

Dolorosa

PENTECOST SUNDAY

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A STEP BACK IN TIME

FILIAL FIDELITY

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When you hear the name *Ruth*, what comes to mind? According to a certain survey, most people think of the iconic *Baby Ruth* candy bar, which was introduced in 1921 and named after President Grover Cleveland's eldest daughter Ruth. This top result was followed by the hall of fame baseball player George Herman "Babe" Ruth. People from various backgrounds, whether baseball enthusiasts or not, are familiar with this legendary slugger who was a member of the New York Yankees.

After the candy bar and the baseball player, the next result on the survey is that people think about a relative or a friend with the name *Ruth*. Very few people, however, said that the biblical Ruth came to mind. At first I was surprised at this, for the Ruth of the Bible is the first woman on record to bear the name, and she even has a book named after her in the Old Testament. At the same time, however, it is not so surprising given the anti-Christian spirit of modern times.

The Book of Ruth is the eighth book listed in the Old Testament. It opens with these words:

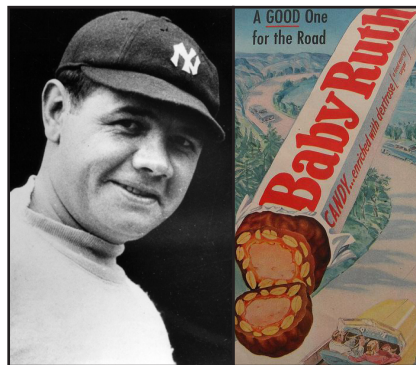
In the days of one of the judges, when the judges ruled, there came a famine in the land. And a

certain man of Bethlehem Juda, went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. (1:1)

The man in question was named Elimelech. He lived in Bethlehem with his wife Noemi and their two sons Mahalon and Chelion. When famine struck the land of Juda, they decided to immigrate east of the Dead Sea to the pagan land of Moab.

Having come to their journey's end, the little family settled in a fertile plain south of the Arnon river. Soon after arriving there, however, Elimelech died, leaving his wife and two sons alone to live among the pagans. Eventually, the sons married. Chelion married a native girl named Orpha; Mahalon married Ruth.

For ten years the family of Elimelech lived peacefully and happily in Moab. But, after this brief period death again visited the family. Both sons died, leaving behind their mother and wives. After mourning the loss of her children, Noemi decided to return to her home in Bethlehem. She had received word that the famine had ended, and thus the time had come to return.



Noemi began the journey to Bethlehem with her daughters-in-law. After they had gone a short distance, Noemi stopped and turned to Orpha and Ruth. “Go ye home to your mothers,” she said to them. Continuing, she added, “[May] the Lord deal mercifully with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. May he grant you to find rest in the houses of the husbands which you shall take” (Ruth 1:8-9).

Hearing this, the two girls began to weep. “We will go on with thee,” they protested.

Noemi would not hear of this. “Return, my daughters: why come ye with me?” (1:11) She then told them that she had nothing to offer them, that she was poor, and that for their own good they should stay in Moab and find husbands among their people.

At these words, fresh tears began falling abundantly from the eyes of the two girls. Orpha kissed her mother-in-law and then turned and began walking back to her home. Ruth, however, refused to leave. Noemi again attempted to persuade her to return to her home. In *Dramatic Stories of the Bible*, Rev. Thomas D. William describes Ruth’s response. He writes:

