



Homily for the Nineteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year C

Archbishop Fulton Sheen often spoke in his retreats of God's tendency toward "love's delays,"¹ examples by which our heart is expanded with longing as we wait patiently for the Lord to make good on His promises. Our needs are not immediately fulfilled, our desires are not immediately satisfied, and our prayers are not immediately answered. God delays his arrival while we grow more anxious for his presence. The deeper the hunger, it seems, the more satisfying the meal when it finally comes. This mystery is a fundamental movement of the Christian life; Christopher West, following St. Augustine, writes that "the 'whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing... That is our life, to be trained by longing' – to follow the heart's deepest desire where it ultimately takes us."² Love's delays put us in touch with that holy longing, making our awareness of it keenly felt—sometimes painfully felt—as our hearts expand and yearn for fulfillment. West writes: "What's needed to progress on the journey of the Christian life is depth of desire, not death of desire."³ Love's delays keep that desire alive. It's God's way of stretching us, opening us to receive the fullness of His divine gift. And it is those who are faithful in waiting on love's delay, whose souls are content to "wait for the Lord," who will ultimately enjoy the supreme inheritance God has prepared for them (cf. Psalm 33:12, 20).

This is the attitude that stands behind the great gift of faith as it is on display in the Letter to the Hebrews. "Faith," as the Hebrews author writes in the second reading, "is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1). It is the human response to love's delays. The letter to the Hebrews, in some ways, is faith's constitution, highlighting the great Patriarchs who lived in expectation of God's promise. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were all men who "died in faith," yet "did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar" (11:13). They responded to the Lord's promise with faith because they knew that "the one who had made the promise was trustworthy" (11:11); and yet none of them lived to see the total fulfillment of those promises in their lifetimes. Rather, faith is most alive precisely in the middle of that delay, while the promise is still being worked out.

In fact, it could be said that faith reveals the true constitution of man. How does one react when faced with love's delay? Today's Gospel poses this very question. When the Bridegroom is delayed in His arrival, what are we doing while we pass the time? How does our faith express itself in action? The question may at first seem somewhat removed from the question of faith; my actions and my beliefs do not always necessarily have a bearing on one another. But Pope Saint John Paul II, in his *Theology of the Body*, cautions us against dualistic thinking. The healing of such a division, he suggests, is at the heart of what St. Paul calls life "according to the Spirit." The Holy Spirit of God comes to permeate and invade every aspect of human life: body and spirit, belief and action. This, St. John Paul II argues, is what St. Paul means when he speaks of "justification by faith." "At its center stands man," St. John Paul II asserts: "man constituted in the personal unity of spirit and body. It is precisely in this man, in his 'heart' and thus in all his behavior, that the redemption of Christ bears fruit" (TOB 52:1). Justification has a real effect on man; faith comes to bear on his behavior.

In other words, as he awaits the fullness of redemption, man's fidelity to God in his deeds is precisely the fruit of his faith, the working out of his ability to wait on God. Justification has a real effect - it's an active power channeling faith into action, the Spirit permeating the body. As St. John Paul reminds us, "This 'justification' by faith does not constitute simply a dimension of the divine plan of salvation and of man's sanctification, but according to St. Paul it is a real power at work in man that reveals and affirms itself in his actions" (TOB 51:4). Jesus holds up the example of the steward whom the master finds diligently at work: "Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival." Here we see one whose faith has indeed justified him, for it is his confidence in the promise that the Bridegroom is not long in coming that keeps him faithful to the tasks before him. Would that such faith were to be found in each of us as well. And it is found, in every act of fidelity, every responsible work that we undertake to build up the Kingdom of God.



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¹ See Fulton Sheen, *St. Therese: A Treasured Love Story*, (Irving, TX: Basilica Press, 2007), 57ff.

² Christopher West, *Fill These Hearts: God, Sex and the Universal Longing*, (New York: Image, 2012), 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 18.