What Mary saw at Cana: The indispensability of others

Sunday's Coming Premium
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Nicolás Correa, *The Wedding at Cana,* mixed media with encrusted mother-of-pearl on panel, 1693.

When the wine gave out, the Gospel writer tells us, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "What is this to me and to you?" (John 2:3–4).

While in Florence studying Italian during the summer of 1973, I spent a good deal of time wondering and praying about this question: In what way are others essential to my relationship with God? In what way are they indispensably present? Other people are obviously crucially important and integral, irreplaceable. I spend most of my life with them and (hopefully) much of it for them. They enclose relationships of friendship, love, and wisdom that make up much of the richness of life. This seems obvious. But how are they absolutely essential and indispensable to my hope for a relationship with God—so much so that if they were not present, I would have no relationship with God at all? That is what I mean by "absolutely essential."

These puzzling, confused reflections were triggered by a foundational statement of Cardinal John Henry Newman, taken with its full force: that there are simply "two

and two only absolute and luminously self-evident beings, myself and my Creator." But are others essential, that is, an absolutely necessary part of my conscious life with God, my affectivity, and my actions—so much so that if they were not somehow or other consciously present I would have no relationship with God, or for that matter, with myself? This question forms the context in which I hear and understand the question that Jesus asks of Mary at Cana: "What is this to me and to you?" It asks how we include essentially within our lives those who we might otherwise forget as we go about the business of our lives.

The dialectical form of the question realizes a Semitic idiom. It asks: Do we have something in common between us here? It probes: What business is that of ours? Or perhaps: How does that involve *me*—and not just you? Or, as in this question: How are *we* involved? This interrogation calls into question whether there is any common concern here or even a common passion in which we are united, in which we come together into a "we." What is here to unite us in a common concern, a single identity in a care that we share? Why are we involved? How is this a concern of me and you?

Jesus's question looks like a refusal, but that view is deceptive. It is easily noted that no request has been made. Mary simply comments, the way anyone might, that the wine is gone. There is no directive, no command. No request is made of her son. The mother appropriates the shattering embarrassment, the pain of others, and represents it to Jesus. But he reads much more than that into her comment. Jesus transforms her remark and takes it as if it were a request. He then meets a request that has not been made with what seems to be its refusal. He refers to Mary, his mother, as "woman"—the way "woman" would appear in John 19 before the cross, and in the sign that appears in the heavens in Revelation 12. "Woman" transposes the symbolic significance of this interchange into what it is to become for all times and all places. Mary becomes the symbol of the entire church.

Mary ignores the refusal that seems to have been made of a request that had not been put. Then she carries this interchange one level deeper, ignoring the surface meaning of what Jesus had just said. In Rudolf Bultmann's words: "The mother has understood her son: all she can do now is to await the miracle worker. So she directs the servants to do whatever Jesus tells them."

Mary comments—and Jesus understands what is beneath. Jesus questions Mary—and she discerns the actual depth and meaning informing the seeming denial. She understands that this concern touches him so much that she can direct the servers

to a more general openness and availability: “Do whatever he commands you.” Why did she have to say that? Would the narrative not have found them obeying Jesus without this directive? The Gospel discloses that the servants did what they did at the direction of Mary. This fact seems to be strongly paradigmatic of her continual influence within the church.

In fact, are there not times in the history of the church in which the influence of Mary has made the influence of Jesus both present and directive in a way it otherwise would not have been? In the Guadalupe culture of Mexico? In the piety of 19th-century France? In the ordinary piety and understanding of Catholics for centuries when the liturgy was in Latin, translations forbidden, the Eucharist at a great distance and seldom received, and much of the clergy lost in class isolation? Is it not simply a palpable fact that the presence of Mary and the historic identification of Mary with the poor and the unlettered gave them a unique and powerful access to Jesus, and that her symbolic, unrealized presence and influence within the church kept them Catholic in a deeper sense than may have met a theologian’s eye? Here is the mystery and source of authentic Marian piety: Mary giving birth to Jesus, her endless service to the church.

For this question of Jesus continues through history to stand before his mother, and in her, to stand before the church: “How are we involved in the needs of these people?” It is of great importance to the life and mission of the church that we hear this question. For it has been and is shockingly easy not to see human social misery or to take it for granted as part of the intractable social situation. Examples abound even in the lives of men and women great in sophisticated theological knowledge and heroic in sanctity.

The only time, as I recall, that the factories of Birmingham in the 19th century—where women and small children were working 12 hours a day in wretched conditions—figured in Newman’s diaries and writings was in the record he made of his visit to one of them very late in his life. His visit was meant to ensure that the Catholic women would be allowed to attend mass and that the Christian instruction for Catholics would be within the creed. Amid the terrible poverty that suffused Birmingham, he makes note of nothing else.

And what of the great Baron von Hügel—one of the supreme masters of spiritual theology in the 20th century? Von Hügel scholar James Kelly discovered a report that the baron allowed his servants to live in squalor.

Newman was not indifferent to the poor; indeed, he worked among them for years. Nor did Baron von Hügel consciously exploit his servants. These theologians simply did not see the social need and class poverty for what they were. Social structures and widespread poverty with its sufferings were simply taken for granted. Such social myopia threatens all human beings. Even the greatest men and women have profound class limitations. This demonstrates the serious and continual need for the question Jesus put to Mary. It calls all human beings into painful judgment. The church, the local Christian community, its theologians—Jesus' question calls them also into judgment. In every aspect of life, one can hear the searing question to Mary: "What is this to me and to you?"

