

Talk to Catholic Writers Guild, St. Johns Chapter
“The Book of Wisdom as Preparation for the Gospel”
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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Once again it is indeed a pleasure to join St. Johns Chapter of the Catholic Writers Guild. I am extremely grateful to Anthony Kolenc for the invitation to speak with you this evening. My topic today is “The Book of Wisdom as Preparation for the Gospel.” We have much to discuss, so let’s begin. As you know, we will have time for Questions and Answers at the end of the talk.

Let us begin by imagining that we were present in the Temple in Jerusalem on the day that the Holy Family came for the circumcision of the Child Jesus. We would have heard the sounds of the sacrifices taking place around us; we would have smelled the incense being offered on the altar and would have seen many people milling about the Temple precincts going about their business.

But we also would have noticed one man – an old man – named Simeon whose face was aglow with joy as a young couple approached with a child. Despite the great number of people in the Temple that day, Simeon focused exclusively on the young couple and their son. He told them that he was led to them by the Holy Spirit of God, and as he took the child in his arms he cried out in astonishment:

Now, Lord, I have seen your salvation...the light of the nations...and the glory of your people, Israel!

Most people standing nearby probably dismissed his reaction as the emotion of a grandfather in the presence of a baby, but Simeon’s reaction was more than that. Simeon saw something that no one else saw. He saw Jesus with the expectant eyes of all the wise men of Israel.

It is most likely that Simeon was prepared for his unique encounter with the Christ Child that day because he was steeped in the Wisdom literature of Israel. He spoke of salvation and light and glory, all themes of the Wisdom writers. He was led by the Spirit, which means he had a very personal relationship with the God of Israel that went far beyond mere obedience to the laws and precepts. When the Christ Child entered the Temple in the arms of his holy Mother, Simeon did not just see a young family. He recognized Wisdom Himself entering into His own Temple with humility and glory. Of all the people in the Temple that day, only he and the prophetess Anna welcomed this Child as Israel’s long-awaited Messiah.

The Wisdom writings are more than a collection of proverbs that give insight into living successfully. They do that, but they also grapple with the great universal challenges of life such as suffering, love, relationships with family and neighbors, even temptation and business ethics, etc. When we read any part of this literature, we get the sense that we are sitting at the feet of a

wise rabbi teaching us about the way of righteousness in this world. If the books of the Law and the Prophets highlight the infidelities of the people of Israel, Wisdom literature highlights their fidelity, their holiness, their prayerfulness.

The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament contains some of the most beautiful passages anticipating the coming of Christ and his kingdom. The document on divine revelation from the Second Vatican Council, *Dei verbum*, says that in the Old Testament, “the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way” (DV, 15). I think you will find that in some passages of these Wisdom books, particularly those we will study tonight, the truth of Christ is hardly hidden at all.

There are seven books in this genre: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom, and Sirach. With the exception of the first two, Job and Psalms, all of the Wisdom writings are alleged to have been written by King Solomon, the wisest man in the history of Israel. They were included in the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament (called the Septuagint) as a distinct bloc of literature situated between the books of Law and the writings of the Prophets. The Catholic Church has always considered these seven books as inspired and as canonical scripture because they were in common use in the liturgy from the beginning of the Christian era.

Regretfully, such a short talk does not allow me to illustrate the depth and beauty of the whole range of this great literature. However, I have chosen four passages from the most representative book, the Book of Wisdom, that will hopefully give you a sense of how these passages anticipate the fullness of revelation in the Christian Church. The Powerpoint handout will assist you in following along. Let’s begin with the passage from Chapter 5, verses 15-20:

15 But the righteous live forever,
and in the LORD is their recompense,
and the thought of them is with the Most High.
16 Therefore shall they receive the splendid
crown, the beautiful diadem, from the hand of the LORD,
For he will shelter them with his right hand,
and protect them with his arm.
17 He shall take his zeal for armor
and arm creation to requite the enemy,
18 Shall put on righteousness for a breastplate,
wear sure judgment for a helmet,
19 Shall take invincible holiness for a shield,
20 and sharpen his sudden anger for a sword.

On this handout, one cannot fail to notice the amazing parallels to this passage in the writings of St. Paul, who would have undoubtedly been familiar with the Book of Wisdom.

First, the predominant theme of the text is “righteousness,” which is a major preoccupation of the Law, the Prophets, and the Wisdom writings. But it is also a major theme of the New Testament. In Romans and Galatians, St. Paul says that we are not saved by works of the law but by a

righteousness that comes through faith in Christ (Rom 3:22, Gal 3:11). In this passage, the Wisdom writer seems to anticipate that there is something larger at work than the Law of Moses, something that can only be done by God's hand, by God's power. We have a partial glimpse of St. Paul's doctrine of salvation by faith in the image of the "crown of righteousness" and the "recompense" given to those who are faithful.

