

September 27, 2020 Riches to Rags Homily: In 1953 a young Italian-American singer, Tony Bennett, recorded a song, “Rags to Riches”, that topped the Billboard charts for an extended period of time. The opening words of the once popular song are worth noting. “I know I’d go from rags to riches if you would only say you care and though my pocket will be empty I’d be a millionaire.”

The theme of “rags to riches” or “from poverty to wealth” has long been a popular one in film and the theater, not to mention fairy tales and great works of literature. Consider some of the films that adopt the theme, and very successfully: “Cinderella”, “Maid in Manhattan”, “Pretty woman”, “Slum Dog Millionaire” and “Trading Places”, to name just a few.

But what of a “riches to rags” story?

In his second Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul writes: “Although Jesus was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that you may be enriched by his poverty”. (2 Cor. 8:9) In the Person of Christ we have the perfect “riches to rags” drama.

The retired Pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI writes that today’s second reading (Phil. 2:1-11), which includes an ancient Christian hymn dating back to the earliest days of the church, is one of the most elevated texts in the whole of the New Testament. “Christ emptied Himself”, we are told, “taking the form of a slave”. (Phil. 2:6) He set aside the radiance of his divinity by entering human history as a human being. He was without position, power or rank. The apex of his humiliation was his death on the Cross, a fate normally reserved for foreigners and slaves. The Eternal Father’s response to his Son’s humbling of himself was to raise him up and exalt him. (Phil. 2:9)

In his “emptying” he has shown sinners, each one of us, the way to God. The path of humility is the way of exaltation.

As Christians we are to model ourselves after Christ’s act of self-emptying. We must be of the same mind and be of the same attitude as Christ. Our failure to do so will only result in a tragically divided church. Listen to Paul’s words:

“Do nothing out of selfishness. Rather humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking not for his own interests but also for those of others.” (Phil. 2:3-4)

An anecdote: In 1954, the future neurologist, Dr. Roger Bannister, became the first athlete to complete the mile run in less than four minutes. Although his record lasted for only twenty-six days, it was, in his day, nevertheless considered a monumental achievement. Until his death, Dr. Bannister was a national icon in his native Britain. But few realized it was a team effort. One of his teammates, Chris Brasher would pace him in the first part of the race and be followed by a second teammate, Christopher Chataway, who picked up the pace. Bannister passed both of them as the race neared the finish line. Dr. Bannister gave due credit to his two teammates for breaking the record.

The selfless unity of spirit that made Bannister’s achievement possible is the kind of selfless unity of spirit Paul speaks about in today’s Epistle.

Certainly in the history of the church there are many inspiring “riches to rags” stories. One thinks of St. Francis of Assisi who relinquished his wealth to follow the poor Christ or the American born Saint, Katherine Drexel, the daughter of a wealthy investment banker in Philadelphia and heiress to a huge fortune, who, moved by the plight of Native Americans and people of color, embraced the consecrated religious life and became poor for the sake of those who lived on the margins of society.

The Christian community is built upon three pillars: unity, humility and solicitude for others.

To be honest, as our life draws to a close we come to the realization... sometimes very painfully... of just how impoverished we all are in the view of Christ. We learn a much needed lesson, that we are dependent on God’s mercy. Even the wealthiest among us are, in the final analysis, very poor. At the hour of death our bank accounts are of no consequence whatsoever.

At the end of Tony Bennett’s song, he, like all of us, acknowledges his poverty and hopes his fortunes will eventually change:

“Must I forever be a beggar whose golden dreams will not come true or will I go from rags to riches my fate is up to you.”

Our treasure is in heaven.

Amen!