

SERMON - Father John A. Perricone - 22 JANUARY 2012

Third Sunday after Epiphany

*And Jesus saith to him, I will come and heal him.
And the centurion making answer said, Lord, I am
not worthy that Thou shouldst enter under my
roof; but only say the word, and my servant shall
be healed.*

Mt. 8:7-8

Anytime the Catholic Church tells us something, we stop, listen carefully and promptly obey. But when the Church repeats something over and over, throughout the course of 2000 years, not only do we listen, but we recognize that something supremely important is being told us; something having an immediate urgency to our eternal salvation. So it is that we linger over the words of the pagan centurion. Few passages from the Holy Bible are placed upon lips of the Roman Catholic as often. How privileged these words have become: no soul takes upon his tongue the Body of the Savior unless first repeating these words of the Roman official two thousand years ago. Like a golden key, they unlock the door of a sinner's unworthiness; like a red carpet unfurled before the Kings of Kings, they permit Christ to step onto the soul of the contrite; like a trumpet volley, they proclaim the wonder of poor souls stunned at the approach of so merciful a Savior.

Each word of that centurion's prayer is cast in the admission of unworthiness. But *why* are we unworthy? Our modern age balks at such self-abasement. Friedrich Nietzsche made this the centerpiece of his venomous attacks upon Christianity. This pacesetter of contemporary secularism indicted Christianity for belittling Man; for making Man comfortable with his inferiority, and appreciative of his weakness. Nietzsche called Christianity a gutter religion because it kept Man in chains, restraining him from the glory of an unfettered existence undisturbed by God, morality or truth. His battle cry against Christianity's millennial captivity was "God is dead." With God dead, Man could be alive. Nietzsche's shadow darkens the 20th and 21st century. Is it any wonder that when the cancer racked Christopher Hitchens, only hours before his death last December, when asked about God, defiantly declaimed, "I shall have no part of this foolishness, even now. I shall die like a master, not a slave."

Does the Faith make us weak? For an answer, all Modern Man need do is look at the remarkable lives of the Saints over the centuries. No men or women have achieved the measure of greatness than they. It was their very subjection to Christ that gave them the freedom for the greatness that leaves men in awe. Even Nietzsche could see that.

But the paradox still remains: only through the open admission of unworthiness before God does man arrive at greatness. But, *why*?

Man recognizes that God, who has so much to give, stoops to one who has so little to give in return. Each day brings a new shower of Divine gifts. Only the dullest heart remains unmoved by that largesse. Only the smallest of men cannot see the depths of unworthiness before such undeserved gift after gift.

Moreover, man is painfully aware of the endless record of his offenses and sins – from Original Sin, to the sins he committed an hour ago. With all that, God still begs to be his friend. What kind of man could be insensitive to his unworthiness before that kind of Divine longing for man's love?

One cannot omit the preenings of pride – those eruptions of self-regard that scar the soul of every one of us. This ugly Ruler of all the vices makes daily the persuasive argument that *my* plans and *my* designs serve me far better than His. In spite of this staccato grandiosity, God is patient. After we are quite through with our arrogant rationalizations, who do we find waiting but God. After all our friends have become weary of our chest thumping declarations of self-importance, only one is left unwearied: Almighty God. Before such graciousness – who among us can refrain from confessing unworthiness?

What of all the times we have doubted Christ's Divine power? We think our own conditions and circumstances to be more formidable than Our Lord's grace. Yet, He persists in filling us with grace. Isn't such generosity humbling? In spite of our breaches of confidence in God, are any of us worthy of this Divine Bounty?

Man without God is left to his limits – and those limit crush him. Only when man surrenders Himself to God does he find himself soaring *beyond* those limits. In God, man never reaches any ceiling.

So it is, in Mass after Mass, for a lifetime of Masses, Mother Church places those blessed words on the tongue of every Catholic, "O Lord I am not worthy...". She prays that their repetition might finally shake a soul into seeing that without pleading our *unworthiness*, we are barred entry into God's heart.