There is a second clear parallel between the Old and the New Testaments in the description of the weapons of righteousness. The Wisdom writer makes these devices part of the divine arsenal to be wielded by God's Almighty hand, but in Ephesians, St. Paul describes this same weaponry as armor for the individual Christian. In Wisdom, God uses these weapons against the enemies of Israel, but in the New Testament, these weapons are considered to be the believer's spiritual protection against the devil and his minions. This uniquely Christian development represents a much fuller and more spiritual concept of the life of faith.

Thus the Wisdom writer's understanding of the armor of God anticipates something that will be taken up in the fuller Christian revelation, namely, that the real warfare that we are engaged in is the struggle for our salvation. Padre Pio once said that the battlefield between God and the devil is the human soul. He would have known that very personally.

Let us now look at the passage from Chapter 7, verses 21-26:

21 Whatever is hidden or plain I learned,
22 for Wisdom, the artisan of all, taught me.
For in her is a spirit
intelligent, holy, unique,
Manifold, subtle, agile,
clear, unstained, certain,
Never harmful, loving the good, keen,
23 unhampered, beneficent, kindly,
Firm, secure, tranquil,
all-powerful, all-seeing,
And pervading all spirits,
though they be intelligent, pure and very subtle.
24 For Wisdom is mobile beyond all motion,
and she penetrates and pervades all things by reason of her purity.
25 For she is a breath of the might of God
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled can enter into her.
26 For she is the reflection of eternal light,
the spotless mirror of the power of God,
the image of his goodness.

This is truly one of the most magnificent passages of the whole Old Testament! In fact, for the sake of time, I have shortened the reading, but the whole of Chapter 7 is a true literary work of art.

Once again, we cannot fail to notice many of the parallel descriptions of divine Wisdom in the New Testament, where Wisdom is clearly identified as a Person, the eternal Word of God, Jesus Christ. I have chosen passages from a variety of writers – Hebrews, Paul, James, and John – to show how this understanding cuts across the entire New Testament.

Allow me to point out something that may not be immediately clear in the English translation. In verses 22 and 23, there are 21 individual words used to describe the richness of divine Wisdom. The English language uses expressions like “never harmful” and “loving the good” to translate them, but in fact, each one of these terms is a single word in the original Greek language. And there is a reason for the number 21: it is the multiplication of two perfect numbers, 7 x 3, which symbolizes the utter and complete perfection of divine Wisdom. This passage is poetic artistry at its finest in the Old Testament.

Even where they translate word-for-word, there is always something lost in translation. For example, even the very elegant English word “beneficent,” does not come near to the nuance and beauty of the Greek term which is *philanthropos*!

We could spend hours of prayerful reflection on this passage simply by transposing the term “Wisdom” with the sacred Name of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one who “penetrates and pervades all things by reason of [His] purity.” Jesus is “firm, secure, tranquil, all-seeing, all-powerful,” etc. What wealth of spiritual understanding is contained in this passage!

Although the Wisdom writer characterized divine Wisdom as female, we can see in that image a certain anticipation of the Bride / Bridegroom imagery that is so evident in the New Testament. I’m sure that Jesus would have said to this Wisdom writer, as he once said to a scholar of the law, that he was “not far from the Kingdom of God” (Mk 12:28-34).

Let us now move on to the passage from Wisdom, Chapter 8, verses 5-7:

5 If riches are desirable in life,
what is richer than Wisdom, who produces all things?
6 And if prudence is at work,
who in the world is a better artisan than she?
7 Or if one loves righteousness,
whose works are virtues,
She teaches moderation and prudence,
righteousness and fortitude,
and nothing in life is more useful than these.

This short passage is the primary scriptural source for what we call the four Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance. Let us note, first of all, a verb in verse 5 that we could easily skip over. The passage says that Wisdom “produces all things” and then goes on to talk about the virtues. In other words, to the Wisdom writer, Almighty God is not only the origin of the world and all it holds, but he is also the source of all human virtue. This concept represents a distinct development of the Old Testament over the teachings of pagan Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who wrote about these virtues 300 years earlier but who did not recognize a single eternal source of all virtue.

