



CATHOLIC SCRIPTURE STUDY

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SERIES III

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Lesson 18 Commentary John 15:1 - 27

Lesson 19 Questions John 16:1 - 33

UNITY WITH JESUS

John 15:1-27

I. INTRODUCTION

We have just studied and discussed a Last Supper discourse in Chapter 14 ending with: "Get up, let us go." This is thought to be an earlier ending for this Gospel. But John's source had included other farewell words of Jesus just before His suffering and death. The next three chapters are unique in the Gospels. In John they are a lengthy interruption of the narrative of the last days of Jesus. Besides giving well-loved and often quoted sayings, they include many allusions to the Paraclete and His divine work in the church.

These chapters may have been written to develop answers to questions urgently raised in Christian communities, since we know that this Gospel's date must be in the 90's, and the Faith had spread widely at this time.

The setting for these chapters is the "Upper Room" in a house in Jerusalem. We know from St. Luke that Jesus sent Peter and John ahead to "make preparations for us to eat the Passover," and that they would meet a man carrying a jar of water. They were to follow him to his house and ask for the large, furnished upper room for the

Master's Passover meal with His disciples (Luke 22:8-13). Luke also tells us in the first chapter of Acts that this upper room is the one that the Apostles and other disciples, together with Mary, the mother of Jesus and the other women, went to after the Ascension of Jesus. It was here, nine days later, that the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, came to all of them. An old tradition says that this room was in the house of Mark's mother. Early in Christian history, pilgrims were shown the location of this sacred room. It is a pilgrim's site today.

On this night, picture the Eleven, all eyes on Jesus as He began an "after-dinner" speech. All four Gospels include Jesus' prediction of Peter's denial, but only John's has this lengthy sharing from the heart of Jesus. That night, they did not know that it was their last meal with Him while He was alive; or that on this night as Judas went about his work of betrayal, Jesus was to be arrested.

II. THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES (John 15:1-8)

A. The Vine and Its Fruit (John 15:1-2).
There were several instances in the Old Testament

about vines. The land that God gave the Israelites, Canaan, was filled with vineyards. However, these allusions in the Old Testament usually referred to the unfaithfulness of the Chosen People to God. “Why, when I looked for the crop of grapes, did it bring forth wild grapes? Now, I will let you know what I will do to my vineyard . . . I will make it a ruin: it shall not be pruned or hoed, but overgrown with thorns and briers . . .” (Isaiah 5:1-6).

In John’s passage, Jesus Himself is the vine the Father has planted in the Church. And the Father does not make it a ruin, but “takes away every branch on the vine that does not bear fruit” (John 15:2a). There are baptized Christians who never produce the fruit of faith of a strong spiritual life. What kind of branches are we, in Christ’s vine? There is an early New Testament document outside the Bible, the *Didache* (meaning teaching), that speaks of Jesus as the “holy vine of David.” The *Didache* gives, for the first time, the early liturgies and celebrations of the Church. The Eucharistic liturgy, with its strong connection with the fruit of the vine, is presented there, as that century celebrated it.

Every branch that produces fruit, however, the Father “prunes so that it bears more fruit” (John 15:2b). Two types of Jesus’ followers are included here; those with a living faith produce fruit. But Jesus is not satisfied with all the fruit-bearing ones. A second point is that some could bear and yield more. For faith is the beginning of salvation; it is not static. Without faith we could not please God, but a living faith must produce fruit in the form of deeds. “For in Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6). This is like saying that our baptism is a beginning of faith, hope, and love, but these must be developed by our cooperation. Baptism and practicing the faith externally is not all that Christ wants from the divine sap flowing through the vine to the branches. A person has to produce

works or faith dies. “Faith without works is dead” (James 2, 17).

B. The Fruits of the Vine (John 15:3-8).

The fruit-bearing branches are pruned only to produce more fruit. This pruning is not from our deeds, but from the “Word of Christ.” This means the Word of Life, the whole message that Jesus gave the Apostles: only by remaining in Jesus (Do actions of Jesus’ grace show in our lives?) will we bear fruit. How does God prune fruit-bearing branches? Not being satisfied with half-hearted branches in Christ, He prunes them by contradictions and difficulties, which are like strong winds, like cold weather, which makes weak branches fall off, makes roots grow deeper, and the fruit produced has new richness and maturity.

