

SEPTUAGESIMA SUNDAY

24th January 2016



Back in 2005 when Pope Benedict XVI ascended the Throne of Peter, he took as the motto on his coat of arms a passage from St. John's Third Epistle: "fellow workers of the truth" (III John 1:8). This passage easily comes to mind today as we contemplate the parable of the workers in the vineyard. This parable underlines the distinction between mere functionaries, who care only about getting their wages, and fellow workers who take pride in their labours and who see their master's good as their own. This theme is clearly dear to Our Lord's heart, because he applies this distinction not only to hired hands but also to true and false shepherds: the mercenary flees when the flock is endangered, whereas the true shepherd loves his sheep and braves danger to defend them.

The Prophet Isaiah tells us, "the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel" (5:7), in other words, the Church. The workers who come to work in the vineyard at the various hours of the day represent all those who, in the course of their life, cooperate with God's grace and enter his Church. This is also a parable, therefore, about latecomers who unexpectedly accept God's grace and about grumblers who begrudge God's generosity. This theme was also dear to Our Lord's heart, because he teaches it again in the great parable of the Prodigal Son and he puts it into practice as his final lesson from the cross, when he promises paradise to the Good Thief: a convert of the eleventh hour if ever there was one!

Very providentially, our parable falls this year in the midst of the Chair of Unity Octave, which we have been observing since last Monday. The eight days from the 18th of January (feast of St Peter's Throne at Rome) to the 25th of January (feast of the Conversion of S. Paul) are kept as a week of prayer for the return of separated Christians to union with the Catholic Church. We know that unity is an essential mark of the Church: unity in one common faith and unity under one common Shepherd. Unity as such is not something we can create through purely human efforts, and the Church cannot ever lose her essential unity, although individual people and nations may unfortunately separate themselves from that unity. During this week we should try to increase our own union with the Church by praying for stronger faith and greater love for our chief shepherd. We should of course also be praying that those outside the Church may cooperate with God's grace and enter his vineyard. It might be unfashionable to say that it makes a difference what religion a person practices, but quite apart from what faith itself teaches, even simple human logic teaches us that if two religions teach opposite ideas, both

cannot be true. Those who work in the vineyard receive their reward; those who idle in the market place do not. So – with kindness, humility and patience – Catholics should always be working to make converts.

The history of this week of prayer is rather interesting. It was first held in New York in 1908 by a man called Paul Wattson, who was an Episcopalian vicar – the American version of Anglicanism, as I sure you know. Reverend Wattson had founded a religious order called the Society of the Atonement, also known as the Greymoor Friars, and one of their main aims was to pray for the reunion of all Christians. Although some members of the movement were in favour of waiting for corporate reunion with the Holy See – that is, negotiating en masse a reunion of Anglican bodies with the Catholic Church – Father Wattson came to understand that no more time should be allowed to pass before seeking union with Rome. Indeed, without union with Rome, there could be no Church at all. “Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I shall build my Church” (St. Matthew 16:18). In 1909 he entered the Church, along with his Friars of the Atonement. Pope Pius X gladly endorsed the Chair of Unity Octave, whose first fruit had of course been the conversion of the Greymoor Friars themselves, and in subsequent years Pope Benedict XV and Pope Pius XI adorned it with the grant of indulgences.

Father Wattson had been very influenced by the ethos of the Oxford Movement, something every English-speaking Catholic should know a bit about. The Oxford Movement, which began in 1833, started as an attempt by certain divines of the Church of England to recover some Catholic elements that had been lost at the Reformation. In the end, many of these men – Newman being the most notable example, of course – came to understand that such human efforts were ultimately futile. Although some adherents of that movement continued to be deceived by what Newman was to call the “images and shadows” of the national church, nonetheless countless scores of Anglicans from that day to this have listened to the master of the vineyard and become fellow workers of the truth by following God’s grace into the embrace of our Mother the Catholic Church. The words which Pope Leo XIII spoke to the children of the Oxford Movement over a century ago remain as relevant today as they were then and they ring out like the voice of the master of the vineyard. He said: “Great indeed will be the joy of Mother Church as she welcomes them, surrounding them with every mark of affection and solicitude, because of the difficulties which they have generously and courageously surmounted in order to return to her bosom” (*Apostolica cura*, 13 September 1896, paragraph 39).

The Chair of Unity Octave, I said at the beginning, gives us a new perspective from which to reflect on the parable of the workers in the vineyard. We cannot allow ourselves to be functionaries who only care about getting our penny at

the end of the day. To be fellow workers of the truth in God's vineyard means that we must *love* the vineyard: the master is so good because he is God our Father, and the wine made there is so good too because it is the joy-giving wine of God's grace. We also should be happy when more workers come to join us: we know that if they spend all day idling in the market place, which represents the world outside the Church, they will never taste the good wine and will never receive the wages they need to survive. One of the sorest trials Newman endured after his conversion was the coldness and even suspicion he faced from some of the older Catholics – the descendants of those, perhaps, who had heroically kept the faith in the penal times and who, like the first labourers in today's parable, had borne the heat of the day. Whether we are lifelong Catholics of the first hour, or practicing Catholics who have returned to the faith in the third hour after a misspent youth; whether we are sixth-hour converts from Protestantism or atheism – as I know, praise God, that many of you are – we cannot be smug little functionaries.

Today's parable, like this week of prayer, reminds us not only to pray for converts, but also be welcoming to them. It would have been pleasant to imagine some of the workers in the vineyard rejoicing when they saw more labourers coming, for "the harvest indeed is great, but the labourers are few" (St. Luke 10:2). It would be lovely to think of them greeting the new workers, offering them some water, showing them the tools, and giving advice about the best way to remove stones and plant saplings. That is why I am always happy when I see you inviting people to our retreats or to Mass, taking recent converts and newcomers under your wings, teaching them how to use the missal, and so on. Happy, faithful Catholics are the best recruiters of new Catholics.

Today is a therefore good occasion for all of us to redouble our prayers that lapsed Catholics will return to the sacraments and that non-believers will become Catholics. Our brethren who are outside the vineyard surely have much to gain from being reunited with our Mother the Church, outside of which, in the words of Pope Pius XII, "they cannot be sure of their salvation" (*Mystici corporis*, par. 103). Do not be jealous for one instant that others now far away will get the same reward as you; think rather of these words of St. James: "He who causeth a sinner to be converted from the error of his way, shall save his soul from death, and shall cover a multitude of sins" (5:19).