Christian revelation, in turn, further developed the insights of the Book of Wisdom on virtue. For example, Christianity believes that the Cardinal Virtues have both a natural and a supernatural dimension. The Cardinal Virtues can be practiced as a means of upright living in this world, but they can also be “spiritualized” in the direct service of God’s Kingdom. Divine prudence, for example, surpasses the value of human prudence because it takes in a much wider perspective of eternity and the salvation of souls. The saints are full of divine prudence in their zeal for God which sometimes appears as foolishness to the eyes of the world. The martyr who “throws away” his life as a witness to the faith is not prudent in a worldly sense, but he is exercising divine prudence. The same can be said of the other Cardinal Virtues: they all have both a natural and a supernatural dimension.

Christianity also adds something to the teaching on virtue that is not fully explicit in the Book of Wisdom. Namely, that divine grace is necessary to live a virtuous life. The Catechism (n. 1811) says that “It is not easy for man, wounded by sin, to maintain moral balance. Christ’s gift of salvation offers us the grace necessary to persevere in the pursuit of the virtues. Everyone should always ask for this grace of light and strength, frequent the sacraments, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and follow his calls to love what is good and shun evil.”

In sum, the Book of Wisdom takes the insights of the ancient philosophers and raises them up, but even these insights only anticipate the fullness of this teaching in the light of Christ. I would greatly encourage you to spend time studying Part III of the Catechism, particularly Article 7 on the virtues, which is one of the most valuable sections of the whole Catechism.

Moving on to our final passage, let us look at Chapter 16, verses 19-21:

19 And again, even in the water,
fire blazed beyond its strength
so as to consume the produce of the wicked land.
20 Instead of this, you nourished your people with
food of angels and furnished them bread from heaven,
ready to hand, untoiled-for, endowed with all delights
and conforming to every taste.
21 For this substance of yours revealed your sweetness
toward your children,
and serving the desire of the one who received it,
was changed to whatever flavor each one wished.

There are many eucharistic parallels of this passage in the New Testament, but I have chosen only to cite the 6th Chapter of John’s Gospel, the famous “Eucharistic Discourse,” as the most representative passage reflecting the Book of Wisdom’s insights. The other items, as you can see, are taken from our Christian tradition, the most notable of which are the words of St. Thomas Aquinas who composed the prayers for the Mass of Corpus Christi in the year 1264. We owe St. Thomas an immense debt of gratitude for his timeless hymns and prayers for this feast. In fact, many of us know hymns such as “Tantum Ergo” and “Panis Angelicus” without realizing that St. Thomas is their author.

But where did St. Thomas get his source of material? Of course, from this very passage of Wisdom. I could say without exaggeration that we have here the high point of all Wisdom literature, namely, its designation of the Manna in the desert as “the bread of angels” and “food from heaven.” The terms first appear in two psalms (Pss 78 and 105) that describe the Manna of the Israelites during their sojourn in the desert. Remember that the Psalms are also wisdom literature. The Book of Wisdom takes up the Manna allegory and spiritualizes it to a great degree. The Manna is now interpreted in three unique ways in verse 21:

First, as expressing God’s sweetness toward his people (using the beautiful term “your children”). This interpretation of the Manna is entirely new. In the Book of Exodus, Chapter 16, God gives in to the demands of the Israelites for food because he is annoyed at their complaining! The Wisdom writer, however, has presented this as an act of God’s fatherly care in providing food for his children.

Second, Wisdom interprets the Manna as satisfying the deepest desires of each person, even though the bread in Exodus only satisfied their physical hunger at the time it was given.

Third, Wisdom seems to say that the Manna actually conformed to the individual tastes of everyone. This idea is completely new: there is no precedent for this interpretation of Manna in the Old Testament!

Yet, because of these three interpretations, the Book of Wisdom offers an astonishing anticipation of the Church’s teaching on the Eucharist as the Bread of Life. Wisdom’s spiritual insights open the ancient symbol of the Manna to a mystical, sacramental and highly personal dimension that is taken up by the New Testament authors who reveal the “bread from heaven” as Christ Himself and the fullest possible participation in the divine life that we have while we are on this earth.

Clearly we could talk all night about these themes and many others from Wisdom literature, but we must finish here. Allow me simply to re-state our theme before we go to the Question and Answer period.

In the Book of Wisdom, and in the Wisdom books as a whole, we have the anticipation of the sacred proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The few examples we have examined tonight are just a sample of the immense richness of these seven books, and I pray that you will study them with great zeal and attention to this anticipatory dimension of wisdom literature. Like Simeon in the Temple, the more we immerse ourselves in the wisdom of the ages, the more prepared we are to “see” Christ, the Wisdom of God when he stands before us.

May we, like Mary, keep this divine Word in our hearts, with a passion for listening to the Beloved who is the joy of our souls!