Our Lord draws conclusions from the image of the vine and the branches: “Unless you remain in me you can do nothing” (John 15:4). That is, nothing worthy for the life of supernatural grace and life, or for the rewards of the next life. We spread the fruit of our faith to others who can be grafted to the vine of Jesus. The Vatican II document, the *Apostolate of the Laity*, says, “Intimate union with Christ is maintained by the spiritual helps common to all the faithful, particularly the liturgy. Lay people should make use of these helps while always meeting their human obligations.”

Jesus speaks in verse 6 of what is done with pruned away branches; they are thrown on the fire and burnt. To stay on the vine they must produce fruit. We must grow in the Lord! In verses 7 and 8 Jesus turns to Good News: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask what you will and it shall be done for you; for my Father is glorified in your bearing much fruit.” What a glorious promise! Repeating this often to ourselves will deepen our trust: reminding Jesus of this promise is like Abraham’s reminding God of His promise of posterity! The Father is happy to see Jesus filling our needs. This fruit-bearing is proof of being disciples of Jesus.

III. A DISCIPLE'S LOVE (John 15:9-17)

A. The Commandment of Love and Its Joy (John 15:9-13). Christ's love for us is a reflection of the Three Persons in God - who is Love. "We love," says St. John, "because He loved us first" (1 John 4:19). Two of our proverbs come from this idea. "To have a friend, be a friend," and "Love begets love." We can hardly resist loving others when they love us first. This is a Focolare ideal: Love first, especially in a quarrel or offense. That is what Jesus did for us, for all of His disciples.

Yet the love we see in Jesus springs from the Father. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you." The certainty that God loves us, that He sent His own Son to save us from the effects and fact of our sins, is the source of Christian joy and peace. But this calls for a fruitful response on our part—a strong desire to do God's Will, as Jesus did in doing the Will of His Father.

Jesus reveals, in verse 11, why He is speaking to them: "that my joy be in you, and that your joy may be full." The Apostles in their later lives experienced this joy, after they began to preach the great deeds and words of Jesus. The lives of saints show them as not only joyful, but as spreading their joy to others. A clear conscience, a clean heart, leaves us in peace—bad consciences do not experience joy, but remorse, regret, and negative states of mind.

B. Jesus' New Commandment (John 15:12-15). "Love one another as I have loved you." The model we are given is Jesus' own way of loving—"Greater love no one has, than to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). The Good Shepherd gives His life for His sheep. Our distinguishing mark as a follower of Jesus is not humility or purity, but love for each other. This is what brought the Romans to their knees before Jesus Christ. "See how these Christians love each other!" In the Roman empire, paganism and its fruitlessness slowly were replaced by belief in Je-

sus through the example and the power shown in Christians, especially when they went to martyrdom singing, as St. Agnes and St. Cecilia did, as the early sources believed.

We are not slaves or servants of God as much as we are children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus, because Jesus gave to us all His knowledge of the Father; servants are not in family relationships. It is through the Scriptures, through the teaching Church, that we hear Jesus' words. Many read the Scriptures, yet do not interpret them fully or mistake their meaning. Speaking to the Apostles, Jesus said, "Who hears you, hears me." And to Peter, head of the Church he said, "Upon you, Peter (Rock) I will build my Church" (Matthew 16:17-19).

In His last address, Jesus continued, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit . . . This I command you: to love one another" (John 15:17). There are three ideas contained in these words of Our Lord:

1) The calling of the Apostles and of every Christian does not originate in the good desires of individuals, but in a free choice by Christ.

2) The Apostles' and our mission is to seek to spread the Gospel.

3) The effectiveness of prayer is done in the name of Christ. Our liturgical prayer ends with "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." We are united with Christ if we have preserved our baptismal grace. Thus we are enabled to see the truths that the Church teaches us as we live it.

IV. THE WORLD'S HATE (John 15:18-27)

There can be no compromise, Jesus states, between Him and the world, which is the kingdom of sin, of false values; anyone who lives in sin hates the light. This is why Christ was persecuted and why the Apostles were persecuted. That we

annoy and anger those who do not love God shows that we are of Christ; we cannot please God at the same time as we do the world. If the light of Christ had not shone in our world, the world's hatred could be excused.

