

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time—Year A
“Becoming Reservoirs of Grace”

Through the Words of the Gospel, May Our Sins be Wiped Away

Holy Spirit, Help Me to Preach with Great Clarity and Great Charity

When she was 18-years-old, Agnese left her home in Europe to join the Sisters of Loreto in Calcutta, India. There, while serving as a teacher at the St. Mary's convent school, she sought holiness by maintaining constant union with God and striving to overcome her personal sin, something she struggled with as do all of us. Every morning, she would rise at 4:40 and begin her day with adoration, prayer and Mass. She constantly carried and prayed her Rosary beads, and she was devoted to Our Lord in His Most Holy Eucharist. So in 1948, when God asked Agnes to embark on a new mission, having fully made herself available to His grace, she was able to say, *"I gave my life completely to God, and He was the one Who guided me. I felt His presence at every moment, and I saw His direct intervention."*

"Behold, the Lamb of God, Who takes away the sin of the world." For the Jewish disciples of John the Baptist, this proclamation would have immediately reminded them of their ancestors' exodus from slavery in Egypt. It was the sacrifice of the Passover lamb that saved the Israelites from the destroying angel, the angel of death, as it passed through Egypt to claim all firstborn sons. From that time on, the Passover lamb, the lamb of God, was always associated with deliverance, with rescue, and in particular deliverance from death. John is signaling to his audience,

and to each of us, that Jesus is the true Passover lamb, Who will inaugurate a new exodus that will deliver His disciples not just from physical death but from spiritual death—and begin our journey toward the heavenly promised land.

In today's readings, the Holy Spirit makes clear that we have a role to play in achieving our salvation and reaching that promised land. St. Paul calls those of us who have been sanctified in the Lamb of God through the sacrament of Baptism to be holy. And the Psalmist teaches what holiness looks like, to have ears open to obedience and "*...to do Your will, O my God, is my delight, and Your law is within my heart!*" And so I believe each of us is challenged with this question: Can we honestly examine our hearts and find there that God's will, and not our own, is our delight? To accept Christ, to follow His divine will, we must accept the teachings of His Church and strive for salvation—and this requires great effort.

Perhaps the biggest lie that the devil has perpetrated on mankind in our own day and age is the deception that almost everyone will be saved because God is so merciful. The witness of Sacred Scripture and the clear and consistent 2,000-year teaching of Sacred Church Tradition both highlight that there are two ways set before the human race—one leading to eternal life and the other to eternal death. But today, the world and the Church are filled with false prophets who deny this witness. Instead, rebelling against the revealed word of God and our faith Tradition, they advocate for *universalism*, the belief that all or almost all will be saved. These lying

voices deny that the default situation of the human race is lost—not saved—and Jesus' warnings about this are to be received with the utmost attention. As Avery Cardinal Dulles pointed out so clearly, *"Priests and theologians frequently give the impression that the doctrine of hell is a medieval superstition rather than an essential component of the Gospel. In so doing, they may well be doing Satan's work because the fear of hell occupied a central place in the preaching of Jesus."*

We don't live in a neutral environment. The spiritual realities referred to in Sacred Scripture as the world, the flesh, and the devil present great obstacles to fulfilling the conditions under which it is possible to be saved. John, Matthew, James, Peter, Paul, Jude, and Jesus Himself, in the multiple texts from Sacred Scripture that talk of the final judgment of the human race, unmistakably declare that if people persist in their unbelief or their sin to the end, they will be eternally lost. God makes clear that each person will be judged on how they have responded to the grace they have been given. Recognizing that humanity was forgetting these realities, in 1971 St. Paul VI reminded us of *"...the solemn eschatological truths that concern us, including the terrible truth of a possible eternal punishment that we call hell, which Christ speaks about without hesitation."* Life in the promised land of heaven is not guaranteed. The path that God marks out for human beings so that they can meet Him is Christ. Salvation is the eternal ratification of our life here on earth, dependent on whether Christ's grace was accepted or rejected in this life.

