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+DiNoia's Homily Yesterday

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 4, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, at the North American College, 62 seminarians were installed as Acolytes. When Archbishop Augustine DiNoia, O.P. agreed to celebrate the Mass and give the homily, little did he know that eight cardinals would be concelebrating the Mass! In town for the conclave, and staying at the NAC, the cardinals joined +DiNoia in the liturgy and this is the sermon they all heard:

Third Sunday of Lent: Institution of Acolytes [final]

Pontifical North American College

3 March 2013

J. Augustine Di Noia, O.P.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ. On Tuesday, following an in-flight explosion, a hot air balloon crashed near Luxor in Egypt, killing nineteen tourists??cremating? them, as the media gruesomely reported. The pilot and a passenger survived. Were those nineteen greater sinners than the two who survived?

Our Lord?s examples in today?s Gospel are like this?instances of catastrophes everyone has heard about. He anticipates what his hearers might be thinking: do these events have some religious or moral significance? Were the Galileans whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices greater sinners than all other Galileans, or were the eighteen people upon whom the tower in Siloam collapsed greater sinners than all the inhabitants of Jerusalem?

His response to the questions he poses is brief and deceptively simple. The lesson to be drawn from these events is most surely *not* that those who perished were greater sinners than those who survived or were entirely unaffected. Rather it is this: if we do not repent, all of us will perish. In fuller terms the point is that since all of us are sinners, and the end of life can be so unexpected, then there can be no reason to postpone repentance. Nothing is to be gained by procrastination. If we knew that our lives were going to come to an end on such and such a day in the future?say, ten years from now?then we could delay repentance until a safe interval before that date. But we don?t know this. Death will be as unexpected for us as for those who perished in these catastrophes.

Our Lord underscores precisely this point by means of the parable of the fig tree. Though the fig tree has been barren for three years, the owner of the orchard agrees to give it a reprieve: one more year. Likewise, God is patient with our procrastination, with our failure to bear the fruit of true repentance, but not indefinitely so. ?With fear and trembling,? says St. Gregory the Great, ?should we hear the words.?, ?*cut it down*??. He who will not by correction grow rich unto fruitfulness, falls to that place from whence he is no longer able to rise by repentance.?(Homily 31 on the Gospel of Luke).

But there is a bright side to today?s sobering Lenten message?as it happens something wonderfully apt on this occasion of the Institution of Acolytes. It is to be found in the humble figure of the gardener in the parable of the fig tree. For it is at his suggestion?we might well say his intercession?that the owner of the orchard gives the barren fig tree yet another year. ?Let us not then strike suddenly,? says St. Gregory Nazianzen, ?but overcome by gentleness, lest we cut down the fig tree still able to bear fruit, which the care perhaps of a skilful dresser will restore? (Oration 32). Not only does the gardener put in a good word for the fig tree, but he has a plan for improving its chances of bearing fruit in the coming year: to dig around the tree and fertilize it, to give it special care.

The figure of the gardener is easy to miss, but in the rich tradition of patristic commentary on this parable he gets a lot of attention. A particularly significant reading of the parable sees him as representing Christ who implores the Father to allow him to water the tree with his teaching and his sufferings so that it will yield the fruit of repentance and good works.

This reading counterbalances the sharp warning contained in the whole passage. The prolongation and exquisite tenderness of divine patience with us is assured by the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of Christ who stays the pending divine judgment and provides the grace we need to repent of our sins. We are prompted not only to fear and trembling, as St. Gregory rightly says, but also to hope and renewed resolve to open our hearts to Christ and his healing grace. He works at the roots of our fig tree, watering it with his own blood, as it were, to nourish, correct, and guide us to the repentance and love that makes possible our communion with him, with his heavenly Father, and his Holy Spirit. ?Christ was born for this,? we sang just a few weeks ago at Christmastide, ?Christ was born for this.?

But there are greater depths to be plumbed here. Listen again to St. Gregory the Great: ?By the dresser of the vineyard is represented the order of Bishops, who, by ruling over the Church, take care of the Lord?s vineyard? (Homily 31). Thus the divine husbandman conjoins to himself laborers in the vineyard to take care of us?and not just as collaborators, but as true instruments of his saving grace, internally united with him to act *in persona Christi capitis*, according to the ancient formula.

Christ established a sacramental economy which may be regarded as an extension of the mystery of the Incarnation itself. The only begotten Son of God, who came to us in human flesh as our Savior did not leave us. After he had ascended to the right hand of the Father, he willed to remain with us always, chiefly by his presence in the Holy Eucharist, where he shares with us his body and blood.

What is more, Christ ensured this presence by giving to his disciples, and through them, to their successors, the power of the priesthood to celebrate, in *his* Person, this very sacrifice of his love and his friendship. Bishops and priests are the instruments of this Eucharistic mystery. Through them God wills to pour out his grace?his friendship and love?on us in the Church through the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments.

In this way, the divine husbandman continues to be in our midst but in a manner precisely adapted to our human nature, ensuring that the Apostles and their successors chosen from our midst would care for his precious vineyard. The hand of another human being blesses us, pours the water of Baptism on our heads, offers the body and blood of Christ to us in the Eucharist, and is raised in absolution unto the forgiveness of sins. Through these sacramental actions, we see the divine husbandman at work as God bestows his saving grace on us, drawing us into a participation in the communion of love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

To be sure, as St. Augustine reminds us, ?the husbandman who intercedes is every holy man who within the Church prays for them that are without the Church, saying, *O Lord, O Lord, let it alone this year,* that is for that time vouchsafed under grace, *until I dig about it*?(cited in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea*, Luke, 482).

Nonetheless, the parable of the fig tree provides a key for understanding a special type of participation in Christ?s work as the divine husbandman and thus an insight into what will happen here, dear sons in Christ, as you are instituted in the ministry of acolytes in a few moments.

For you will have a special role in the Church?s ministry, in the care and nurturing of the vineyard of Christ. The summit and source of the Church?s life is the Eucharist. It is your responsibility to assist priests and deacons in carrying out their ministry, and as special ministers to give Holy Communion to the faithful at Mass and to the sick. Because you are specially called to this ministry, you should strive to live more fully by the Lord?s sacrifice and to be conformed ever more perfectly to Christ himself. Strive to understand the deep spiritual meaning of what you do, so that you may offer yourselves daily to God as spiritual sacrifices acceptable to him through Jesus Christ. In performing your ministry bear in mind that, as you share the one bread with your brothers and sisters, you form one Body with them. Show a sincere love for Christ?s Mystical Body, and especially for the weak and the sick. Be obedient to the commandment which the Lord gave to his Apostles at the Last Supper: ?Love one another as I also have loved you.?

In this way, you will begin to share in the unique role of Christ himself who came to save sinners and bring them back to God, and to incorporate the Holy Priesthood and its special assistants?its acolytes?into this work of salvation. Be confident of the divine mercy that has been poured into your own hearts for the sake of repentance and the forgiveness of sins. May God make you fit instruments of this mercy in all your dealings with those whom you serve, in imitation of the divine husbandman, never losing hope in his power to make the barren tree bring forth the fruit of faith, repentance and love. Amen.

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