

November 28, 2010

Second Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

As Mary approached her son at Cana, her sole concern was the welfare of those who sponsored the wedding feast. She does not seem to have had anything more specific in mind. This impression is conveyed, I believe, in what she eventually says to the waiters: "Do whatever He tells you." This "whatever" (Greek *ho ti*) perfectly sums up Mary's concern. She does not request a miracle; she simply wants the problem dealt with, and she trusts Jesus to do it.

As the story begins, there is nothing to suggest a miracle is about to happen. John's account is far removed from the fabulous atmosphere of later apocryphal literature, such as the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, which tells of various prodigies worked by the boy Jesus: breathing life into clay birds, stretching a piece of timber to help Joseph finish constructing a bed, even striking a playmate dead and blinding the child's parents!

There is nothing of this sort in Holy Scripture, where the Cana miracle is identified as Jesus' "*beginning* of signs." This priority may be understood, I believe, in two non-exclusive ways: The reference has a literary significance, meaning that the Cana miracle is the first of the specific seven "signs" narrated by John. The word "beginning" also indicates an historical fact: this was the first miracle actually performed by Jesus. In truth, the other gospels record no miracles until Jesus' ministry in Capernaum (cf. Mark 1:21-28; Luke 4:23). In short, Jesus has done nothing, so far, that would prompt Mary to expect a miraculous response to her solicitous "They have no wine."

Jesus' answer to His mother has been variously translated, but I believe the New King James effort best conveys its sense: "Woman, 'what does your concern have to do with Me? My hour has not yet come.'" Two aspects of this response should be considered:

First, it is important to eliminate a hint of harshness conveyed in the translation: In English it is not usually considered respectful to address someone as "Woman." However, the underlying Aramaic word, *'anot'a*, is a formal and even decorous manner of address. Indeed, this is the way Jesus habitually speaks to women in the gospels, including a Canaanite petitioner (Matthew 15:28), a crippled woman in the synagogue (Luke 13:12), the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:21), the woman accused of adultery (8:10), and Mary Magdalene at the tomb (20:13). Perhaps our English "ma'am" comes closest to the sense of the idiom.

It is especially noteworthy that in John's Gospel Jesus addresses His mother this way as He is dying (19:26). In this gospel, Cana and Calvary are the only places where Mary's son speaks to her, and the same word is used both times.

Second, Jesus explains His question to Mary by adding. "My hour has not yet come." This reference to the "hour" is important in Johannine theology, where it designates the elected time of Jesus' glorification. On the eve of His sufferings and death, Jesus prays, "Father, the *hour* has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You" (17:1). This is the imminent hour of which He says, "the *hour* is coming, yes, has now come" (16:32; cf. also 4:2; 5:24; 16:21).

These considerations of Jesus' "hour" in Johannine theology, however, are not entirely pertinent to the actual historical context under consideration. We are treating Jesus' mother here as a real person, not just a character in a work of theological literature. Our immediate question, then, is: How did this historical Mary, in that dramatic moment at Cana, understand Jesus' words, "My hour has not yet come"?

In that historical context, those words could only have meant, "It's not time yet." That is to say, Jesus was declining His Mother's suggestion that He intervene in the wine problem.

And how does she respond to His objection? She ignores it! Mary does not argue the point with her son. She simply turns and boldly says to the waiters, "Do whatever He tells you." Mary thus puts the pressure squarely on her son, manifestly confident that He will not disappoint her. "Do whatever He tells you" are her last recorded words.

We know the day's outcome: Mary's son, at the direct instigation of His mother, transforms the water into wine. Jesus' own ministry, too, is transformed. The "signs" have begun. It was at this moment that Jesus "manifested His glory; and His disciples believed in Him."

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