

Growing with Grace in an Imperfect World

Every farmer knows that growth does not happen overnight. It takes regular sunshine, rain, pruning, and patience. So it is in the spiritual life.

This weekend's readings remind us that the world is a mixture of good and bad; wheat and weeds — but we should not be discouraged. Instead, we can trust that the Spirit of God is with us, guiding us, acting in us, and bringing us along, even when we may not recognize His action.

God knew this before time began. He did not create two separate worlds, one for the “righteous” and another for “sinners.” Instead, He allows all of us to co-habit together in this same world. Though risky, this may be of great benefit. The righteous, seeing the misery of sin, learn to struggle to remain virtuous. The sinner, witnessing the triumph of goodness, is equally drawn to struggle toward a better life. In His patience, God gives everyone time and space to grow.

We see this patience lived out in ordinary ways. A little girl had learning difficulties and regularly came home from school disappointed. Every evening her father patiently sat beside her, reading one page at a time. He celebrated every small improvement instead of focusing on her mistakes. Years later, she graduated from university and became a teacher herself. At her graduation she said, “My father never allowed me to believe that today's struggle would define tomorrow's future.” Isn't that what God does in our lives? He never stops believing in the person we can become. No wonder St. John Bosco remarked, “Education is a matter of the heart.” Children flourish where correction is joined to love and encouragement.

We also see it in marriage. At their 60th wedding anniversary, an elderly couple was asked the secret behind their long marriage. The wife smiled and replied, “We belonged to a generation that repaired things instead of replacing them.” A brief but powerful testimony that strong marriages are not built because two perfect people found each other. They are built because two imperfect people allow God's grace to teach them patience, forgiveness, and humility. Pope Francis beautifully writes, “Love overlooks the imperfections of others; it knows how to keep silent before their limitations.”

We see it in the home. Every Sunday after Mass, an elderly grandmother quietly gathered her grandchildren around the kitchen table. Before anyone touched the meal, she would make the Sign of the Cross, read the Gospel of the day, and ask each child to mention one blessing from the week. Years later, after her death, one grandson admitted, “Grandma taught us more about faith around that table than anyone else.” What a beautiful way to make an eternal investment in the lives of little children.

We see it in prayerful perseverance. Think of St Monica's 17 years of prayer and weeping for the conversion of Augustine, which blessed the Church with a great saint and doctor. Years later Augustine wrote, “She wept for me more than mothers weep for the bodily death of their children.”

We see it in community. After the death of his wife, one parishioner quietly stopped attending Mass. He felt forgotten and overwhelmed by grief. Rather than criticizing him, some members of the parish organized themselves, visited him regularly, listened to his sorrow, invited him for

coffee, and assured him that he remained part of the parish family. Months later he returned to Sunday Mass. When asked what brought him back, he answered simply, “Parishioners never gave up on me.” That is what Christian accompaniment looks like. Pope Benedict XVI reminded the Church: “The Church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by ‘attraction’.”

We also need this patience in how we see each other. I recall my first experience of seeing icebergs in Newfoundland — fresh and wonderful in their shapes. I was reminded that there is more of an iceberg underneath the water than what we see. This could be likened to the different levels in everyone we meet. There is more to each person than meets the eye. Some are learning to forgive, recovering from addiction, carrying hidden grief, returning to prayer after many years away, and some are taking their first steps in faith.

Jesus is simply saying to you and me, “Let them grow.” Shall we? This week, may we be people who wait, who welcome. St Gregory the Great admonishes, “The proof of love is in the works. Where love exists, it works great things.”