

Wedding Garment
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Is 25:6-10; Mt 22:1-14)

The parable of the Wedding Banquet, like last Sunday's, shows the transition from the Old Testament to the New, from Israel to Christianity. The Jews were unworthy of the Kingdom. Although originally invited, they found excuses and even rejected and killed the messengers of God, who will in turn destroy their city and look to others to fill the banquet hall.

The result is the "Catholic" Church, assembled from all nations of the world. It is providential that God fulfills the preparations for His Son's great banquet of salvation during the time of the Romans, whose magnificent highway system reaches so many nations. Messengers (apostles) of the King go forth on these highways and byways. By the end of the first century, the invitation of the Gospel has reached the four corners of the known world.

The Kingdom of God is described as a banquet. Banquets are important, not just for good food, but for good company. Banquets establish and renew family bonds. They celebrate abundance, harmony, and joy – everything good in life.

Christ's favorite image for heaven is therefore the banquet, described in the prophecy of Isaiah 25. Particular to God's heavenly banquet is the removal of all sadness and death. The heavenly banquet cannot be realized on earth, though many societies and individuals strive to achieve it: peace on earth and abundance of good things. Unfortunately, many things prevent the perfect banquet on earth: famines and food shortages; natural disasters and wars; sin and contention among brothers; illness; death.

Though heaven is not possible on earth, in the Eucharist Christ gives a foretaste of the heavenly wedding banquet. Here Christ pours out all his riches and graces, including the life beyond death: "*He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day*" (Jn 6:54).

It's not just any banquet which Jesus uses to describe the heavenly Kingdom of God, but specifically the *wedding banquet*. The wedding feast celebrates the love of a man and woman, and the blessing of new life. It is the greatest of all human banquets, lasting a full seven days in biblical culture. There is abundant food, fine wine in plenty (at the wedding of Cana Jesus consecrates over 100 gallons!), and Sabbath rest from work. Heaven is the eternal wedding banquet provided by the Father for the marriage of His Son and the Church. Heaven is the consummation of the love between Christ and his bride, where human nature is fully satisfied.

The Book of Revelation also presents heaven in terms of the wedding banquet between Christ and the Church: *“Let us rejoice and exult, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready”* (Rv 19:7). These words are echoed in the Mass before Holy Communion, when the priest presents to the congregation its Bridegroom: *“Behold the Lamb of God... Blessed are those invited to the [Wedding] Supper of the Lamb.”*

It is a privilege to be a Catholic, to be invited to the feast. But it is a privilege not to be taken for granted. Jesus points out in the parable, *“Many are invited, but not all are chosen.”* God wants everyone to participate in the heavenly banquet, and all are given an invitation by His messengers. But that does not mean everybody participates. Not only the Jews who refused him, but even among the Gentiles who did accept the invitation, not all are able to participate. Jesus tells of the man who is thrown out because he did not wear a proper wedding garment. What is the wedding garment that allows us enter the wedding banquet of the Lamb, without which we will be ejected?

Festive attire for Mass. It is disgraceful the way some people show up for Mass, dressed as if they are stopping by a fast food place on the way to the beach. Dress for Mass should not be sloppy and informal, immodest or vain. Mass is a formal and extremely important occasion, it is the wedding banquet of the King. Our dress should reflect that reality: clean clothes, good quality, formal, conservative, dignified, respectful, and festive; without going overboard with jewelry, makeup, and ostentatious display of fashion or style. But this is not exactly what the parable is referring to...

Baptism. The outward adornment of clothing needs to reflect the inner holiness of the soul, which is the true wedding garment spoken of in the parable. The garment we need for the feast is the baptismal robe, i.e. the grace of Christ which washes away original sin and makes us a holy temple of God: *“You have become a new creation, and have clothed yourself in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity...”* (Baptism Ritual). Without Baptism, we cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Without Baptism, we cannot celebrate the Eucharist.

Good deeds. Baptism by itself is not enough. The grace of Christ received in Baptism must be lived through good deeds and holiness: *“...bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven”* (Baptism Ritual). Sin stains and corrupts the baptismal robe, resulting in expulsion from the wedding banquet. In addition to Baptism there is need of Penance/Confession, by which sin is forgiven and our life is continually purified. Penance restores the soul to its baptismal purity, *“without spot or wrinkle, holy and without blemish”* (Eph 5:27).

Vocation. Finally, the garment that allows us entry into the wedding banquet of the King is the vocation which flows from Confirmation: especially Holy Matrimony or Consecrated religious life, in conformity with the laws of God and the Church. In the case of consecrated life, this vocation is literally lived in a wedding garment, the religious habit, a practice which is imitated by the laity through the scapular devotion.

For most Christians, the vocation will be Holy Matrimony. Today many Catholics have no understanding of the meaning of this sacrament, and there are many cohabitations, civil marriages, and attempts at remarriage. All of which violates the requirement that guests to the banquet wear the proper wedding garment. Marriage must conform to Baptism. The Baptismal robe must become the garment of Holy Matrimony, and not some false substitute or counterfeit.

We must understand that Baptism is already one's first and original "marriage." St. Paul, who evangelized and baptized the Corinthian community, says to them, "*I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband*" (2 Cor 11:2). Baptism "marries" the soul to God. We are "consecrated" to Him. We "belong" to Him. Failure to be faithful to our Baptismal vows is an adultery, a sin of "infidelity."

For this reason, the consecrated or celibate state is a higher vocation than the married state, because it "formalizes" in a permanent vowed way the original Baptismal marriage to the Lord. A nun is living a vowed, married life, clinging to the Divine Spouse and living the earthly life in full anticipation of the heavenly banquet. Death ends a human marriage, but not the religious consecration.

It is because of the original Baptismal marriage to the Lord, that the Christian state of marriage *also* has to be a Sacrament. A Christian is only permitted to marry another human being if this "other" marriage can express or manifest in some deeper way what has taken place in Baptism. Thus, the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony is an image and participation of the love between Christ and his Church. In the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, the husband represents Christ the Head and Bridegroom, while the wife represents the Church: "*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church... Wives, be submissive to your husbands as [the Church is submissive] to the Lord*" (Eph 5:25,22).

Christian marriage must be one with the baptismal consecration. It must not violate the original marriage covenant, but express it. Therefore, a Catholic cannot get married without the Church's blessing. Therefore, Holy Matrimony is subject to strict sacramental rules and regulations. Therefore, any irregular non-sacramental "marriage" precludes participation in the Eucharist. Simply speaking, one is wearing the wrong garment.

The severity of the King's reaction to the guest not properly dressed ("*bind him hand and foot and cast him into the darkness outside*") ought to be a warning to those today who seek to rewrite the rules, or otherwise undermine the integrity and intimate relationship of the Sacraments to each other: Baptism – Penance – Eucharist – Confirmation – Matrimony. Though God is generous with the invitation to salvation, and the Gentiles have responded by accepting Baptism in great numbers, the soul must be properly clothed for the feast, which is neither easy nor automatic. There must be a life of holiness and fidelity. This is a requirement which certainly cannot be dispensed. Many are invited, but few are chosen.