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Retreat at Casa Maria of the Sister Servants of the Eternal Word
Birmingham, AL
July 18-20, 2008
“Enrolling in the School of the Saints”
Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
Wis 12:13,16-19; Rom 8:26-27; Mt 13:24-43

The Growth of the Lord In Us and Through Us

- 1) With a hat-trick of different images in today’s Gospel, Jesus teaches us three very important realities about the Church he had come from heaven to found. The Church is his instrument to bring about the Kingdom of God. Insofar as he has called us from all eternity into his Church to carry out, as the saints of our epoch, the mission of building that kingdom, these three parables are deeply relevant to who we are and what God calls us to do. They are also very pertinent to what he has tried to do in us during this retreat and the type of growth he wishes to see in us after the retreat.
 - a. Jesus tells us first that the Church, like a mustard seed, starts small but will grow to be huge.
 - b. Secondly, he says that the members of the Church are meant to function in the world like yeast does in bread. We’re supposed to make everything rise.
 - c. Finally, he states that the Church’s growth doesn’t happen in a vacuum. There is also “an enemy” in the field, sowing weeds, to try to wreck God’s harvest — in other words to destroy you, me and those we know and love.

All three images are meant to guide us at every moment of the Church’s life. Therefore, let’s look at each of them in greater depth.

- 2) The first parable is that the Church begins like a mustard seed. What is that seed? Or better, who is it? It is Jesus Christ, the seed who fell to the ground and died (Jn 12:24), but when he rose, his Church began to grow and to extend throughout time to all the places of the world. From the seed of Christ, dead and risen for our salvation, from this one person in Palestine, the God-man, the Church was born and grew, grew into the largest of shrubs, in which countless people throughout the ages, including whole nations, were able to come and find shelter in her branches. That tree continues to live today, right here and now, and we’re in it. But we’re not only IN it, we’re part of it, along with all Christians throughout the ages past and to come. Together with Christ, as branches on Jesus the vine (Jn 15:5), we are the Church. The branches of the Church extend throughout the whole world, in areas of great sunshine and of great darkness, with all of us taking our roots in that one event, that one piece of soil on Calvary, that one seed that fell to the ground three times and died, but rose again, like a plant in springtime, giving life to all of us throughout time.
- 3) Throughout the history of the Church, many movements have followed this same pattern of starting as a mustard seed and growing to be enormous. So many religious orders and apostolates that the Lord has raised up to help the Church began small, often with one saint. But over the course of sufferings and patience, they grew to be enormous. So many parishes began with just a handful of poor, committed families, but over the course of time, with sacrifices, time and the help the Lord, grew to be quite large. The religious growth in countless individuals has begun with one small seed planted, perhaps, in a retreat like this.
- 4) Sometimes, however, when looking at what is going on in the Church in some parts of the world, in our country, and even within our own spiritual life, we ask whether what Jesus said about the mustard seed has an expiration date. It seems that with so many traditional religious orders and movements, with priestly vocations, with closing parishes throughout Europe and the northeastern United States, the tree,

rather than growing, seems to be shrinking and dying. We need to ask: Does this parable still have meaning? The answer is a resounding Yes! The Lord gives this parable for every age. If in some areas the Church has gotten smaller, the Lord has allowed it, so that we can experience anew the full meaning of this parable, by beginning again, beginning smaller, like the new mustard seed planted from the tall tree. He wants us to experience for ourselves the exhilarating growth of the mustard seed. He wants us to root ourselves ever more in him and experience growth with him. As we do, we'll get bigger again and many others will be able to nest in the branches that will come from this union in future generations. We just need to trust in him like the first Christians trusted in him. If the Lord could take his mother, a few women and twelve relative nobodies — eleven of whom cowardly abandoned him in his moment of great need — and transform the entire world, then he can clearly do the same with us here at Casa Maria, if we but have similar faith. The Lord Jesus wants us to be the living 21st century illustration of this parable.

