

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:
"There is but one thing necessary: Catholic Faith and the Spiritual Life"

Growing up Protestant, I heard a lot about having a "personal relationship with Christ." Billy Graham and other Protestant evangelists would present conversion as a matter of "inviting Christ into your heart." It was a beautiful, and in many ways a Catholic, perspective on the spiritual life. But sometimes my Protestant friends depicted this relationship as something *opposed* to the authority and structures of Church or liturgy. Worse, they thought of it as a reason to reject Catholicism: "We, Protestants, have a personal relationship with Jesus. You Catholics have your rituals and traditions."

Sometimes, unfortunately, the caricature is accurate. There are Catholics for whom Church law is a burden, Mass a drudgery, and tradition a dead ritual. They do not live by Christ in the depths of their souls, and offer only the thinnest participation in public worship. (This is not only a Catholic problem. As a young Presbyterian, I often suffered during many a soporific sermon, and let my thoughts take an unholy turn.) But the truth is far different. Catholic faith has *always* taught that there is but one thing necessary: an inner life profoundly lived by God through Christ. (Luke 10:42) This is the insight of all the great Catholic mystics and spiritual writers.

Why, then, is there a perceived conflict between the interior life and the external forms of religion? And are our Protestant friends right to oppose the one to the other? The best answer I ever got came, ironically, from a Protestant pastor. He compared the spiritual life to a potted plant. It needs both soil and water. The soil is the Word, the deposit of faith, the liturgy and worship prescribed by Christ. These structure and inform our spiritual life. The water is the life of grace, the Spirit, prayer, and that inner commitment to God we call conversion. These give vigor to the external forms of faith and worship. But these two aspects are closely connected, like soul and body. To tear them apart is a grave danger, a temptation to be resisted.

Catholics (or Protestants) who go to church without conversion are in serious trouble. We cannot be saved by liturgy alone, as if our interior life did not matter. St. Alphonsus Ligouri once said, "He who prays will be saved; he who does not pray will be damned." This was rhetorical overstatement, of course, but it conveys the importance of the inner life in Catholic tradition.

There is also a danger in focusing on the water and ignoring the soil. We can come to identify our subjective experiences, our emotions and impressions, with the objective will of God. And worse, we can begin to judge truth and falsehood, good and evil, by how they make us feel. The authentic interior life, however, is one that does not turn from emotional dryness, but moves forward in obedience and faith even when it feels nothing. Christ gave us the Church and the liturgy as a sacred trust, and the source of living waters that flow from within. Their fruitfulness in our lives depends not on our feelings, but on our faith, charity, and obedience.

The Second Vatican Council frequently discussed this relationship of inner life to Church and liturgy. One helpful text is the Decree on the Apostolate of Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. Discussing the spirituality of the laity, the Fathers wrote:

Since Christ, sent by the Father, is the source and origin of the whole apostolate of the Church, the success of the lay apostolate depends upon the laity's living union with Christ, in keeping with the Lord's words, "He who abides in me, and I in him, bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). This life of intimate union with Christ in the Church is nourished by spiritual aids which are common to all the faithful, especially active participation in the sacred liturgy. (*Apostolicam actuositatem*)

Catholic spiritual writing is also treasure trove of wisdom on the inner life with Christ. For deeper reflection on these issues I recommend in particular the works of Fr. Thomas Dubay - especially his *Prayer Primer*, *Deep Conversion*; *Deep Prayer*, and his *Fire Within*. And for those who enjoy a challenging, theological treatment I recommend Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *Three Ages of the Interior Life*.

We Catholics have the fullness of the faith and the resources - liturgical, sacramental, spiritual - for the most intimate personal relationship with Christ. No one put this better than a Catholic woman I know of who was once confronted by a Protestant: "Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?" The Catholic responded, "Every day at Mass I consume Him, Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. How much more personal can I get?"