

Playfully Thirsting for Justice

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It was one of those cold winter mornings when the wind catches the snow in swirls of white that dance across the parking lot. People were coming into church, warm and welcoming, chatting in hushed tones. I watched a mother helping her children take off their coats when the youngest, wearing a heavy sweater, rather deliberately walked over to the immersion style baptismal font that also served as the holy water font in the rear of the church. The Little girl looked at the pool of water that sat about waist height, lifted her arm in the air and then playfully plunged it into the water, all the way up to her shoulder. With a completely soaked sweater arm she lifted her hand out of the water, reached to her forehead and with great purpose made the sign of the cross. I remember thinking to myself, this child understands our symbols and instinctively knows how to interact with the waters of baptism.

Like the fountain of immersion in the back of the church water is also a prominent theme in the rear of the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi, found in the art on the inner façade. On either side of the doors are two scenes of the life cycle of Saint Francis: *Miracle of the Spring* and *Sermon to the Birds*. These frescos are understood as an artistic nod to Francis' *Canticle of the Creatures* where he addresses nature as an example for us to better consider our relationships with God and his creation.¹

Looking at these frescos, one is prompted to ask: *How do I approach God through nature?* Francis, the Jongleur de Dieu, does this by joyfully singing his canticle, "Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, who is very useful and humble and precious and pure".



In the fresco of the *Miracle of the Spring*, Francis approaches God through nature on his way to Mount Alverna. Saint Bonaventure tells us how the man accompanying Francis, on a hot summer day, cried out for an immediate drink lest he die of thirst. Francis then dismounted his donkey, raised his arms in prayer and declared that Christ in His mercy provides living water, from a nearby rock, for him to drink.² Francis' liturgical raising of his arms in prayer actively engaged his Sister Water (useful, humble, precious and pure) to fulfill God's promise of providing living waters to those who believe.

This scene reaches back to Exodus, where God commands Moses to strike the rock with his staff so as to produce water for the thirsty people on their desert journey.³ In Numbers we hear how

¹ Franco, Bradley R. *The World of St. Francis of Assisi: Essays in Honor of William R. Cook*, Brill, pp.155-156.

² P.Gerard Ruf, *S. Francesco e S. Bonaventura* (Assisi: Casa Franciscana Editrice, 1974), pp. 159-162.

³ Exodus 17:6

Moses felt the need to strike the rock twice.⁴ Francis, however, only needed his simple prayer to produce living water from the rock. With such complete faith, Francis becomes the new Moses who is both patriarch and prophet.⁵

In his address to the Congress of the United States of America, Pope Francis uses the figure of Moses as patriarch and lawgiver, reminding legislators, to keep alive unity of the people through passing just laws. He then looks at Moses as a prophet, who at the same time led the people to God and to a greater awareness of human dignity.⁶ This coupling of just legislation with our growing into a deeper awareness of God and human dignity is key in our understanding not only of government, but of how we are to be disciples in the world.

When we encounter unjust laws or oppression we are to cry out like Moses, speaking for the Lord and saying, “Let my people go, so that they may worship me”.⁷ In the spirit of Vatican II, Pope Francis was highlighting how we Christians are to live in our contemporary world, by enacting just laws and living in right relationship with God, one another and creation. To do this the Church’s liturgy serves to prepare us to secure our rights and carry out our duties in the liturgy of the world.⁸

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, later Benedict XVI, explores the Exodus journey of Moses and the people from the perspective of liturgy. While the journey was important, it is the worship of God that brings true meaning to the forty years in the desert and the reaching of the Promised Land. Exodus 10:26 reminds us that the ultimate issue in Exodus was liturgy, which needs to be completely dependent on God’s revelation.⁹

Reading the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, the 1971 Synod of Bishops understood the power of liturgy in developing a sense of right relationship that is rooted in justice, “The liturgy...can greatly serve education for justice...The liturgy of the word, catechesis and the celebration of the sacraments have the power to help us to discover the teaching of the prophets, the Lord and the Apostles on the subject of justice. The preparation for baptism is the beginning of the formation of the Christian conscience. The practice of penance should emphasize the social dimension of sin and of the sacrament. Finally, the Eucharist forms the community and places it at the service of people.”¹⁰

⁴ Numbers 20:8-11

⁵ Ibid, Franco, p.156.

⁶ Pope Francis, Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress, 24 September 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html (accessed 14 October 2019).

⁷ Exodus 9:1

⁸ *The Liturgy and Catholic Social Teaching: Participation in Worship and the World*, Liturgy Training Publications, 2019, p.38.

⁹ Colnin, Richard. *The Parodical Catholic Blog*, <https://richardconlin.wordpress.com/2017/07/19/the-spirit-of-the-liturgy-by-joseph-cardinal-ratzinger/> (accessed 14 October 2019).

¹⁰ World Synod of Catholic Bishops, 1971, *Justice in the World*, <https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Justicia-in-Mundo.pdf> (accessed 14 October 2019).

Through the waters of baptism, we are found to be precious and made pure; through the waters of baptism we are called to Eucharist so as to become useful and humble in our service to God, one another, and creation. Each time we come to Mass and dip a hand (or whole arm) into the water, we are reminded of a baptism that began the formation of our consciences along the path of justice, to then necessitate a response to the dryness of violence in the world.

To better help us rediscover the joy of the Gospel life, Pope Francis reminds us how, “family and the workplace can also be a parched place where faith nonetheless has to be preserved and communicated. Yet ‘it is starting from the experience of this desert, from this void, that we can again discover the joy of believing, its vital importance for us men and women. In the desert we rediscover the value of what is essential for living; thus, in today’s world there are innumerable signs, often expressed implicitly or negatively, of the thirst for God, for the ultimate meaning of life. And in the desert people of faith are needed who, by the example of their own lives, point out the way to the Promised Land and keep hope alive’. In these situations, we are called to be living sources of water from which others can drink”.¹¹

Considering the place of liturgy in the reality of our everyday lives of family and workplace, Ratzinger says, “Play takes us out of the world of daily goals and their pressures and into a sphere of purpose and achievement, releasing us for a time from all the burden of our daily world of work. Play is a kind of other world, an oasis of freedom, where for a moment we can let life flow freely...liturgy is a kind of anticipation, a rehearsal, a prelude for the life to come, for eternal life”.¹²

The child playfully approached the font and put her whole arm into the water. This is an example of the liturgical play that Ratzinger mentions. Like Francis raising his arms in prayerful worship, she made the sign of the cross as if to say through her actions, “Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water, who is very useful and humble and precious and pure”. Like Francis, the Jongleur de Dieu, she became a new Moses. Through her intentional playfulness with water, she herself became living water, as we onlookers drank in the depths of her prayerful actions. She opened herself completely to the living waters that alone can quench all thirsts, so that she could then come to be fed and nourished at the banquet of the Lord, so as to be strengthened for the work of justice in the world.

¹¹ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, #86.

¹² Ratzinger, Joseph. *The Spirit of Liturgy*, pp. 13-14.