

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Throughout November, Catholics traditionally pray for the dead. In the northern hemisphere, as harvest ends, the leaves turn colors and die, and crops fall asleep, our thoughts naturally turn toward death. November begins with All Saints Day, celebrating those who have entered the great harvest of heaven, and continues with All Souls Day, when we pray for all the dead who await resurrection. The Church offers a plenary indulgence under the usual conditions for those who visit cemeteries and pray for the dead during the first week of this month. Scripture readings at this time of year announce the Second Coming of Christ and call us to be ready for our own death every day.

Against this landscape we hear Jesus' parable about the final judgment, where doom awaits those who forsake their talents. The reading from Proverbs offers a sunnier view of a wife who devotes her talents to her family, and the psalm similarly praises the happiness of those who produce results at home.

The Catholic Church recommends Psalm 128 for weddings, even though, to our culture its vision of husband and wife seems sexist: he grows crops outdoors, and she raises kids indoors. Still, it paints a scene of people using their talents. It says of the subsistence farmer responsible for planting his family's food, "by the labor of your hands you shall eat." His toil and knowledge about farming puts the food he grew on his own family table. If you plant tomatoes in the summer, you have some idea of the joy that Psalm 128 extols.

The psalm says of the farmer's wife, she shall be "a fruitful vine in the heart of your house." The fruit it means here are the children, who, the psalm says, are "like shoots of the olive around your table." Just as vines and olives multiply seemingly on their own, so the man's wife becomes the mother of many children. In our culture many parents feel blessed with a limited number of children. In biblical times multiple births were as welcome as fruitful crops in the field.

Psalm 128 promises these indoor and outdoor blessings to you if you fear the Lord and walk in his ways. If you lead a pious and moral life, you will have a large family and food on the table.

Now, I'm a single guy with no children, and I'm terrible around plants. So though I strive to fear the Lord and walk in his ways, my blessings look different from those in Psalm 128, and perhaps yours do too. But one theme this psalm perceives about humans is our desire to produce. As November reminds us, one day we shall die. We do not walk the earth forever, so many of us find satisfaction in accomplishing something that will last beyond our years. Parents achieve this principally with the birth of their children. They hope that the next generation will contribute to society long after they have died. Even without children, many people build a better world in countless ways whether in isolation in their homes or in collaboration at the office. They may not live to see the harvest, but they plant vines that will bear fruit.

However each of us applies our talents, we will satisfy our desire to produce if we remember the refrain of today's psalm: "Blessed are those who fear the Lord." We produce not for selfish gain, but to build a better future. When we walk in God's ways, blessed shall we be, and favored.