, which saps our energy and diminishes our spiritual fruitfulness. If Christ prunes us through trials it is only to make us more fruitful. Pruned by suffering, a person produces the fruit of understanding and compassion.

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Five ways to avoid marrying an unsuitable partner

No. 5: Opposites attract, but differences often divide.

Take inventory of your similarities and differences in personality, values, and lifestyle. Go for a high degree of compatibility.

No. 4: The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Family patterns form scripts and molds that often are replicated in future relationships. Talk about his/her family background and watch how he/she interacts with different family members.

No. 3: History repeats itself. Look closely at the way he/she acted throughout previous relationships. You will probably get something similar.

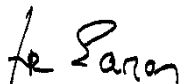
No. 2: Take time to get to know the talk and the walk.

The first three months can be exhilarating...but then you start to see patterns. Going too fast too soon will infect you with the "love is blind" syndrome. It is a good rule of thumb to first develop a strong friendship.

No. 1: First remove the log from your own eye.

A relationship cannot fulfill what is deficient or unhealthy in your own personal life. Get your act together before you complicate things with a relationship.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Sean". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.