

June 2, 2002

The Sunday of the Samaritan Woman

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the loveliest lines ever penned for Christian prayer, I think, are these in the tenth strophe of Thomas of Celano's *Dies Irae*:

Quaerens me sedisti lassus
Redemisti crucem passus
Tantus labor non sit cassus! or

"Seeking me, You sat down weary,
Redeeming me, You bore the cross,
Let not such labor be in vain!"

No Calvinist was Thomas of Celano. He believed, from the Scriptures, that the Lamb of God suffered and died for everyone, atoning for the sins of the whole world, not just the sins of the elect. Broadly flooding in libation, Jesus' Blood was shed even for the sake of those sinners who would, by their own choice (not God's!), be damned. And that Lamb's dear Blood would be, in the latter case, without avail, *cassus*. Thus Celano prayed that the wide labor of Christ's redemption be not wasted in his own regard.

But these second and third lines of Celano's *terza rima* are so rich that one might easily miss the delicate allusion of its first line: "Seeking me You sat down weary." Once the line is noticed, nonetheless, its allusion here is perfectly clear. These words refer to the scene in John 4:6—"Jesus therefore, being wearied from His journey, sat thus by the well." Just why did Jesus sit down weary by Jacob's well? Celano answers that He was waiting for someone special whom He had in mind to meet that day. He was seeking me. The Samaritan woman at the well is each of us.

The evangelist John surely knew that woman's name, just as he knew the names of the paralytic at the pool and the man born blind, because he narrates all of these one-on-one encounters with details that he could only have obtained from the individuals themselves. So John most certainly knew their names. His omission of those names in the stories, then, has literary significance, and Celano is probably right to suppose that we are dealing here with anonymity for the sake of reader-identification. That is to say, each of us, as we

ponder the text prayerfully, becomes that paralytic, that blind man, and that woman at the well, encountering the Lord in the power of His Scriptures.

As an "Every Christian" account, the story of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well serves to illustrate certain distinct stages in the path of conversion.

We observe, for instance, what might be called a growth in Christology as the story progresses; there is a pronounced evolution in the terms by which the Lord is regarded. Thus, when the woman first meets Jesus, He is called simply "a Jew" (4:9). This is important to the story as a whole, of course, because the Lord Himself will presently declare that "salvation is of the Jews" (4:22). On the woman's lips, nonetheless, the designation "Jew" indicates two things: First, it says that Jesus is at first assessed only within a certain class of people. He is not yet a distinguishable person, important on His own account. And second, the word "Jew"; indicates the woman's sense of separation from Jesus, because "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans."

Next, Jesus is addressed as "Sir" (4:11; presumably the Aramaic Mar). This term of respect is a great step for the woman to make, indicating her change of attitude toward Jesus. But then, within four verses "Sir" becomes "prophet" (4:19), when the Lord directs the woman's attention to her own sins. Then Jesus takes the initiative in His own identification, calling Himself the Messiah, the Christ (4:25f), and the woman immediately departs.

Nonetheless, she leaves the well with a question in her mind, a question about the identity of Jesus. It is the fundamental question that would in due time be addressed by the Ecumenical Councils: "Who do you say that I am?" Just exactly who is Jesus? "Come", she invites her friends, "see a man who told me all I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" (4:29) Everyone in John's Gospel seems to be asking such questions: "'This is the Prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Christ'" (7:40f).

At the end of the woman's story, the designation "Christ" is embraced by her Samaritan friends, who promptly complete it with another important Christological title: "We know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world" (4:42).

The lady from Samaria has now come all the way. Starting out that day, hardly suspecting what lay ahead, she laboriously bore her sins to the well, where she met a Jew, who asked her

for a drink of water. The Jew presently became a Sir, and then a prophet who reminded her that she was a sinner. No matter, though, because this prophet was also the Christ who, because He was the Savior of the world, knew exactly what to do with sins. Seeking her He sat down weary, and to redeem her He would, in due course, endure the cross.

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