

THOUGHTS FROM THE RHINELAND

THE DIVINE AGGIORNAMENTO

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*A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you;
and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a
heart of flesh — Ez 36:26*

With these words of the prophet Ezekiel, glorious yet mysterious, the Lord gives a remarkable promise to the children of Israel. In the past, he had worked powerful deeds among them, miraculously saving them from oppression in Egypt, feeding and sustaining them in the desert, and finally bringing them into the Promised Land. Now, however, the Lord gives a promise of a different sort, the fulfillment of which will look a bit different than manna from heaven or the land flowing with milk and honey. The sign of this fulfillment will not be a new food or a new land, but *a new heart*, a fleshy heart. Just as God fashioned Adam from the earth, so it seems he will fashion him again. Perhaps what is here most striking, however, is God's pledge to remain with his people, to continue to be their God even in the face of their repeated infidelities.

"What is man that you are mindful of him, and a son of man that you care for him?" (Ps 8:5). A good question, that. Indeed, what is this "man," this creature so unfaithful yet so beloved? Further, what does it say about the God who neither obliterates weak and sinful man nor robs him of his freedom? It is with a similar wonder that the medievals wrote *Gratia non tollit, sed perficit naturam*; grace does not replace nature, but rather works with it and makes it better. In this last age, the age of Ezekiel, God has become man

to redeem him, forging a new covenant in his own blood, with which he has begun the era of the new law of grace.

OUR LADY OF GRACE

For a masterpiece of this perfecting yet preserving grace, we can look to Mary. We should meditate on Our Lady, at once most blessed yet most humble. The angel greets her, and she humbles herself, exercising virtues she knew all too well from her loving obedience shown to Joachim and Anne. At her word of trustful surrender, the unimaginable transpires: God takes on flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, thus commencing the mystery of Our Lady of the Expectation. You can picture her, can you not? She walks through the streets of Nazareth, performs the most ordinary of tasks and chores like any other woman; however, at one and the same time, she is unlike any other woman, for this woman *carries God*.

If we marvel at this great mystery, we should also marvel at all who carry the Lord by grace—all the sons and daughters of God. Do we not have it on the very word of Jesus that God will live in his children, even though—unlike Our Lady—they carry about the effects of original sin? “Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him” (Jn 14:23). Like Mary silently adoring the Christ child in her womb, the man or woman in grace can marvel at the Divine Friend living in his or her soul. The burning bush is a common Old Testament type for Mary; the bush was burning yet unconsumed, just as Mary was a mother yet with virginity preserved. Likewise, every child of God is a burning bush, consumed by the divine presence, yet sustained in his or her own quirky and eccentric existence. The Christian in grace is a walking miracle—a miracle of divine love.

THE FISHERS OF MEN

Some burning bushes need a little divine pruning. Christ called disciples to follow him, disciples who were still works in progress. In his divine wisdom, Jesus calls his friends to follow him in a manner personally suited to each one of them. In the



PIET MONDRIAN - GOING FISHING

Gospel of Matthew, Jesus walks by the sea and spots Simon Peter and Andrew fishing, for they were fishermen by trade. Christ calls them: “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” This God-man entered their lives without destroying them; instead, the Lord took what they had and opened to them a new, unforeseen horizon. In their encounter with the Lord, Simon Peter and Andrew did not give up their trade of fishing. They would continue to exercise this office, although something would be altogether different, like a familiar melody accompanied by a Baroque fugue. Their encounter with grace would make their old, familiar work radically new. They would continue fishing—though they would catch the whole world in their nets!

When someone welcomes the Lord into their life, it is not really the ways in which they are changed that is most interesting, but rather the way in which they are shockingly, scandalously the same. Business students continue to be business students after a conversion, and cashiers continue to be cashiers, and baristas baristas, and truck drivers truck drivers. Life seems the same—yet so different. What a luminous horizon has opened on their worlds of mocha frappuccinos and truck driving! Friendship with the Lord is a cool drink, and “whoever drinks the water I shall give will never thirst; the water I shall give will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). In the muck of the mundane, the friends of Jesus are refreshing fountains, washing the feet of their neighbors, and flowing springs blessing the Lord.

A PORTRAIT OF ST. PAUL

St. Paul is a striking example of what Jesus does for his friends. He provides a brief autobiography in the first chapter of his Letter to the Galatians, where he shares in bold fashion how he persecuted Christians before his conversion with a view to destroying the Church, growing in Jewish observance with an unmatched zeal. However, God called him to embrace the holy preaching of the Gospel, a preaching which Paul eagerly embraced; at the remarkable spectacle of his conversion, believers exclaimed, “the one who once was persecuting us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy” (Gal 1:23). Thus, Paul is made to realize that he was not beating down a dangerous religious sect, but rather he who was to be his most beloved: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4). Following his conversion, Paul set out to preach the Gospel with a superhuman zeal, and now his zeal was in the service of the Body of Christ.

In the Second Letter to the Corinthians, we see a complementary yet different side of Paul. After reporting the details of a certain mystical experience, he explains that “a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being

too elated.” Paul asked the Lord to take away this thorn; rather than removing it, the Lord replied, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” In response, Paul boldly proclaimed, “I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (see 2 Cor 12:7–10). Was this mysterious thorn some temptation of the flesh, or some malady, or an enemy of his preaching? Whatever it may have been, Paul learned a critical lesson in the mysterious words of the Lord for him. The obvious answer Paul desired was the healing of this pain, the removal of this injury, the silencing of the horror of temptation. The Lord, in his mercy, answers: “My grace is sufficient for you.”

The portrait of a man who both converted nations and yet was a bit disconcerted at his own weakness and brokenness seems contradictory only for the pagan. How is it that Paul was both weak and strong? Paul was a man who did not rely on his own strength or resources, but rather stretched out to the Lord for aid. He is like the woman with a hemorrhage in Matthew’s Gospel, who saw Jesus and rightly thought, “If only I can touch his cloak, I shall be cured” (Mt 9:21). The Lord mercifully permitted Paul to keep his weakness; otherwise, he might have been tempted to trust in himself, as one who, as it were, has this converting-the-nations thing under control. Real strength is not in smug self-confidence or—thank God—having it all together; true strength is looking beyond oneself and reaching out to touch the Divine Physician. Paul needed a Savior, and he knew it.

HOPE

Paul has a message of crucial importance for each of us today. There is no doubt that he spoke from experience when he wrote in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, “we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:7). As Paul learned, the disciple carries about, at one and the same time, the surpassing power of

God and a humanity as fragile as a clay vessel. When the faithful are baptized and adopted as sons of God and heirs to that glorious inheritance, the Trinity takes up residence within them (see Jn 14:23), and they become friends of God. We know this by faith—but this is not the end of the story. Faith enables us to believe this truth in a general way; hope gives us the confidence to boldly ask for such a grace for me. Hope led the Israelites into the Promised Land. Hope impelled the prodigal son to go back to the Father. The woman with a hemorrhage was a woman of hope. Mary awaited the Messiah in hope. Peter and Andrew hoped to be successful fishermen. Paul's zeal was his hope in God's promises. Like all theological virtues, hope allows us to touch Jesus and thus receive the new heart promised to the People of God so long ago. "They that hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall take wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Is 40:31). Without Christ, we can do nothing; with Christ, we become tabernacles of the Most High. And we can hope for a new heart, too. If we hope, we shall be saved.

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