But Jesus' worst enemy is "the ruler of this world" who is coming, he tells the worried Apostles. He "goes about seeking whom he may devour; he is the power of darkness." At the Last Supper, Jesus tells Peter, "Satan desires to sift you like wheat" (Luke 22:31). Jesus, the Light of the World, is opposed by darkness (John 9:5). "Those who are wrongly my foes...hate me without cause" (Psalm 69:5). It has been said that those whom the devil most attacks are the saints, for the light of Christ shines brightly in them. How do we resist, as we stand in the light of Christ, the temptations suggested to us by the power of darkness in the world and in us? The best recourse is prayer, on the spot, but avoiding places, times and people that can lead us to sin, is necessary.

The Apostles, after their desertion and weakness, went on to witness to what they had seen of Jesus in His public ministry, to His death and His miraculous, never-done-before resurrection. But they could not do this of themselves; not until they had been filled with the Holy Spirit. In verse 26 Jesus foretells that the Advocate will come and testify to the truth about God and the One who comes from the Father: Jesus. What opposites we have—Satan and the Holy Spirit, vying over us! "I will send him from the Father, and he will speak about me," said Jesus to them that last night. And after the Ascension, the Spirit came with power, as we shall see.

To have witnessed Christ in person and in His public life became a condition for being an Apostle—one sent. We call this original group of twelve the "Apostolic College." Luke tells us in Acts 1:21-22 that the Eleven realized that Judas, the defector, needed to be replaced. So they chose from among other witnesses with them from the beginning, from Jesus' baptism on, two men: Jo-

seph called Barabbas, and Matthias. Then they prayed, "O Lord, you read the hearts of men. Make known to us which of these two you choose for this apostolic ministry." Then they drew lots—to us, an unusual way to choose. The lot fell to Matthias, who was added to the Eleven and is also commemorated in the Church as an Apostle. Notice how, before they took this important step, they turned to prayer. So we turn to God, asking that He make known to us an action that He affirms?

These men are the first bishops of the Church; from then on a bishop in the Catholic Church must have been consecrated by a legitimately consecrated bishop, who can be traced back to the Apostolic succession in the early Church.

In this chapter, we have clear teaching by Jesus of the Three Persons in God, and their role in our lives. The Father sends His Son, Jesus, the Man-God who saves us from the domination of evil, and the Holy Spirit, our Advocate who teaches us in each generation, personally, and through the Church. The "Blessed Trinity" as we call the God whom Jesus revealed, has been made known in a special way to some of the saints. St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1570's), on the feast of the Holy Trinity, received a revelation of the Trinity in her soul. Her later namesake, St. Theresa of Lisieux, also recognized and experienced the Trinity in her soul and composed her well-known Act of Oblation on that feast. Still a later Carmelite, Elizabeth of the Trinity, lived her life as a contemplative only four years. She died in 1906, and her writings in the form of letters, not intended to ever be published, were kept. She has been beatified and is on the way to canonization. These saints and others lead lives which also give testimony to what Jesus taught about the Indwelling Trinity in each baptized Christian. We are never alone if we haven't chosen to reject God or offended Him seriously, so that He cannot remain in us. "Dwell in Me, as I in you," Jesus told us (John 15:4).

In her liturgy (public worship of God) the Church ends the year of all the Christ mysteries with Trinity Sunday, the Sunday following Pentecost Sunday. This complete revelation of who God is came only with Jesus, and is the most perfect name for God.

In the Eucharistic Sacrifice, also the most perfect sacrifice on earth, the heart of the Mass is the

“Canon,” the oldest and clearest expression of prayer in the Church. The great doxology (praise of God) is at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer. It states our faith and praise of the Blessed Trinity, the Creator and Father and Savior. What is called the great AMEN is the congregation’s assent to the Eucharist, and our faith at this part of the Mass. Try to put your heart and voice in it!

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QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 19
John 16:1-33

- Day 1 Read the words of Jesus on the vine and the branches. What struck you most in this discussion of it? Explain why.
- Day 2 Read John 16:1-4, Matthew 10:17-20, Luke 21:12, and Acts 26:9-11.
- a. What two witnesses to Jesus' person does John mention in John 15:26b-27?

 - b. In the beginning of John's Gospel, who were Jesus first witnesses?

 - c. Tell of an instance when someone witnessed about Jesus to you.
- Day 3
- a. Why do you think Jesus told the Apostles so openly what would come to them for witnessing to him (John 15:21, 13:19, 14:29)?

 - b. Do you feel that they were adequately prepared for this? Why or why not?

 - c. What do you learn for your Christian life from John 16:4?

