

FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT, 2015

The beautiful Gospel reading that we just heard already came up about a half-year ago, on the feast of Mary's Visitation to her cousin Elizabeth. I once read a commentary by someone reflecting on that Gospel, and he assured his readers that, in his words, "when charity called upon Mary, she thought of no dangers or difficulties in so painful and long a journey from Nazareth in Galilee to the southern part of the mountainous country of Judea."¹ What we have in such a statement is the unspoken assumption that when a holy person performs a virtuous deed, this almost inevitably requires overcoming obstacles in a particularly arduous and painful way. I call this the grit-your-teeth understanding of virtue, and I suspect that it has a lot to do with making religion unattractive to many people. A while back I heard a young Catholic mother say that when she was leaving her house to attend a weekday Mass, her little boy said, "Have a good time, Mom." She replied that she wasn't going to church to enjoy it, to which her son astutely replied, "Why not? The Baptists do."

Well, I've never asked any Baptists if they really enjoy services at their church, but I hope they do, just as I hope all of us have gotten beyond a mind-set that equates doing good with straining against the goad. To his credit, the editor of a more recent edition of that commentary on Mary's visitation omitted the phrase about the "dangers or difficulties of so painful and long a journey" and simply noted that it was "a visit of charity."² That has it exactly right. It was indeed a loving thing for Mary to visit her older relative in order to be with her in the final months of her pregnancy, but there is every reason to suppose her journey south was rendered easy, even joyful, by her anticipation of soon being with Elizabeth, and that their months together were marked by many pleasant conversations. After all, the best of our tradition has regularly taught that the virtues—of which the greatest is love—are what make possible the ready and easy performance of actions that lead to good ends. The more virtuous we are, the more we will positively want to live according to the pattern bequeathed to us by our great teacher, Christ

Jesus, and the more delight we will experience in this way of life. St. Benedict of Nursia, the author of the monastic rule under which I live, expresses this memorably at the end of his lengthy chapter on humility, where he writes: “After ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out fear [1 Jn 4:18]. Through this love, all that he once performed with dread, he will now begin to observe without effort, as though naturally ... out of love for Christ, good habit, and delight in virtue.”³ This is why the French writer Leon Bloy once wrote that joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.

It is also encouraging to note that the kind of behavior the church holds up to us in this Gospel passage is not the sort that would ever make headlines, for this puts such activity within the reach of us all. Visiting a relative or friend is surely among the most mundane things any of us might do, but the fact that St. Luke’s Gospel makes a point of noting Mary’s visit to her cousin is a way of saying that even relatively small deeds are important in the eyes of God if they are done with a loving heart. Let me therefore conclude this homily with some brief reflections on love.

Critics of Christianity occasionally say that our religion preaches love but doesn’t tell us clearly enough just how to practice it. Such critics may be well-intentioned, but I think they’re on the wrong track. If we had a list of precise things to do, such that fulfilling them would prove that we loved other people, there would be a terrible danger that we would become “bean-counters.” In other words, we would be keeping track of all sorts of precisely defined duties and so be led to think that we had thereby done everything that God wanted of us. It’s more risky, but in the long run more invigorating and even exciting, to leave our practice of love open-ended, ready to respond to ever-changing situations in the most generous and creative ways possible.

Many of these ways will include precisely the kind of activity that Mary models for us in today's Gospel. All of us have relatives or friends who, because of sickness or old age, live in nursing homes or as shut-ins and receive few visitors or even none at all. Such persons can easily feel forgotten and unloved, one of the worst feelings imaginable. What is to stop us from taking the time to pay them a visit, to let them know that someone really cares about them? Somewhere recently I read an account of what such a visit can mean to a person. It went like this: An elderly woman was so ill that she was permanently bed-ridden. When a friend visited her, she said how thankful she was that she was still able to see. When the friend asked how she would feel if she lost her sight, she said that she would be grateful for still being able to have a conversation with her visitor. And when asked how she would feel if she then became deaf, she said, "Oh, I would be so happy that you came to visit me."

Or perhaps we know someone grieving over the breakup of a marriage or the death of a loved one. How easy it would be for any of us to extend a heartfelt expression of sympathy, to ask if there is anything we can do to be of assistance. Maybe all we can do is give the person a hug, but that might make all the difference. As one of my high-school teachers used to say, "It takes so little to make people happy." Or again, consider that in our day one in every 138 Americans is incarcerated. These prisoners are truly among the most forgotten persons in society, the living embodiment of the adage "out of sight, out of mind." Yet the Gospel could not be clearer about how such persons are to be treated, for one of the ways in which we serve the Lord Jesus in the least of his brothers and sisters is to heed his words, "I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt 25:36). There could, in fact, hardly be a better way of following the example of Mary's visitation.

My point is simply that to be truly loving followers of Jesus, we don't so much need a list of precise activities to be undertaken as rather a lively conviction that there are countless ways to show our love for others if only we keep our eyes wide open looking for opportunities and our hands wide open, ready to help. If we live in this way, we will indeed be following the Lord's new commandment, "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34), and then we may hope one day to hear from him those other words, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.... [For] I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers or sisters of mine, that you did for me" (Matt 25:34, 40).

1 *Butler's Lives of the Saints: Complete Edition*, ed. Herbert Thurston, S.J., and Donald Attwater (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1956), 3:6.

2 *Butler's Lives of the Saints: New Full Edition*, revised by David Hugh Farmer, *May* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996), 176.

3" *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, 7:67-69, English-only edition, ed. Timothy Fry, O.S.B. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1982), 38.