

Catechism on the Liturgy I,22

It seems that everyone, whom our Blessed Lord met, needed some individual favor – a solution to some problem – from St. Peter to the most pathetic man suffering from leprosy. The people with whom He came into contact were not just faces in the crowd. They were individuals, with particular need. For example, the woman who suffered from an issue of blood came up to Him with the thought that if she could only touch the hem of His garment, she would be healed. He was in a hurry at the time, on His way to heal the daughter of Jairus, who was at the point of death. “And immediately Jesus knowing in himself the virtue that had proceeded from him, turning to the multitude, said: Who hath touched my garments? And his disciples said to him: Thou seest the multitude thronging thee, and sayest thou who hath touched me?” (Mk. 5.30-31)

St. Peter pointed out that it was just a casual contact, and that many had brushed up against Him, but Christ insisted on having an answer, because virtue had gone out of Him. This is partly because God does not seem interested in mass-produced miracles. Every single person who met the Lord was brought into some personal relation with Him, and they were all able to say – with anger or delight – “He turned, and spoke to *me*.” Everyone who met Him could carry away from the meeting some personal memory of His voice. “Go and sin no more.” “Thy faith hath saved thee.”

But He is fully able to distinguish between those who approach Him with pride, or with humility. “And it came to pass, as they walked in the way that a certain man said to him: I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. Jesus said to him: the foxes have holes, and the birds of the air nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head.” (Lk. 9.57-58) It

seems like a curt response, but it was the right response to the man who would approach him with pride and self-assurance.

Should one approach Him honestly however, and with humility, the result is quite different. “And the two disciples heard him speak and they followed Jesus. And Jesus turning, and seeing them following him, saith to them: What seek you? Who said to him, Rabbi, (which is to say, being interpreted, Master,) where dwellest thou? He saith to them: Come and see. They came, and saw where he abode, and they stayed with him that day: now it was about the tenth hour.” (Jn. 1. 37-39) The result of this enquiry is the Lord entertaining them all day until sundown.

How surely he recognizes, how gently he inspires, contrition, and at various levels! The woman of Samaria, with her pious platitudes, must be suddenly knocked off her perch with the command, “Go home, fetch thy husband.” The woman taken in adultery is to be won by sympathy; “I will not condemn thee either. Go, and do not sin again henceforward.” The Magdalen – she is pardoned already; “If great sins have been forgiven her, she has also greatly loved.” How nicely graded are the demands he makes on different souls! The young man who has kept all the commandments from his youth up must be sent home to sell all that he has. But when poor Zacchaeus, the publican, has been beckoned down from his eyrie in the sycamore-tree, and announces, “I give half of what I have to the poor,” that is enough; “He too is a son of Abraham.” How well he knows where faith is strong enough, where it is not yet strong enough, to do without reassurance! The Magdalen is to keep her distance; only Thomas may thrust

his hand into the wounds. Everybody, to our Lord, from our Blessed Lady downwards, is a separate problem, needing a separate approach.

And so it is, if only we had faith to believe it, in Holy Communion. That long procession to the altar-rails, how interminable it seems! The priest, you would think, must get tired of muttering the same formula two or three hundred times over! But no, he is not allowed to say “Corpus Domini Jesu Christi custodiat animas vestras”, the sacred words must be said to each communicant individually. Jesus Christ is not simply coming among us, he is coming to each of us; and although the gift is always the same (for it is nothing less than the whole of himself), the purpose for which it is given, the influence which it is meant to bestow, on your soul or mine, is something special, in proportion to the needs of each, in accordance with the plan he has for each. He knows you, and makes allowances for you; knows you, and can gauge your capacity; knows you, and is not to be put off by excuses. He can tell whether you are really trying to find him when you go to the altar, or merely following the dictates of convention; whether you come in a spirit of humility, or expecting too much of him. He can tell whether the contrition you feel for your sins needs to be drawn

out still more, or is ripening already into love; whether your faith is such that it still needs reassurance, or whether it can stand up to the test of a rebuff. (The Layman and His Conscience, Msgr. Ronald Knox)

So from the altar boy who is learning how to hold the paten correctly, to the priest with many academic degrees, everyone can learn from the Mass, in any country, and at any time. The Mass can run up and down touching each of the eight modes of teaching, like the chanter singing the musical scales, sometimes pausing at this note, or skipping to a higher note, or going back to the first note.

As Sacred Scripture has different senses to it, so that either the lamb or the elephant can be nourished from its waters (as St. Gregory pointed out), so the Mass can teach and nourish anyone, no matter what his level of knowledge might be, or what level of participation he might be capable of pursuing.

The Mass is like heaven, where the lowest angel and the lowest saint, join their voices with the highest angels and saints, all of them singing “Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus.”