

I began my life of full communion with the Catholic Church in college in a rare and isolated corner of the world, where the Catholic community consisted of three or four brilliant and faithful professors, four or five zealous students... and a large but vegan dog named after the seventeenth-century Irish martyr Oliver Plunkett. No priests, deacons, bishops, chapels, sacraments, within about twenty-five miles and fifteen hundred feet of elevation. But we did have Judge Baker.

*The Judge* was a retired Republican judge from Nashville, and as I remember him looked exactly the part: not too tall, but very robust, wearing suspenders that held pants halfway up his estimable belly, like the world was a river he was wading through for fish, and above the suspenders his huge head, hair greased back in sort of ocean waves, with bushy eyebrows, a large downward-pointed nose, a truly political grin, and sharp, pale little eyes, with a permanent wrinkle at the sides of seeming amused by the world. When Judge Baker became Catholic, he became *very* Catholic: a fourth-degree Knight of Columbus, a supernumerary of Opus Dei, and, what's more, a knight of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem. He claimed that this crusading honor gave him the right to come into churches on horseback – if only he could find a horse strong enough to carry him. His greatest achievement, he urged, was that not only had both of his children become Catholics, too, but one a priest of the diocese, and the other a Dominican sister.

So Judge Baker took it upon himself to ride up once a month from Nashville to give us a talking to – and we needed it. He would often begin like this (I'll try to impersonate him): “Now let me remind you gentlemen of your purpose in this life: to make people Christian; to make Christians Catholics; to make Catholics good Catholics; and, finally, to make good Catholics saints.” This was exciting for us fervent but embattled Catholics: that the faith was not merely a cool group we decided to belong to, or a mere custom, but a mission that connected us potentially to every single human being and to a sweeping and turbulent spiritual growth that we could somehow take part in and encourage – that our fidelity did not mean pretending we were already saints and could only be around saints, but rather drew us into an intermingling with all sorts, with the almost boundless needs of people and even of *good* Catholics to grow further. The immensity and universality of the mission Judge Baker’s words suggested taught us that Catholic life is something we could dedicate our entire lives to, that no part of our mind or our loves or our freedom would be left unengaged. Every one has another step to take, and we are right there with them all.

I can only imagine how Judge Baker (of blessed memory) would have reprimanded the Apostles in today’s Gospel. Christ is explaining the single most important event in history, his own death and resurrection, and they don’t even ask a question; they are then wondering who among them is the greatest. But true greatness... surely would mean asking something. True greatness is to ask: How, through my presence with Christ, through my presence in the Church, is God drawing others a few steps closer to himself? Greatness is not something static, a status, like we and the apostles at first imagine. This is a natural sort of mistake, and perhaps even a healthy instinct of faith: that someone who stands close to God

must in fact be already finished, all good – but not everyone is as ready as the Virgin Mary; some are like Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father, who was serving his turn as priest, looked fine, but was not quite ready yet to believe the angel; and then of course there are some like Judas. One aspect of the scandals of our day is that we naturally think that those who are influential must be continuously and profoundly and absolutely worthy of their position – that a priest, for example, must really be close to God, or else he would be a total fool to stand up here and act the way he does. I mean, okay, think of the monastery: we are men publicly consecrated to pursuing the spiritual life in prayer and work and communal life – we’re not hiding it. We spend two, three hours a day literally praying on a platform in front of other people. We wear a special habit to show we are different. We change our names, and go by “father.” This would be a museum of Pharisees or a hypocrite petting zoo if these consecrated men were not sustaining their nearness to Christ by not only the well-known disciplines of priestly and monastic life, but also by all manner of sacrifice and prayer that is unseen even perhaps by the monks themselves. Imagine how much internal and difficult work it would take to live up constantly and deeply to what it means to be a priest, or a bishop or a pope, or even a good spouse or a good friend or a good worker for that matter. When you take your vows or are ordained, you know the work is not done – just like no one’s Christian development was totally finished the moment you were baptized.

