Monday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

Gospel text (*Mk* 2:18-22): The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were accustomed to fast. People came to him and objected, "Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" Jesus answered them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day.

No one sews a piece of unshrunken cloth on an old cloak. If he does, its fullness pulls away, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. Likewise, no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins are ruined. Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins."

"Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?"

Fr. Joaquim VILLANUEVA i Poll
(Barcelona, Spain)

Today we see that the Jews, in addition to the fast prescribed for the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev 16:29–34), observed many other fasts, both public and private. These were expressions of mourning, penance, purification, preparation for a feast or a mission, petitions for God's grace, and more. Devout Jews valued fasting as an act belonging to the virtue of religion and as something very pleasing to God: the one who fasts approaches God in humility, asking for forgiveness by renouncing those things which, while satisfying, could draw him away from Him.

That Jesus does not require this practice of His disciples and of those who listen to Him surprises the disciples of John and the Pharisees. They think it is an important omission in His teaching. And Jesus gives them a fundamental reason: "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them?" (Mk 2:19). The bridegroom, in the language of the prophets of Israel, refers to God Himself and is a sign of divine love for humanity (Israel is the bride—often unfaithful—yet the object of the faithful love of the bridegroom, the Lord). In other words, Jesus identifies Himself with the Lord. Here He is declaring His divinity: He calls His disciples "the friends of the bridegroom," those who are with Him, and therefore they do not need to fast because they are not separated from Him.

The Church has remained faithful to this teaching which, coming from the prophets and even being a natural and spontaneous practice in many religions, Jesus Christ confirms and gives a new meaning: He fasts in the desert as preparation for His public ministry; He tells us that prayer is strengthened by fasting; and so on.

Among those who listened to the Lord, most would have been poor and familiar with patching garments; there would have been vintners who knew what happens when new wine is poured into old wineskins. Jesus reminds them that they must receive His message with a new spirit—one that breaks through the conformism and routine of aging souls—for what He proposes is not just another interpretation of the Law, but a new life.

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- “A different exercise of devotion is required of each. Such practice must be modified according to the strength, the calling, and the duties of each individual.” (Saint Francis de Sales)

- “The word of God is living and is free. The Gospel is newness. Revelation is newness. Jesus is very clear: new wine in fresh wine skins. God must be received with openness to what is new. And this disposition is called docility.” (Francis)

- “Outward sacrifice, to be genuine, must be the expression of spiritual sacrifice (...). The prophets of the Old Covenant often denounced sacrifices that were not from the heart or not coupled with love of neighbor. Jesus recalls the words of the prophet Hosea: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’ (Mt 9:13).” Catechism Of The Catholic Church, Nº 2100)