Christians have heard this text so many times and in so many ways that it can be dulled by its repetition if it is not searchingly applied. This Gospel is to be insistently proclaimed year after year within the church, so that Christians might come to see what they do not adequately see and to feel what they do not adequately feel, so that the question would touch, even shape, their understanding of what God through the Spirit is calling them to. The church is summoned by God never to forget, in its array of talents, promises, and temporal successes, the suffering of the marginalized. The question to Mary is essential to this call. The question, in its own haunting way, surmounts the banality of repetition and offers to those who can hear it the meaning of Christian life. That is the reason why the social doctrine of the church can be far more radical than that of either American political party.

Leaders in and outside the church can be so isolated that they become incapable of hearing this call in any demanding way, in a way that would cause a revolution in their own appropriation of reality. Isolated from such insecurity and pain, a priest can easily find himself unconsciously alienated from the lived experience, the searching anxieties, and the poignant needs of the very poor. A closed clerical subculture can develop, and has developed, within the church. A priest can see the migrant workers bent over in the fields in California as he drives by on the highway. The priest can see it—he can even reflect on it—but it may not impinge upon his life or tear at his sensibilities; it may not form the stuff of his examination of conscience, of what he spontaneously represents before God. He can become more a spectator than a participant in these lives, in their misery. He neither suffers their lot nor experiences their need. He may only regret it. And this distance is destroying the church.

What is necessary is lived experience—not privations calculated at a distance. Instead of having a common ground, a common concern that unites Christians with Christ in the very poor, leaders may move away from it. In their emotional indifference, they simply don't get it. The effect of this ignorance and indifference has been the destruction of much of the church as an effective agent within the world. If, unlike Mary, church leaders do not appropriate with some depth of experience and passion the needs of others, they become less and less those who can even hear the question contained within the human situation addressed to them, less and less those who can turn to the Lord with any experienced poignancy and say: "They have no wine." The statement has become insistently a question about life itself.

One has only to raise one's eyes to see this poverty and suffering. Those parents who watch their children grow up without education, without much hope for a better life; the migrants who shift with the crops in the Southwest, knowing bitterly that their children are condemned to repeat the lives of their parents—"They have no wine." The millions of aged, hidden away in our cities or in dreadful convalescent homes, who with very little must eke out lives of threat, worry, and terror on minimal subsistence—"They have no wine." The despised or feared or uneducated men and women, especially the poor in the inner cities whose lives are terrorized by the violence on their streets and the hopelessness of ever getting enough education or capital to escape—"They have no wine." The debtor nations, attempting to pay off their debts by progressively and unconscionably lowering the living standards of the poor—"They have no wine." Women demeaned and threatened by violence and their disproportionate level of financial insecurity, patronized and discriminated against at the highest levels of decision making even within the church, and by their level of poverty in the world—"They have no wine."

In all this misery, the question Jesus asks turns Christians back to themselves: "What is this to me and to you?" What is this world of endless sorrow to us? How should it shape our lives?

Christians become more Christian as they realize in themselves the mysterious promise that is the church—and what it means to become church. The church, in its turn, becomes more itself the more it realizes the call of the mother of God in her appropriation of the pain and sorrow of others. This may be the embarrassment of a wedding couple, or the pain of her son at his death, or the hidden church praying for the Spirit that would give it insight and courage. The church becomes more the

church as the pain of the human race comes more and more into its consciousness and into its effective action, its experience and understanding and affectivity—as the condition of human beings gets a stronger purchase on the lives of Christians.

For others are absolutely essential to one's union with God. Without the love of others, there would be no Christian relationship to God. Here is where one becomes capable of responding to the question of Jesus: "What is this to me and to you?" Wisely Thomas Aquinas insisted that the love of charity in which we love God is the same capacity of charity by which we love other human beings. It is in charity that one becomes capable of responding fully to Jesus.

In 1944, when Roger Schütz wanted to form his ecumenical monastic community, he decided to locate it in one of the most de-Christianized sections of France. And so he chose Taizé in Burgundy, in the neighborhood of what had for centuries been the greatest and most extensive monastery in Europe, the Abbey of Cluny. It is not strange, although it is paradoxical, that this was the neighborhood that he lighted upon. For the most de-Christianized places in France are the sites of what were once the wealthiest and most powerful monasteries in France. I once mentioned this curious fact to Cardinal Godfried Danneels, the former primate of Belgium. His response: "Of course, you will find exactly the same situation in Belgium." If one looks over the social and religious history of Italy, one will find that the most extensively communist areas are in what had been the Papal States.

Why is this the case, all Christians must ask themselves—why so often was the legacy of centuries of establishment, of institutional productivity and security and great religious art, frequently a profound alienation and de-Christianization? Why is there a cultural absence of God where those very institutions that should have ministered to God's presence were so powerful? And to be more concrete and particular, does one find anything similar in the United States—a powerful presence but a growing disbelief, alienation, disgust, and distance? Part of the reason may well be that very power and wealth. Perhaps it's because local churches and large Christian communities that possessed, for whatever reasons, political power and extensive holdings became strangers to the massive social inequity and outrageous poverty and humiliation of so many, and came to accept comfortably a social structure that was impoverishing and unjust. Did they inevitably come to trust in the status quo, no matter how unjust, to feel secure in the presence of what they had, and to fall under the terrible condemnation of the prophet?

> Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord.
> They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. (Jer. 17:5–6)

Among the many stories of St. Francis of Assisi, one in particular bears on this lesson. The story goes that Francis was being shown the Lateran Palace by Pope Innocent III, and the vision was one of splendor. The pope is reported to have said, “It is the same Church, but we can no longer say with the apostle Peter: ‘Gold and silver I have not.’” To which Francis answered, “Nor do you have the power to say, ‘In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk’” (see Acts 3:1–7).

This essay is adapted from Michael J. Buckley's book What Do You Seek? The Questions of Jesus as Challenge and Promise.