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Quinquagesima Sunday

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Septuagesima, Sexigesima, Quinquasema II

Most liturgists of our age have forgotten the inherent value of the Prayer Book. There has been a theoretical and willful forgetting. They have repudiated our religious inheritance by rejecting the history and theology that inform the liturgical year.

The great attribute of the real Prayer Book is its intrinsic inclusion and articulation of Patristic, Medieval, and Reformation spirituality. Current so-called revisions are not actually revisions at all, but rather instruments of various interest groups driven by ideologies promoting inclusive language, feminism, and homosexuality. Like Dostoyevsky's Kirillov, they have not eaten the idea; the idea has eaten them.

The deletion of the gesima Sundays from the liturgical calendar reveals a deeper problem in the spiritual life of the Church. The new ideology has obscured the cultivated wisdom and true spirituality of the Prayer Book.

But ideology only obscures. It cannot completely deface, disfigure, and denature human aspiration for the good. Our contemporary age still longs for faith, hope, and charity, even when the ideologically driven church has forgotten what they mean.

Before the present ecclesiastical aberration, W.B. Yeats was an example of the modern man who aspires to these virtues, even while despairing of them. His aspiration goes beyond moral legalism toward a mystical relation to nature. In the first stanza of "Into the Twilight," Yeats writes,

Out-worn heart, in a time outworn,

Come clear of the nets of wrong and right;

Laugh heart again in the gray twilight,

Sigh, heart, again in the dew of the morn.

And in the final verse comes,

And God stands winding His lonely horn,
And time and the world are ever in flight;
And love is less kind than the gray twilight,
And hope is less dear than the dew of the morn.

One cannot help but feel for Yeats. He wants so desperately to renew the heart with greater kindness and to satisfy hope with what is most dear. These are human aspirations that can only be fully experienced in the presence of God. Indeed, for Yeats, these virtues are so powerful that even "God stands winding His lonely horn." The unorthodox Yeats dreams of God also needing these virtues, and in this way Yeats makes them absolute. Such are the aspirations of modern man, and of every man.

The Christian can feel for Yeats because we experience the same aspiration, and yet the Christian claims these virtues as the gift of God whose life is not lonely but rather the sublime fellowship of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The virtues of faith, hope, and charity are our way to God, and are satisfied only in conversion to Him.

In a more explicit and orthodox form, T.S. Eliot speaks of the character of conversion, which has nothing to do with ideology. Faith, hope, and charity appear, but not as the end, and not as the presumption of our own zeal.

Faith, hope, and charity are the gift of God who gives as He comes. The call to each soul is to be still and wait upon God. This is not the absence of works, of trying, but rather the essence from which works come. To be still and to wait is the essence of spirituality, spirituality that must not and cannot be replaced at the center with the perspective of our own ideas or actions.

In "East Coker," Eliot writes,

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

For Eliot, it is waiting on God that allows faith and hope and charity to have their proper place. These virtues are the essence of the soul living by grace in relation to God. And all else that we do, all our intentions, our trying, our works of charity, can be useful, if they stem from a soul that has learned to wait, to depend, to believe, to hope,

and to love truly.

The liturgical year develops the habit of waiting, of practicing being still. To be still and to wait is to receive what our Father has to give us. And through the cycle of the church's liturgy, we begin now to become what we shall one day be wholly and completely. St. John writes, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when He shall appear we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is." In following the church year, the practice of waiting and being still prepares us for our life with God in heaven.

There is no better way for modern man to find greater kindness and what is most dear than through what is offered to us in the Sunday lessons of Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima. Faith in the goodness of God, hope in the power of God, and love in the love of God. These are the very motions of the life of the soul in which we ourselves, as St. Paul says, "groan within ourselves waiting for the adoption..." "Now abideth faith, hope, and charity, these three, but the greatest of these is charity." Then, when we shall know even as we are known, the final end of these virtues will be for us to step into the loving presence of God forever.

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