

Love, the Key to Spiritual Authenticity
To the Students of the University of Dallas Rome Program
L'Abbazia delle Tre Fontane
February 11, 2014
Fr. John Bayer
Reading: 1 Kings 8:22-23; 27-30
Gospel: Mark 7:1-13

I think the readings for today have a clear theme: spiritual authenticity. And it's a very fitting theme for a mass celebrated on the site of so many martyrs and monks.

In the first reading, King Solomon prays to God that the Temple he built may be an authentic place of worship – that here God may truly be present and praised. The meaning of such a prayer is very profound for Solomon. For in his humility, he knows that a work of human hands can hardly serve as a place within which God can dwell and be known; and yet in his faith he knows that indeed God has chosen to dwell among his people, that he condescends to be heard and known through the works of our hands – our temples, tablets of law, arks and traditions.

Can it indeed be that God dwells on earth? If the heavens and the highest heavens cannot contain you, how much less this temple which I have built! Look kindly on the prayer and petition of your servant, O LORD.... May your eyes watch night and day over this temple, the place where you have decreed you shall be honored; may you heed the prayer which I, your servant, offer in this place.

Solomon is wrestling here with a mystery at the heart of our faith: the almighty God wills to be known by us in the finite, material circumstances of our existence. God is not reached by setting aside what is human; by his gracious will, he has made what is human capable of bearing his presence sacramentally. This is the mystery of revelation, of the humanity of Christ, of the seven sacraments and of the mystical body of Christ that is the Church: human words and signs, the events and people of history, earthly institutions and traditions – these finite realities can truly become the bearers of God's presence and power. This is really a marvel: "Can it indeed be that God dwells on earth? If the heavens ... cannot contain you, how much less this temple which I have built!" And yet, Solomon says, "this temple" is "the place where you have decreed you shall be honored."

Standing before such a great mystery, Solomon is moved to prayer: may this Temple truly be what God has called it to be: "May your eyes watch night and day over this temple..., may you heed the prayer which I, your servant, offer in this place." He is praying that God uphold the Temple such that it may be an authentic place of prayer and communion. This is a prayer for spiritual

authenticity; it is a prayer that the work of human hands may be an authentic bearer or channel of the presence and power of God.

In Solomon's prayer for authenticity we have an anticipation of the very important distinction made in today's Gospel between human and divine traditions. For in the Gospel Jesus reproves the Scribes and Pharisees for promoting "many" traditions that are *not* faithfully bearing the presence and power of God. The works of their hands, the temples and religious traditions they have built, are not authentic; they do not do what they should – they do not offer an authentic encounter with God. On the contrary, as Jesus says they have ignored the word of God in their traditions, thereby reducing their religious traditions to a vain honor of the lips cut off from any true interior, authentic worship of the heart.

This theme is a worthy source of personal meditation and prayer. It is healthy to ask ourselves such questions as: How well do my religious practices and habits of life reflect the word and commandment of God? Do I sometimes offer the empty "honor" of my lips rather than the authentic "worship" of my heart? This is not a question about whether my exterior actions *look* good from the outside, but whether or not they truly *are* good – that is, whether or not they spring from a heart shaped by an authentic encounter with the Word of God.

Do I recite decades and decades of the rosary with my lips, but fail to utter Mary's beautiful *fiat* – a single word – in my heart?

Do I attend mass frequently, but fail to attend to the interior disposition of my heart necessary for the authentic flowering of grace?

Do I give up meat on Fridays or desert after dinner, but cling to my own will and desires when it really matters in my relationships with other people?

What is the status of the "traditions" and "temples" we build in our lives? Are they truly places of communion with God? Places of his power and presence? Are our spiritual lives authentic? The holy monks and martyrs of this place are a wonderful example of the authenticity for which we should strive: the monks that truly entered into their vocation, did so because they prized the reformation of their heart above every other good in the world – they wanted to be holy and were willing to use any instrument at their disposition to struggle and to win in the adventure of the interior life. And of course the martyrs are the best example of those who fought for a perfect correspondence between their interior life and their exterior life: even when faced with the choice between authenticity and death, they chose authenticity – "I believe in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and I refuse to act in any other way, whether you kill me for it or not."

What a beautiful model of spiritual authenticity! But the example of the saints offers us more than a model of living authentically. They show us not only the goal but also the way, the key to living authentically. And it may seem paradoxical, but the key to modelling their greatness, is to understand their weakness; the key to following them in their authenticity, is to follow them in the way they understood their in-authenticity.

To explain what I mean, we need look only at St. Paul himself, and in particular at a beautiful and mysterious passage in one of his letters. If you are searching for the key to holiness – if you struggle with your own sinfulness and in-authenticity; if you are ashamed by your past or your present; if you are disturbed by your inability to conquer your divided will, read 2 Corinthians 12. There you will find that St. Paul too was weak, and it is in his very particular attitude towards his weakness that he reveals the key to following him on the path of holiness. In this letter, after expressing the many gifts he had been given – gifts of revelation and mysticism – he offers us a beautiful witness of his own self-understanding and desire for humility and holiness: For he says that “to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I besought the Lord about this, that it should leave me; but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’”

St. Paul does not offer us a static, exterior model of holiness. If we read his letters, we see little hints about the dynamic secret of the interior life of holiness. Our call and destiny is perfection; but in this life, sanctity has so much to do with our imperfection and weakness, or rather with our attitude towards our imperfection and weakness. St. Paul was not freed from his the “thorn in his flesh.” He wanted to be perfect and at peace; but in at least this respect, God did not grant it to him. And we too may wonder why God at times does not seem to be ready to help me, free me, deliver me from my weakness, temptation and sin. But as we ask such questions, let us follow St. Paul – let us learn to live by God’s grace, which truly is *sufficient for us*. Let us see that the struggle for holiness is precisely that: a *struggle, a combat and adventure* in which we learn to live by a power that does not originate in us: “it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). The life of holiness we now live is a life rooted in our faith “in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Our spiritual lives are about learning to live by grace, about coming to understand ever more how deeply God’s love and mercy reaches. And the more we understand God’s love for us the more we will have discovered the key to authentic holiness. For it is this encounter with the mercy and the grace of God that alone is capable of igniting a life of love – as St.

John says, “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Understand the depth of God’s love and your own will follow. And with love enkindled in our hearts, a flame of worship in our heart, we will be animated by a power that spills over into every aspect of our lives, bringing us to true authenticity, to a life of interior and exterior worship grounded in our encounter with the mercy and love of God given to us in Jesus Christ.