

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)

September 22, 2019

Amos 8:4–7 • 1 Timothy 2:1–8 • Luke 16:1–13

I.

Most people have heard of the Second Vatican Council.

It was a worldwide meeting of bishops that took place from 1962 to 1965.

Its purpose was to renew the Church
so that it could better proclaim the Gospel to the modern world.

Fewer people have heard of the First Vatican Council,
which took place from 1869 to 1870.

This was the first worldwide council of the Church.

The third bishop of Richmond, John McGill, attended Vatican I.

He had to leave the council early because of medical reasons,
and he died shortly after the council ended.

The future fourth bishop of Richmond, James Gibbons, also attended Vatican I.

At the time, Gibbons was the bishop of North Carolina.

The coats of arms of Bishop McGill and Bishop Gibbons hang in the cathedral.

Interestingly, Gibbons was the youngest bishop at the council
and was its last surviving participant.

II.

Vatican I famously proclaimed that the pope's teaching
on matters of faith and morals was infallible under certain conditions.

Less well known is the council's teaching
on the relationship between faith and reason.

Building on the Church's vast intellectual tradition, Vatican I taught that faith and reason, or religion and science, are complimentary (Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, *Dei Filius*).

All truth comes from God,
so there can be no contradiction
between what is known by reason and what is known by faith.

There are some basic things we can know about God through the use of reason; for example, that he exists.

But then there are the more specific teachings and actions of God—divine Revelation—that lie beyond reason.

We can only know these things because God himself reveals them; this is what Christ did.

To grasp these things, divine illumination and the response of faith are necessary.

But even here reason plays a role.

According to Vatican I,
“The assent of faith is by no means a blind action of the mind.”

The council taught the following:

“In order that the obedience of our faith might be in harmony with reason, God willed that, to the interior help of the Holy Spirit, there should be joined exterior proofs of His revelation; to wit, divine facts, and especially miracles and prophecies.”

All of this is to say that faith and reason go together.

Certain things lie beyond reason, but reason plays some role in our accepting them.

III.

Today's Gospel is the parable of the dishonest steward.

The lesson here is prudence:
the use of reason in making good decisions—sound judgment.

By way of background, there are two important things to note about parables:

1. A parable is a literary device, a figure of speech that conveys a lesson; it is not to be understood literally.
2. A parable usually includes a surprise—a twist—that conveys its meaning.

In the case of the parable of the dishonest steward, the surprise is this:

“The master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently.”

Dishonesty and prudence do not usually go together.

The steward is dishonest for “squandering [his master’s] property,” not because he issues promissory notes for lower amounts to the debtors.

That latter action demonstrates the steward’s prudence.

Knowing that he is being fired from his position because of his dishonesty, the steward wisely ingratiates himself with his master’s debtors.

He does so by forgoing the commission that he would normally earn for collecting a debt.

The lower amount on the promissory notes reflects what the debtors owe, since the steward forgoes his commission.

The steward sacrifices a short-term gain for long-term prospects:

“I know what I shall do so that, when I am removed from the stewardship, they may welcome me into their homes.”

Jesus concludes the parable by stating that his followers—all of us—are to be prudent and trustworthy in dealing with “honest wealth,” meaning the grace of God.

This teaching indicates that reason plays an important role in our relationship with God.

Often enough, we mistakenly believe that holiness and closeness to God amount to feelings—perceiving God’s presence.

Feelings themselves are morally neutral; they are neither good nor bad.

They are important because they tell us about ourselves and others.

But it’s thoughts and actions that are either good or bad.

So God gave us reason and he wants us to use it.

We can use reason to make good decisions.

Being a person of faith doesn’t mean letting go what is humanly sound, such as common sense and critical analysis.

The tools of reasons are essential to our spiritual lives, for discerning what God is asking of us and what we should do.

It’s not enough “feel” something from God.

Yes, there’s a place for that.

But equally important are realities such as our own interests and needs, the needs of others, and the limitations of money, time, and abilities.

A closing thought, which is a prayer composed by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), founder of the Society of Jesus or Jesuits.

The prayer beautifully expresses that we have reason, and that we can use it to draw closer to God.

The prayer is called the *Suscipe*, Latin for its opening phrase:

Take Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess.

Thou hast given all to me.

To Thee, O lord, I return it.

All is Thine, dispose of it wholly according to Thy will.

Give me Thy love and thy grace, for this is sufficient for me.