

ON THE JOY OF RECONCILIATION

Among the parables in the New Testament, few have achieved the notice that distinguishes the story of the "Prodigal Son." The Fathers of the Church took special delight in discovering the figurative meanings attached to the characters and details in this parable from the Gospel of Luke. In the patristic tradition, the parables of Jesus provide richly-elaborated allegorical accounts of the Christian mysteries. Allegory, of course, involves certain risks. Thus, St John Chrysostom recounts that some early commentators held the startling opinion that the elder son represents the good angels, and the prodigal son the human race that in Adam fell away from grace, but was to be received back. Cyril of Alexandria reports that other expounders presumed that the loyal son signified Israel according to the flesh, and the younger one the multitude of the Gentiles. But the great doctors of the universal Church unanimously recognize in the "son who was dead and has come back to life" (Lk 15: 24) a figure of the Christian believer. More specifically, for Sts Ambrose, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Basil, and Jerome, this Lucan parable illuminates the sacramental nature of Christian reconciliation that exists in the Church of Christ.

I propose, then, that we choose St Augustine as our principal commentator, that we let him disclose for us the catholic truth expressed in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In his commentary, St Augustine first suggests that the elder son represents those who have never abandoned the worship of the true God, while the younger son stands for all those who have turned themselves over to idolatry of any kind. "From the very creation of the human race," writes St Augustine, "the elder son refers to the worship of the one God, but the younger seeks that the share of the estate that is coming to him should be given him by the father."¹ For St Augustine, this request epitomizes the depraved inclination in the human person to withdraw from God. For while baptism sanctifies every man and woman for the perfect worship of God, each Christian believer still recognizes a craving for certain

¹ The citations from St Augustine come from his brief exposition of the parable found in *Quaestiones Evangeliorum*, Bk 2, q. 33 (PL 35: 1344-48).

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idolatrous forms of self-autonomy, for a self love that prefers a wrongful independence to the rectitude of divine charity in his or her life. And to the extent that a person, abandoning the ways of divine providence, consciously pursues this illusion, such a one stands in need of forgiveness and reconciliation.

So it comes as no surprise that for the Doctor of Grace, the "distant land, where the [younger son] squandered his money on dissolute living," does not indicate a geographical location, but represents a psychological state, that of being permanently forgetful of God. "For by following those things that pass on to something else, the younger son forsakes Him who is closest to himself." By this astute commentary, St Augustine reminds us that alienation from God amounts to a sort of self-destruction and is certain to entail the disordered behavior that we call sin. So St Ambrose poses the rhetorical query: "For what is more far off than to depart from one's self, to be separate not by country but by one's actions."

The Gospel continues: "In that country, a great famine broke out" (Lk 15: 14). And "the famine," says St Augustine, "is the want of the word of truth." As happens with every sinner, the younger son pays a costly price for ignoring the word of Truth: "So he attached himself to one of the propertied class of the place, who sent him to his farm to take care of the pigs" (Lk 15: 15). "He feeds those swine into whom the devil sought to enter," St Ambrose observes, "living in filth and pollution." But God is never outdone by evil. The gracious design of a loving Providence ordains that the emptiness and futility of sin open our minds to the purposes and reality of a Father's love.

The Church is the place of reconciliation. "You must understand then," St Augustine continues, "that this 'return to my father' must now be taken for being established in the Church by faith, where there may still be a lawful and effective confession of sins. The younger son says then that he will say to his father, 'Father.'" "How merciful," exclaims St Ambrose, "He, though offended, disdains not to hear the name of Father." Like every Christian mystery, reconciliation involves us in the Trinitarian mystery and life of God. For the Christian believer, everything salvific happens

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in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. In the arms that the father threw around the neck of his repentant son, St Augustine sees an image of God's own Arm, which, says Augustine, is our Lord Jesus Christ. By this, he helps us to fathom the sense of St Paul's words: "I mean that God, in Christ, was reconciling the world to himself" (II Cor 5: 19). Consider the importance of the paternal embrace! "To be comforted by the word of God's grace unto the hope of pardon of our sins, this," St Augustine teaches, "is to return after a long journey to obtain from a father the kiss of love."

During the season of Lent, the Church emphatically makes St Paul's words her own: "We implore you, in Christ's name: be reconciled to God!" (II Cor 5: 20). The ministry of reconciliation belongs in a special and unique way to the priests of the New dispensation. In the sacrament of reconciliation, the ordained priest, acting in the person of Christ, extends the embrace of God's Arm towards the Christian who has heard the word of Truth: "Through the ministry of the Church, may God grant you pardon and peace, and I absolve you" Little wonder, then, that St Augustine discusses particular sacramental meanings in the details of the father's joyful welcome. "The finest robe" serves as a symbol of our baptismal dignity, and the stewards who dress the reconciled son are the "preachers of reconciliation." The ring, says Augustine, represents the pledge of the Holy Spirit and a renewed participation in the life of grace; the "shoes on his feet" symbolize a preparation for preaching the Gospel. One might easily conclude that the prodigal son was being readied for divine service! Indeed, St Augustine interprets the slaying of the fatted calf as a type of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross and the subsequent banquet as a foreshadowing of the eucharist. "For that calf in our Lord's body and blood is both offered up to the Father, and feeds the whole house."

Because reconciliation leads to the eucharist, the Christian maintains the hope that forgiveness transforms us. In the gracious mercy of the Heavenly Father, the disorder of sin and self-centeredness gives way to the rectitude of virtue, the fullness of worship and praise. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old order has passed away; now all is new" (II Cor 5: 17).

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What about the elder brother? St Augustine can find no reason to differentiate among the saints, and so he counsels the elder son to abandon useless comparisons. "For when we shall have obtained that blessedness, the higher things will be ours to look upon, equal things ours to have fellowship with, the lower things ours to rule. Let then the elder brother join most safely in the rejoicing." This rejoicing of the saints belongs to all those who have been washed in the blood of the Lamb. For without forcing St Augustine's intuition, I think we can affirm that the two sons in this morning's Gospel actually represent only one person. Who is this person? Each one of us, members of the Church all, who by God's mercy and through his gracious providence rejoice to share in the banquet of the Lamb.