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Retreat on Living Religiously By Faith in the Year of Faith
Sisters of Jesus our Hope, Bloomsbury, New Jersey
July 29 to August 2, 2013
Ex 40:16-21, 34-38; Ps 84; Mt 13:47-53

St. Alphonsus and the Redeemer's Mission to help us become Beautiful Fish

- To live by faith means to live in the kingdom and for the kingdom of God, to live with the King, to acknowledge him as Lord, to give him homage, to obey him with love, to accept his lavish generosity, to serve as his herald, attend and invite others to attend his banquet, to desire that his kingdom expand, to recognize the value of the kingdom and be willing to give our life for this celestial homeland. To live by faith means to live in the “now and not yet” reality of the kingdom, that there is already a part of it that’s here but it’s fulfillment is still on the way, and it’s a fulfillment that not only we’re called to seek and embrace, but also facilitate.
- At the end of the passage, Jesus asks the disciples and us, “Have you understood all these things?” The Greek means “Have you put all of these things together?,” indicating, as we discussed when we were talking about Mary’s contemplative heart on Monday, but putting new truths together as the pieces of a mosaic with the other tesserae to form a whole. It’s not enough merely to hear Jesus’ parables and ponder the images. It’s not enough for us to have him solve the riddle of the images used in the parable. It’s to grasp the truths pointed to by Jesus’ unforgettable illustrations using similes from daily life and grasp them in such a way that it helps us to live with increased faith in that kingdom.
- And so in today’s Gospel, Jesus gives us the last of seven images of the kingdom in this 13th chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel. In the image of the Kingdom of heaven as a dragnet thrown into the sea, we can see two great lessons: The kingdom seeks to draw everyone in, but not everyone is fit for the kingdom. The net will collect fish of every kind, but the good — literally the “beautiful” in Greek — will be retained and the bad — literally the “rotten” — will be thrown away after the haul. So there is a universal will for salvation but there’s also a judgment and not everyone will make it.
- This is one of the main points Jesus makes in his parables of the kingdom. He makes the same point in the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat, that both good seed and darnel will grow in his field, but at the end they will be separated and those not fit for the kingdom will be separated by angels and thrown into the fire where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. Likewise he makes the point when he describes the kingdom as a banquet. His servants go into the highways and by-ways to “compel” everyone into the banquet, but those who are improperly dressed for the feast, those who have not maintained their baptismal garments properly cleaned and pressed for the feast, will be cast out to the same dark place of teeth-grinding and wailing. He reiterates it yet again in response to the faith of the Centurion. He says that many will come from the east and west — i.e., non-Jewish lands — to recline with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at the banquet, but many of the children of the kingdom will be cast into the outer darkness, where there’s tear-filled dental destruction. Perhaps the most famous image is Jesus’ description that at the last judgment he will separate us as a shepherd distinguishes the sheep from the goats on the basis of faith working through deeds of love for him in the image of those in need; the goats who fail to do this will be forced to depart from him into the eternal fire of punishment.
- To understand this means to understand the incredible stakes of our freedom, to respond with faith and live according to what God has revealed to us, to make the kingdom the precious pearl or hidden treasure worth losing our life for in order to gain it forever. Today there are many who are universalists, believing basically in the ancient heresy of apocatastasis, which teaches that basically everyone goes to heaven, no matter what one does. Theoretically, of course, we can fathom that Judas, Hitler, Osama Bin Laden, serial killers, and all the people who don’t like us might end up in hell, if there is a hell; but we can’t envisage ourselves, any of those we care about, or a sizable chunk of ordinary people ever ending up in Gehenna. How could a God Who is full of compassion, slow to anger, and rich in kindness ever set up an eternal, infernal dungeon in which He mercilessly punishes people for disobedience? How could God Who is love ever establish an everlasting Abu Ghraib for anyone, not to mention His beloved children? And if it’s the

case that only those with post-doctoral degrees in Satanic wickedness are candidates for the eternal hall of shame, then, at a practical level, we can all just calm down, because very little now matters to our or others' eternal destiny. It doesn't matter if we spread the faith, because everyone gets to Heaven whether or not they know Jesus Christ. The Sacraments don't matter. The Word of God doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if we pray or play, if we keep or break promises, if we steal or sacrifice, if we come to Mass or sleep in, if we're faithful to our spouse or cheat, if we provide for or neglect our family, if we forgive or settle scores, if we love or abuse the poor, or if we welcome or abort the littlest of Jesus' brethren. None of this matters — or at least none of it matters much. Since almost everyone in the class is going to make the eternal honor roll no matter what they do, while we may still admire those who study hard, the really wise ones are those who eat, drink and be merry and still get their easy A.