Monastic life – and it is a sign of how all Christian life goes – is not about feeling that you have finished growing and can now settle in to help out and wait for heaven. It is a life of seeking God, not entitling oneself to possess God. We are taught by the Rule to pray each day with words like: “If only today you would hear God’s voice,” “Lord, teach me your law, that I may live,” “Save me, O Lord, from what ensnares me,” “Lead us not into temptation,” “Guard us as the apple of your eye; hide us in the shadow of your wings,” or, quite often, “Lord, make haste to help me.” The monk’s task is a constant return to spiritual neediness, and a striving upward for the higher gifts and greater closeness with Christ. You should not think of the priests and religious, and the good Catholics and even saints around you as people who have simply gotten it figured out permanently. They are rather the ones even more intently challenging themselves to overcome spiritual inertia and sinfulness in and around them – they are the front line, and thus they are people in even more dire need of help and grace and prayer, who call themselves back repeatedly, with fear and trembling and joy, to the mysterious God whose voice they try to hear, and they might need your faith to be an echo of that voice.

The life of conversion that we are all engaged in (in our degree) is a continual returning to the right path of greatness. What is Christ’s lesson about greatness? He says: Come up and be a child again. Our true life is made up of crucial moments when we are reborn. Jesus Christ, begotten of the Father before all ages, is the one through whom all things are made, and so every reality of life for us, every action and decision, can be a moment when we are renewed in a kind of birth, when we start to be, for the first time again, not just the person who we are really called to be, but a part of the mystical Body of the eternally Begotten Son, a part of that birth

beyond all time. Every moment that a virtue takes hold in us, when at the crucial moment we find the courage we need to throttle sin and evil and ignorance until they just die, or when we overcome our blindness to grasp what true justice requires, or when we are honest though it makes us seem like fools, we are lifted out of an old way of confusion and reborn by the new strength and purity that practice and prayer has prepared for us. And so also in the more mysterious virtues: in the life of love, we might find at one moment that we are more willing to sacrifice ourselves for our beloved than ever before – or after many years of love we recognize a beauty in the beloved that we were not yet ready to see – or we open ourselves to the one we love in a way that makes our whole previous life together seem small and unobservant. And these deeper levels open up in all kinds of loves, not just first falling in love, or just marriage, but all of them. We are also reborn in hope, when we recognize in a new way that we ourselves can be loved, or that another person, no matter how weak or even wicked, can be something beautiful and great – when a new dream opens, a new horizon of possibility and set of goals, like the glorious birth moment when a young person steps out of pure childishness and first intuits that they are free and responsible, and some path of life opens before them, with desires and adventures and powers that were not yet manifest. Nothing shows more clearly how our lives are made up of constant new births than the beauty of being forgiven, of living in a relationship that comes back to life after some reconciliation, of finding a long lost friend, of surmounting some emotional barrier or sin, of giving or being given another chance beyond apparent deserving.

The whole Catholic life is this rebirth of repeatedly starting over at higher levels: the rebirth from natural life in baptism, and then somehow even further in confirmation; the rebirth of grace and discernment in the sacrament of reconciliation; the permanent consecration and public vow to persevere in growth beyond all trials in both marriage and ordination; the mystery of the Eucharist, in which Christ is offered to us, he who did not grasp his divinity as a status but somehow died to himself so that he could live for us and in us and we could live in him and in each other truly. Christ's sacrifice shows that true rebirth is always a death to self, burying a seed. And so the final mystery of rebirth will be our very death, when this life with all its experiences of delight and fear, joy and pain, will not just cease to be, but be gathered up and reborn into its fulfillment in the resurrection, in a body that will be incorruptible, glorious, powerful, and spiritual, when nothing of who or what we are will be a barrier to knowing each other and knowing God, when we begin a continuous and eternal rebirth as a true child of God and member of his only Son. Every new birth is a death to something lower, and the final birth that our faith teaches us to expect is the birth into the life of the world to come, a complete death to the isolated and obscured self and definitive birth into the mysterious communion of life that is God.

Jesus puts the child in our midst and embraces him. He offers to make us that child, he wants to fold us in his arms and give us new life. Let us abandon whatever greatness keeps us from him, and beg to be his children.