- 5) The second image is of the yeast in bread. The bread is the whole world and Christians are called to be the leaven. One Christian in a neighborhood, or one truly Catholic family on a street, should be enough over time to transform that neighborhood and that street if the Christians don't hide the light of their faith under a bushel basket (Mt 5:15). Similarly one true Christian — or a few of them — in a school or in an office complex should be enough over time to impact all the rest. During my studies in Rome, I used to love to compare stories and strategies for preaching the Gospel with future priests from around the world. I remember once we were talking about evangelization and an African seminarian told me that, unlike in many parts of Europe and North America, when they want to spread the faith they don't concern themselves with producing slick fliers and books for people to read. Rather they just ask for a family to volunteer to move into another village and just live the faith with joy, spreading it as good news through friendship, or, on occasion, being willing to spread it through becoming a martyr for it. And in these parts of Africa, the faith is growing by leaps and bounds. The Lord wants us to be similar yeast in our neighborhoods, places of employment, schools. He wants us to live in a way that, like yeast in dough, lifts everyone else up to God. Through our joy, through our conversation, through our Christ-like self-sacrificial love, through our modesty and morality, the Lord wants to use us to transform all of society from within. One person can do so much. Just think about what Blessed Mother Teresa did in Calcutta. One small Albanian nun in a city sprawling with millions. She just started caring for people left to die in sewer drains. Soon others joined her. And she and they have had a dramatic impact not just in Calcutta but throughout the whole world, individually and through her sisters. We can look at the example of so many other saints who have been similar instruments for the Lord. Like St. Ignatius of Loyola, when he was convalescing in a castle after having his left leg shattered by a canon ball during battle and reading the lives of the saints, we're called to ask, "Why can't I do what Francis has done? Why I can't I do what Dominic has done?" The Lord wants to use us — you and me, none of us excepted — as his yeast to make the whole world rise to him. But to carry out this mission, we need to be willing to take the Gospel into unleavened areas and live our faith with joy to the full. This is, of course, how the mustard tree continues to grow.
- 6) The third parable concerns the fact that while the Lord wants this growth to be occurring, there is an enemy trying to sabotage his plans. Jesus identifies the enemy straight out as the devil. At the same time that the Lord is trying to sow good seed — who are "children of the kingdom," you and I if we're truly in his kingdom giving the King the homage he is due — the devil is sowing those who are beholden to him and to his lies. They are the anti-yeast, who rather than lifting everyone up toward God, bring people below, to behave more like animals, to behave more like proud devils. Jesus says that the weeds are "children of the evil one... who cause others to sin and do evil." Does anyone deny that these weeds exist in our world and that the field of our nation is becoming more populated with them? We've got employers who threaten to fire their employees if they don't work on Sunday. We've got whole industries in Hollywood, Nevada and 40% of the internet who try to cause others to sin and bring them down through the slavery of lust. We've got new aged gurus purveying anti-beatitudes through kabbalah, crystals, and scientology. There is the whole movement of radical feminism that tries to get women to reject the maternal meaning of their bodies and to look at their own children in the womb as burdens rather than blessings and to do what is unspeakable to them. These weeds, and many others, threaten to

choke people's spiritual growth and have choked it. The Lord tells us that they will get their just due at the end of time. He tells us that they're present now so that we will know that so much hangs on whether we unite ourselves and grow with Christ, the mustard seed, and on whether we become the leaven he's calling us to be. The weeds are everywhere and choking people's souls to death. We can either do nothing and let the evil grow, poisoning our culture and the hearts, souls and lives of those we know and love, or we can rise up, as yeast, as salt of the earth and light of the world (Mt 5:13-16), and do something about it for Christ. The Lord Jesus gives us that opportunity and choice again today. Every crisis that the Church and the world faces, as St. Josemaría Escrivá used to say, is a crisis of saints. With the seeds that the Lord has planted within us during this retreat, with the seeds that the Lord has planted in us over the course of our life, he has set in motion the response to all these ills. He's not asking us to have all the solutions to every difficulty. He's simply asking us to allow those seeds to grow, to remove whatever obstacles, to put up no resistance, to the work of sanctification he wishes to do in us, to make us more and more his holy image and likeness and through us to make others his image and likeness as well.

- 7) At this Mass which concludes our retreat, the Lord wants to strengthen us to carry out this crucial mission of the salvation of the world and the spreading of his kingdom. He does so not just through planting the seed of his word through our ears into our hearts, but by planting himself, the mustard seed, into our mouths and digestive tracks through Holy Communion. From within, he wants to grow, so that others, in seeing us, may see more and more of Him. He wants us to root ourselves ever more in his passion and death, and experience the mustard seed's growth within so that we might take it out. He wants us to become his yeast, leavening all around us. And he wants us to realize that unless we work with him for the salvation of others, many will be lost. Jesus wouldn't be calling us to this mission unless he were prepared to give us everything we need to fulfill it. He shows us that he is ready to give us everything else besides by giving us himself. With him, nothing is impossible. We can, indeed, do all things in him who strengthens us. "Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear!"