

## Homily Sunday 28B: 14 Oct 2012: HT-W/XII-PC

Last Thursday the Year of Faith began for the Catholic Church worldwide. It is providential that this gospel is read on the first Sunday of the Year of Faith. It's providential because faith is what gives believers the hope of eternal life, the goal of the rich man's quest. This anonymous fellow in the gospel is particularly intriguing because he resembles us. The man has a lot of good stuff, many possessions, as the gospel says. Yet he wants something more, something called eternal life. And he feels this amazing rabbi called Jesus may hold the key. So he goes to the good teacher to find out, sort of like we come to the Lord at Mass. We learn this gentleman is a good man; we like to think we are too. The man keeps the commandments, as Jesus enumerates them. In fact, he has kept them all his life. Then comes this poignant passage: Jesus, looking at him, loved him. Once again, the man is like us, because Jesus loves us too.

And then the climax. The Lord tells the man that he lacks only one thing--go sell what you have, give to the poor, then come and follow me. But because the man is rich, he goes away sad. He had a lot of possessions, and they came between him and Jesus. At that point we get that unforgettable image of the camel going thru the needle's eye to illustrate how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom. The irony is that for Jesus' audience riches were thought to be a sign of divine favor. Yet the Lord indicates that these supposed tokens of God's approval could actually be impediments to eternal life. Even the disciples are surprised.

My brothers and sisters, I hope that this Year of Faith may prove an opportunity for us here amid all our possessions in the affluent regions of the world to renew our faith. As noted, there are many parallels between the sad lesson of this gospel and our contemporary situation. And one chilling similarity to the story of the rich man is that in the richer parts of the globe, many people have turned their backs on Jesus, they've lost the faith. I fear that many relatively well-heeled folks are too wrapped up in their belongings to give serious consideration to following the Lord. And this is especially sad because, unlike the man in the gospel, most people of means are not asked to give up everything for the sake of the kingdom. Rich people can enter the kingdom of heaven, for as Jesus says, all things are possible for God. However, rich people, like everybody else, do have to believe and obey God to enter his kingdom. And that obedience does require poverty of spirit, that is, a humble recognition that true wealth is found only in God, a humble acknowledgement of Jesus' Lordship expressed in obedience to the teachings of Christ and his church. I'm afraid that money and the comforts it can afford and the inflated sense of self that it can engender have become the golden idol corrupting the hearts of many Americans and Europeans. And because they have turned away from the Lord, they move through life fundamentally sad, like the anonymous fellow of the gospel. If you look beneath the glittery and glamorous surface of our culture and the ephemeral delight it produces, you discover a deep-seated discontent. It's the unavoidable sorrow that comes from turning one's back on the path to eternal life opened by faith in Jesus. Without eternal life, you see, the good things of this world

are nothing more than transitory pleasures doomed to pass away, leaving human beings dissatisfied and despondent. The Lord calls everyone to follow him because he loves them and he wants them to share in eternal life. Jesus called the rich man to get rid of his possessions because he loved him and he knew those possessions would impede him from gaining the eternal life he was so earnestly seeking. Incidentally, this is a point that can't be overemphasized in talking about vocations. The Lord calls certain special young men and women to give up family and wealth and personal freedom as priests and nuns, because he loves them, and he wants them to experience his love in a more profound and lasting way, and he knows that family and wealth and personal freedom would impede them from the peace and joy that come only from God.

During this Year of Faith, the Church invites us all to strengthen our faith in the God who loves us, the God whose name is Jesus. This endeavor is especially necessary for us in this part of the world, because our faith is subjected to many types of attack, most of them rather subtle. Many Americans have abandoned the faith, including many of great influence, such that a quasi-official culture of disbelief has been established. When you exit church, you enter a society that doesn't encourage freedom of religious expression. One finds this tendency in the mass media, the universities, entertainment, and elsewhere. It's ok to believe whatever, they say, as long as it doesn't affect your behavior in public. Religion isn't talked about much; and when it is, discussion tends to focus on the negative aspects--hate crimes perpetrated by fanatics, betrayals of trust by ministers, and the like. This means that believers have swim against the current, as it were; we who do believe must adopt countermeasures to protect and strengthen our faith. Study and prayer are the two essential pieces of this strategy. We must study our faith so that its reasonableness, its coherence, and beauty are more evident to us. I'm afraid that a typical Catholic has little more than a smattering of disjointed doctrines bouncing about in his head: he may know, for instance, that the Church teaches that Jesus is God, that we're supposed to come to Mass on Sunday, and that contraception is immoral. But relatively few know how all those different elements are woven together into a unitary, intelligible, cogent, and beautiful whole. Study is important, because it helps us see the coherence of the entire body of beliefs that constitute the content of our faith. Alongside study, prayer is crucial too. Because faith is the gift of God, it's the work of the Holy Spirit moving in our hearts and prompting us to confess that Jesus is Lord and to give assent to his teachings as expounded by his Church. We require God's help to keep on believing in God, and that's what prayer asks for. So I encourage everyone to make extra time for prayer this year: try attending Mass during the week, or commit at least 15-30 extra minutes a day to personal prayer, say, by meditating on the Bible or saying the rosary.

My dear people, this Eucharist is the feast of faith, for it is where the mysteries of our faith are proclaimed and celebrated, and where our faith in Christ is strengthened. Let's pray that this Eucharist will fortify our faith so that we can better enjoy the happiness that comes from being loved by Jesus and from grasping the promise of eternal life he offers.