

THE OVERFLOWING CUP

Very Reverend Glenn Jones

Vicar General, Vicar for Clergy, Vicar for Religious

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Have you ever wondered why supermarket celebrity “gossip rags” are so popular? And nowadays, so many even of news websites pepper their pages with those types of articles and teasers so that people will click links and thus increase advertising rates and revenue for site originators. You know the ones—this or that adulterous scandal ... some starlet “sizzling” in a bikini or other scanty clothing, etc.

But a very curious thing are the well-publicized tantrums that rich and famous have when things don't go exactly their way. You'd think that in their apparently-privileged lives that little things would hardly be worth their notice, but such things often seem to become the focus of their wrath. Perhaps gossip rags are popular so that readers can feel a sort of self-righteous shock: “Can you believe it?! How ungrateful and spoiled!! I would never do that!” ... all the while envying and fantasizing about similar fame and wealth. We need remember that not only can power corrupt, but so does wealth and fame. We need also remember that, as supposedly whispered into Caesar's ear by his slave: “All glory is fleeting.”

These thoughts came to mind while reading the Catholic Mass Gospel reading (John 6:24-35) for Sunday, August 1, in which Jesus, after having fed over 5,000 persons in the desert with a miraculous multiplication of loaves and fish, is sought out for even more, He telling them: “...you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” They had filled their bellies, yet had given little thought of the greater to which that miracle had pointed. Rather, they were tempted by that almost-universal human desire for “more” than what they had already been given.

That brings to mind also the Israelites in the desert during the Exodus—forgetting God's providence toward them just a few weeks earlier in freeing them from slavery in Egypt, manifesting the 10 plagues, the fiery column, and even the parting of the Red Sea and the miraculous destruction of the Egyptian army to save them. And yet still it was not enough, and they seemed to complain incessantly and so ungratefully.

But do we not see ourselves in such stories? When do we ever say: “That's enough! ... give me no more!?” No matter the bounty and blessings that are ours, we focus on any immediate lack—even the trivial—and there is always more that we can desire. But the problem is: there IS not enough in this world to satisfy. Had we all the riches of the earth, we would still feel lacking. This is because we are not made for this world, but for the next.

In our weak humanity we will focus upon that any negative in our lives, not matter how small ... worries which destroy our peace, and in the believer, trust and faith. Allowing those little negatives to burrow into and “set up shop” in our mind are like the nefarious bark beetles destroying pine forests: as tiny as they are, if not checked, they multiply, burrow in and fell even the mightiest arboreal titans by constant and relentless assault.

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Certainly the blessings we have are not necessarily in proportion to our level of goodness, holiness or favor with God. As Jesus tells us, it rains upon both the just and the unjust. And, as we see with the saints, very often the holiest among us are the poorest and the most long-suffering. But few peoples on earth have had to struggle less than we do for the necessities of life.

Obviously this isn't to diminish those who DO have real struggles in life—hunger, alcoholism, marital problems, disease, errant children, the death of loved ones, etc. ... but the vast majority of us live better than Roman emperors or great European kings of the past. As Mother Teresa noted about the U.S. and western countries, when even the poor are overweight, it can't be too awfully bad. In times past there was ever-present war, disease, banditry, famine and plagues in every place ... and I think we forget such things when we complain. Like the Exodus Israelites in the desert forgot the whips, chains and beatings of slavery once they were free of them.

We Christians believe—and Jesus warns us—that all that God gives us is for naught unless it somehow directs us toward eternal life with God. Regardless of earthly accomplishments, if we do not attain eternal life with God, we are failures.

And thus Jesus' admonition in our Gospel: "Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you." So we also remember what God tells Moses in the first reading of the Mass for Sunday (Exodus 16:2-4,12-15): "I will now rain down bread from heaven...thus will I test them, to see whether they follow my instructions or not" ... to see if they follow my Word. So let us labor for eternal food—the food of grace and blessedness which lasts forever.

How? By being "mirrors of God"... reflecting the love of God to those around us. By seeking to be—as Jesus exhorts us to be—perfect, as our Heavenly Father is perfect ... through love and obedience to God, charity and forgiveness. Even the striving has its own merit ... sloth its own price.

Yet the goodness and holiness to which we are called comes only with effort. But God gives ample grace in Christ to attain holiness. Jesus is, as He assures us, the "bread of life" ... in His Word, in His sacraments, in His example and teaching. We can consume even this holiest of foods and still not progress if we refuse to cooperate with the grace it provides, for to "consume" Christ is to drink in the very words, thoughts, and desires of Jesus—of God Himself...and to conform our life to His. "Communion" means, to be "in union" with Him and with His Body, the Church. He is the true and eternal food—the true and eternal sustenance and nourishment—come down in order to draw us up to our true home ... and to eternal life—that treasure which has no deficiency or lack, for God is the overflowing fulfillment of even the deepest of our desires.