

EX NIHILO

CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE CREATIVE ARTS

EVER ANCIENT, EVER NEW

Bonaventure Chapman, O.P.

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke . . .

Gus looked up and around and wondered why he was here. Sitting in the same church. Sixty years it was since his first communion. Times had changed; well, he had changed. He looked down at his hands. Cracked. Empty. Spotted. Not like they were sixty years ago, folded together with a rosary. Ready to receive, ready to begin. That was sixty years ago.

And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new, for he says, 'The old is good' . . .

The old is good. Gus's memory faded away into the mists of his mind as the priest started speaking. The old is good, or the old *was* good. He had lived with the new; lived with all the changes. Growing up in America during those days was all about newness. New Ideas. New Values. New Perspectives. What good were they? It was a catchword, a word of the times. Still is. He picked up his head to see the preacher. How old was this priest? Twenty? No, couldn't be. But not much older. He hadn't seen a young priest in

a long time. He hadn't been to church in a long time. Why was he here today—what was he looking for?

“In this parable Jesus is calling for a change, a conversion, metanoia in the Greek. A renewing of our minds, as St. Paul says . . .

What does this kid know about “renewing” the mind? What new ideas does he have? Gus looked down at his hands, noticing the ring on his right hand—an old tarnished college ring. That was about renewing the mind, wasn't it? He thought about his time in college, his classes, his friends . . . where were they all now? Fifty years ago, almost as long as his first memory of this church. Those were the days, though; a new spirit was sweeping the nation. No more outdated learning, no more old-fashioned rules and regulations. None of this Liberal Learning; it all had to be practical. Up-to-date. Ready for the world, they said! But what good were all those classes on Gender and Culture, Revolutionary Politics, South-American Anthropology . . . ? Didn't help him get a job, that's for sure. Didn't even study for those classes. Where had the time gone during college? His father had always been concerned about his education. He hadn't gone to school, he was part of the old system, what did he know? Dad couldn't make sense of what Gus was learning. Then again, neither could he. They were going to change the world, remember? He thought about the campus protests, the parties, the sit-ins, and all the activities against the old way of doing things. This was going to be a new era, one of freedom. But freedom for what? Even now he didn't know . . .

“The new wine is Jesus' new commandment; the commandment to love one another as He loved us. A new kind of love . . .

Gus knew about a new kind of love. He thought about all the parties at college and after—the freedom that everyone was proclaiming. Free from burdensome moralities, free from commitment, free from rules. This was new love, free love. But

where did it get him? He returned to his hands, this time to his left. There was still a mark there from where the ring used to be. They had married late. Why settle down when they were still young? Why move so quickly? Why lose the best parts of your lives? That's what he was told, and he believed it. Used to believe it. It took ten years after college before marriage, and it was only eight years after that when they separated. They weren't happy. *He* wasn't happy. It was all about him back then. If it doesn't feel right, don't do it. Marriage isn't forever. It's best for both of you. That's what the marriage counselors said, right? What did they know? He didn't remember a ring on their fingers. What God has joined together, let no man separate. Those were the old words, the ones his father had reminded him about. It's different now, Dad! Different doesn't mean right, that's what his father had said. He was more right than Gus was ever able to admit.

Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem, factorem caeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium . . .

Gus found himself standing, as if this whole experience was normal, as if he had been coming for the last sixty years. Must have been the Latin. He hadn't heard Latin in . . . well, he couldn't remember. He thought back to the old rite: priest facing the tabernacle, pious old ladies praying the beads, the old language echoing among statues and votive candles. Those were the old days, the old wineskins of the Church, right? New wine was coming, a new spirit filling the Church. Well if something new came in, it pushed a whole lot out too, especially the people. Gus was one of them. Not that he loved everything in the old liturgy; he certainly liked the idea of more English and a friendlier atmosphere. He had been to a few weddings since he left the Church, but it never felt like when he was a boy.

Something was missing. There was something solid to the old ways, memorizing the catechism with the funny pictures and proofs of the Church's indefectibility on the back cover. These

may have been old, but they were good—things and ideas and notions one could rest on, rest in perhaps. He had left all that when those ideas seemed to leave the Church. Maybe they both went on holiday together. But there were plenty of people here this morning, responding in Latin, hands folded in prayer. Kids too, young people, families with plenty of children all moving about in the pews. Why were they here? Why was he here?

Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the wine we offer you: fruit of the vine and work of human hands . . .

Gus found himself on his knees again. Must have drifted off. Amazing how you move habitually to an old pattern . . . The work of human hands. He looked down at his hands again. What work had he done? His father had built their house himself. He was mighty proud of it too. An old-fashioned man. Gus trusted the work of others with his projects. Then he thought of all the repairs that had to be made on his house. New plumbing. New electricity. Seemed like something was breaking down every year, even though it was all new. He thought about the old house, tried to remember fixing anything with his father. Nothing ever broke in that house! The work of human hands, not machines; one's own, not others'. What was he proud of, what had he made that lasted? Was there anything he had left a mark on?

Gus looked up and saw the children again, bunches of them. Three, four, five . . . six! In one family! How could they do it? How could they control them? When did those two parents get a free minute? When did they get time to themselves? Ah, grandparents in the pew behind, that's how they did it. Grandparents living near their children and grandchildren, who did that anymore? He thought about his own family, his one son. "Son" . . . was that the right word? Didn't seem to mean the same as what this young father in front would call one of his boys. He didn't have weekends once a month with his boys. He didn't have to fight with his wife



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over holiday visits. Chris was grown now. Had his own family, sent a Christmas card. Sometimes. That was the new way, the way the new family lived. The kids would be fine. As long as you loved them, that was all that mattered . . .

He looked back at his hands, cracked, aged, spotted. Old hands. Old hands, old, worn out hands . . . old . . . What's so bad about old hands? What's so bad about the old ways, the old times, the old Church, the old-fashioned things? As far as he could figure his life had been perpetually new, new cars, new houses, new relationships, new this, new that. If all this new wine got him here, this Sunday in this church, he decided he wasn't interested anymore. The old

is good, nothing truer in the world. Apparently even Jesus got it wrong in the end . . . The bells rung, a gold incense bowl caught his eye as smoke ascended at the altar, and he heard the words he had heard before, words from his childhood, but he heard them for the first time:

Take this, all of you, and drink from it, for this is the chalice of my blood, the blood of the new and eternal covenant, which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in memory of me . . .

And as he stared at the raised chalice, wrapped about with smoke and bathed in light, the words echoed in his mind: “New Wine . . .”

Bonaventure Chapman entered the Order of Preachers in 2010.