

The Richness of Ordinary Life

A homily given on March 11, 1960.

I remember, many years ago now, I was going along a road in Castile with some friends, when we noticed something in a field far away which made a deep impression on me at the time and has since often helped me in my prayer. A group of men were hammering some wooden stakes into the ground, which they then used to support netting to form a sheep pen. Then shepherds came along with their sheep and their lambs. They called them by their names, and one by one lambs and sheep went into the pen, where they would be all together, safe and sound. 1

Today, Lord, my thoughts go back specially to those shepherds and their sheepfold, because all of us who are gathered here to converse with you—and many others the world over—we all know that we have been brought into your sheepfold. You yourself have told us so: “I am the Good Shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me.”¹ You know us well. You know that we wish to hear, to listen ever attentively to your gentle whistling as our Good Shepherd, and to heed it, because “eternal life is knowing you, who are the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”²

The image of Christ with his sheep at his right and left means so much to me that I had it depicted in the oratory where I normally celebrate Holy Mass. Elsewhere, as a reminder of God’s presence, I have had engraved Jesus’ words, *cognosco oves meas et cognoscunt me meae*,³ to help us consider constantly that he is at our side, reproaching us, instructing us, and teaching us as does a shepherd with his flock.⁴ The Castilian scene I have recalled is very much to the point.

God wants us to be saints

- 2 You and I belong to Christ's family, for "he himself has chosen us before the foundation of the world, to be saints, to be blameless in his sight, for love of him, having predestined us to be his adopted children through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will."⁵ We have been chosen gratuitously by our Lord. His choice of us sets us a clear goal. Our goal is personal sanctity, as Saint Paul insistently reminds us, *haec est voluntas Dei: sanctificatio vestra* ("this is the will of God: your sanctification").⁶ Let us not forget, then, that we are in our Master's sheepfold in order to achieve that goal.
- 3 Another thing I have never forgotten, though it took place a long time ago, was once when I had gone into the Cathedral in Valencia to pray, and I passed by the tomb of the Venerable John Ridaura. I was told that whenever this priest, already very advanced in years, was asked how many years he had lived, he would reply with great conviction, in his Valencian dialect, *Poquets* ("Very few! Only those I have spent serving God"). For many of you here, the fingers of one hand are still sufficient to count the years since you made up your minds to follow our Lord closely, to serve him in the midst of the world, in your own environment and through your own profession or occupation. How long is not all that important. What does matter is that we engrave, that we burn upon our souls the conviction that Christ's invitation to sanctity, which he addresses to all men without exception, puts each one of us under an obligation to cultivate our interior life and to struggle daily to practice the Christian virtues; and not just in any way whatsoever, nor in a way which is above average or even excellent. No; we must strive to the point of heroism, in the strictest and most exacting sense of the word.
- 4 The goal that I am putting before you, or rather that God has marked out for us all, is no illusory or unattainable ideal. I

could quote you many specific examples of ordinary men and women, just like you and me, who have met Jesus passing by *quasi in occulto* (“hidden as it were”),⁷ at what appeared to be quite ordinary crossroads in their lives, and have decided to follow him, lovingly embracing their daily cross.⁸ In this age of ours, an age of generalized decay, of compromise and discouragement, and also of license and anarchy, I think it is more important than ever to hold on to that simple yet profound conviction which I had when I began my priestly work and have held ever since, and which has given me a burning desire to tell all mankind that “these world crises are crises of saints.”

Interior life. We need it, if we are to answer the call that the Master has made to each and every one of us. We have to become saints, as they say in my part of the world, “down to the last whisker,”* Christians who are truly and genuinely such, the kind that could be canonized. If not, we shall have failed as disciples of the one and only Master. And don’t forget that when God marks us out and gives us his grace to strive for sanctity in the everyday world, he also puts us under an obligation to do apostolate. I want you to realize that, even looking at things humanly, concern for souls follows naturally from the fact that God has chosen us. As one of the Fathers of the Church points out, “When you discover that something has been of benefit to you, you want to tell others about it. In the same way, you should want others to accompany you along the ways of the Lord. If you are going to the forum or the baths and you run into someone with time on his hands, you invite him to go with you. Apply this human behavior to the spiritual realm and, when you go toward God, do not go alone.”⁹

If we do not wish to waste our time in useless activities, or

* *Sin que nos falte un pelo*, that is, “down to our fingertips” or “every inch of us.”—Trans.

in making excuses about the difficulties in our environment—for there have always been difficulties ever since Christianity began—we must remember that Christ has decreed that success in attracting our fellow men will depend, as a rule, on how much interior life we ourselves have. Christ has stipulated that our apostolic endeavors will be effective only if we are saints—rather (let me put it more correctly) if we strive to be faithful, for while we are on this earth we shall never actually be saints. It may seem hard to believe, but both God and our fellow men require from us an unswerving faithfulness that is true to its name and is consequent down to the last detail, with no half measures or compromises, a faithfulness to the fullness of the Christian vocation which we lovingly accept and caringly practice.

6 Some of you might think I am referring only to a select few. Don't let the promptings of cowardice or easygoing ways deceive you so easily. Feel, instead, God urging each one of you on, to become another Christ, *ipse Christus* ("Christ himself"). To put it simply: God is urging us to make our actions consistent with the demands of our faith. For our sanctity, the holiness we should be striving for, is not a second-class sanctity. There is no such thing. The main thing we are asked to do, which is so much in keeping with our nature, is to love: "charity is the bond of perfection,"¹⁰ a charity that is to be practiced exactly as our Lord himself commands: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with thy whole heart, and with thy whole soul, and with thy whole mind,"¹¹ holding back nothing for ourselves. This is what sanctity is all about.

7 Certainly our goal is both lofty and difficult to attain. But please do not forget that people are not born holy. Holiness is forged through a constant interplay of God's grace and the correspondence of man. As one of the early Christian writers says, referring to union with God, "Everything that grows begins small. It is by constant and progressive feeding that it

gradually grows big.”¹² So I say to you, if you want to become a thorough-going Christian—and I know you are willing, even though you often find it difficult to conquer yourself or to keep climbing upward with this poor body of ours—then you will have to be very attentive to the minutest of details, for the holiness that our Lord demands of you is to be achieved by carrying out with love of God your work and your daily duties, and these will almost always consist of small realities.

Little things and the life of childhood

Thinking of those of you who, despite years of experience, 8
still go about dreaming—with vain and childish dreams, like those of Tartarin of Tarascon—imagining they are hunting lions in the corridors of their homes, where the most they will find are mice, if that; with, I insist, such people in mind, I can only remind you how great a thing it is to be accompanying God through the faithful fulfillment of your ordinary daily duties, coming through struggles which fill our Lord with joy, and which are known only to him and to each one of us.

Rest assured that you will usually find few opportunities for dazzling deeds, one reason being that they seldom occur. On the other hand, you will not lack opportunities, in the small and ordinary things around you, of showing your love for Christ. As Saint Jerome writes, “Even in small things, the same [greatness of] spirit is revealed. We admire the Creator, not only as the framer of Heaven and earth, of sun and ocean, of elephants, camels, horses, oxen, leopards, bears, and lions, but also as the maker of tiny creatures, ants, gnats, flies, worms, and the like, things whose shapes we know better than their names: and in all of them (big or small) we reverence the same skill. So too, the person who is dedicated to Christ is equally earnest in small things as in great.”¹³