- But Jesus says otherwise. He says that those who live by faith working through love and those who don't will be separated. He says that those who choose the kingdom and those who reject it won't end up together. He takes our freedom seriously and so must we. To ask us if we understand these things means to ask us whether we grasp the incredible stakes of our choices. Jesus said that He had come into the world not to condemn the world but to save it, but He added, "The one who rejects Me and does not receive My word has a judge, and on the last day the Word that I have spoken will serve as judge" (Jn 12:47). Those who reject Jesus' words of eternal life, who prefer to walk in the darkness instead of the light, who fail to live by faith and enter the kingdom, become their own judges by the way they respond to the truth God has revealed. "There are only two kinds of people in the end," C.S. Lewis once famously wrote. "Those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in hell choose it." Hell exists not despite God's love but precisely because of it, in order to honor the desires of those who don't want to live in loving communion with Him and others. It is the state, as the Catechism calls it, of "definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed." It is the tragic possibility of human freedom for those who, in voluntarily choosing sin, separate themselves from God and others.
- St. Alphonsus Ligouri was famous in the 18th century for reminding people of these truths. As a preacher of parish missions for 32 years together with the priests of the Congregation of the Redeemer he founded, he went throughout Italy, and the Redemptorists throughout the world, to give lengthy retreats helping the people to come to conversion, to ponder the meaning of their freedom, and to choose the King and the Kingdom. A few centuries later, St. Alphonsus' homilies are perhaps most famous for the graphic imagery he would use about what happens at the judgment and death and some have said that he tried to "scare the hell" out of people. But his goal was never to preach to the folks as if they were a bunch of convicts on the way to prison but as much beloved sons and daughters of God called to cease squandering their lives in self-made pigsties and make the way home, here in this world, to the celebration God has for us not with a fattened calf but a Lamb looking as if he has been slain. His many books on the Glories of Mary were meant to show how it is possible to imitate her faith so that our own souls may magnify the Lord and our spirits rejoice in indescribable happiness. St. Alphonsus gave his entire life so that no one lose the precious gift of redemption for which the Redeemer paid such a precious price, but rather use their freedom and in faith choose continually and definitively to live in the kingdom of the redeemed.
- In order to understand today's parable and all that Jesus has been describing about entrance into the kingdom, we need to grasp a little how the choice will be made between the good and the bad fish, between the beautiful and the rotten. The Jews weren't spending all-nighters on the Sea of Galilee trying to catch fish for aquaria. The good or beautiful fish that are saved are those that are fit for eating, who are capable of making themselves a holocaust for others. To use the famous acrostic of the early Church, in which the Greek word for fish, *ichthus*, was understood to signify by its letters "Jesus Christ Son of God, Savior," the good and beautiful fish are those who, like Jesus, are able to say, "This is my body ... given for you," given to nourish you, given to help you live. The rotten fish are those who have been corrupted by interior selfishness, who by their own choices have made themselves unfit for this type of total service. To live in the kingdom means to imitate the King in humbly serving all his subjects, giving oneself totally for others, losing one's life for the sake of advancing the Kingdom so as to save it.

- That brings us in conclusion to the other readings today. In the passage from the Book of Exodus, we see how painstakingly God commanded Moses to erect the meeting tent, the Dwelling, for his presence, symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant containing the Ten Commandments and by the cloud that covered it when God's glory filled it. We know that God the Father had an even greater plan in mind to tabernacle his presence and glory. It was his Son, the fullness of the refulgence of the Father's glory, who took on our human nature and dwelled among us. The Blessed Virgin, the model and pillar of faith, became the new Ark of the Covenant. But God's greatest plan was for us to imitate Mary's faith and receptivity and become in turn true temples of God, arks of the New and Eternal Covenant, covered no longer by a cloud, but overshadowed still by the Holy Spirit and ignited from within by the fire of his love. When we cry out with the Psalm, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord, Mighty God!" we remember that by God's unbelievable loving designs we have become that dwelling place through the admirabile commercium, the wondrous exchange, that happens in Holy Communion. We ask that the Lord who will come to dwell within us today will make us truly lovely, truly beautiful fish, ready to sacrifice ourselves fully like the divine Icthus, for the salvation of others, so that, when the dragnet finally comes, we, with them, with the Blessed Virgin, St. Alphonsus and all the saints, may come to gaze on the the loveliness of God's eternal dwelling place forever.