While we certainly cannot judge the state of anyone's soul and what transpires at the moment of death, it certainly appears—from the view of human resistance to the judgment contained in the Scriptures and from everyday observation of the world around us, that many people do indeed persevere to the end in their rejection of God and/or in a life of immorality. This led St. John Paul II to proclaim, *“Thus is defended the teaching of the divine law which excludes from God's kingdom not only unbelievers, but also the faithful if they are guilty of fornication, adultery, wantonness, sodomy, theft, avarice, drunkenness, slander, plundering, and all others who commit mortal sins from which, with the help of divine grace, they can refrain, and because of which they are severed from the grace of Christ.”*

Unfortunately, the dominant view in western culture today is that a man must simply be involved in good works to be assured his salvation. There are, for example, many involved in the very important work of the pro-life movement, of feeding the poor, of helping refugees, or of teaching the faith. All of these ministries are praiseworthy and it is vital that they be performed. But is it possible for a person to be involved in such work and still lose his eternal salvation? Of course it is.

The distinction between good works and holiness was made by St. Bernard of Clairvaux when he taught of the difference between being a channel of grace versus being a reservoir of grace. Hear his words, *“The channels let the water flow away, and do not retain a drop. But the reservoir is first filled, and then, without emptying*

itself, pours out its overflow, which is ever renewed, over the fields which it waters. How many there are that are devoted to works, who are never anything but channels, and retain nothing for themselves, but remain dry while trying to pass on life-giving grace to souls! We have many channels in the Church today, but very few reservoirs.”

Holy Mother Church instructs us that, in His Providence, God uses the work of sinners *and* those who are eventually lost for all eternity. God even uses Satan’s malice for his own end. The damned Apostle Judas was a channel of grace. Pontius Pilate was a channel of grace. Annas and Caiaphas were both channels of grace. While every person has freewill and may choose for or against holiness, what our future choices will be are already known to God and He crafts His divine plan of salvation accordingly. Thus, He incorporates the freewill decisions of men that they make *against* Him into His Divine Providence, reducing such men to channels of grace. As it is rightly said, God even uses evil to bring forth good.

If, through our good works, we are merely channels of grace and not reservoirs, we shall not see heaven. To gain for us merit in the eyes of God, all our good works must originate from a life of holiness or at least from striving to be holy. It is not our works that make us holy, but the interior disposition from which our work flows that is critical. If we are trapped by our personal sin, whether it be pornography, sexual immorality, drunkenness, disrespect for human life, or any of the many sins which plague our culture, then our good works avail us nothing. If you’re a soup

kitchen or crisis-pregnancy center volunteer, that's good for those you are assisting, but if you are trapped in serious sin, you are reduced to a mere channel of grace and it means nothing for you when you stand before Christ the judge.

Too many people today have been hardened to sin, especially their own. And sin destroys our ability to fight the fight that matters most—the fight for holiness. Satan has many tricks to fool people into a false sense of security about their own eternal fate, even those doing objectively good things. Jesus Himself recounts what it will be like for some of His followers when judgment comes and they are refused entry into heaven. He says to them, *“I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.”* This from the merciful lips of Our Lord even after these followers had recounted their close association with Him and their works for Him.

Grace flows from God. It is the lifeblood of God. When we each die we must be a reservoir containing that grace, we must be filled with God. That grace passed through us will account for nothing. Grace passed through Judas. If you struggle with habitual sin, fight that first. Conquer the demon within, bring him to heel in your soul, and then seek to perform good works. The remedy for evil in the world is holiness. Strong Christians are only truly strong when they battle for holiness. Only then can we perform the works needed to bring about the change needed to make this world more in keeping with God's desires.

The Church and her teachings are a light to each of our souls, illuminating for each of us the narrow road to salvation. Like John the Baptist, who himself was certainly a reservoir of grace, the Church always points to and leads us to the Lamb of God. It is the Church and her teachings that guide us to heaven. They help us to make God's will the delight of each of our hearts and reservoirs of His grace. So let us strive to learn and live our faith, the one true faith that can help us to be holy.

Agnese was truly a reservoir of God's grace. In 1950, she left the comfort of her teaching position and ventured out into the slums of Calcutta. Beginning with just five of her former students, she founded the Missionaries of Charity and spent the rest of her life showing compassion and providing support for those typically abandoned by society in the slums of Calcutta and around the world—the dying, orphans, alcoholics, drug addicts, AIDS patients, the homeless and the destitute. When asked why she gave her life to alleviating poverty, she replied, *"I'm not a social worker. I don't do it for this reason. I do it for Christ. I do it for the Church."* Through the intercession of Agnese Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, may we follow her example, the example of St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and strive to be ourselves reservoirs of grace, so that we too can live good and holy lives, lives of sacrificial love, and lives always in keeping with Our Lord's Divine Will.