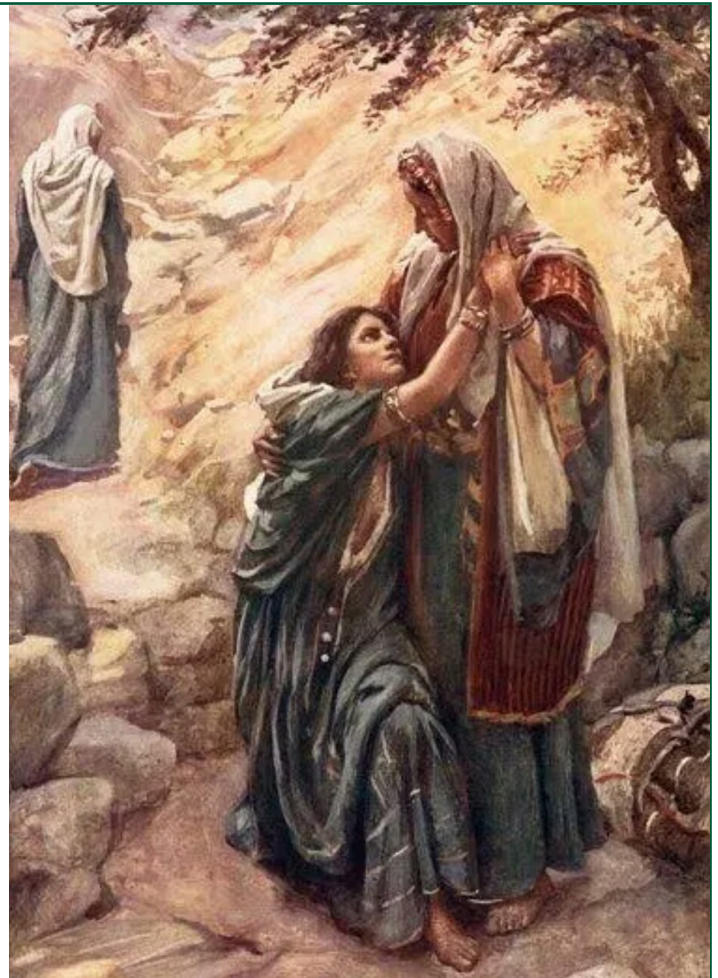
This brought from the young woman the answer so full of love and loyalty, that in all after years it has been the expression of the highest form of human affection and self-sacrificing devotion: “Do not ask me to leave thee; for whither thou shalt go, I will go; and where thou shalt dwell, there will I dwell. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. The land that shall receive thee dying, in the same shall I die; for nothing but death shall part me and thee.” (322)

Seeing that Ruth was not going anywhere, Noemi ceased her attempts to persuade her to return to her family in Moab. The two women thus journeyed together to Bethlehem.

By the time they arrived in Bethlehem, it was the beginning of the barley harvest, which, in that country is near the end of April. Knowing well that they would need food, and ever solicitous for her mother-in-law’s well-being, Ruth asked if she could go into the nearby field to collect ears of corn. Noemi agreed.

In his *Bible History*, Father George Johnson explains that “the Law of Moses forbade the owner [of a field] to go back over his field a second time, and commanded that the grain which was left on the ground [after harvesting] should be left for the poor” (169). Thus, Ruth was able to follow closely behind the reapers and gather the corn that they left behind.

It so happened that this field belonged to a certain rich man named Booz, a relative of Noemi’s husband. One day, he came to check on the progress of the reapers, and while there, he saw Ruth. “Whose maid is this?” he asked the man in charge of the reapers (Ruth 2:5). The man



informed Booz that she was a young Moabite woman, the daughter-in-law of Noemi. Continuing, he explained that “she desired leave to glean the ears of corn that remain, following the steps of the reapers: and she hath been in the field from morning till now, and hath not gone home for one moment” (Ruth 2:7).

Booz directed his servants to treat Ruth with all respect and to leave sufficient ears of corn to provide her with all she desired. He then kindly addressed Ruth. “My daughter,” he said, “do not go to glean in any other place but here, for I have charged my men not to disturb you; and when you are hungry and thirsty, eat of the food, and drink of the water with which they are provided” (Ruth 2:8-9).

We read in the Book of Ruth that on hearing Booz’s kind words, Ruth fell to her knees in gratitude. “Whence cometh this to me,” she graciously said, “that I should find grace before thy eyes, and that thou shouldst vouchsafe to take notice of me a woman of another country?” (2:10)

“I have been told how good you were to your mother-in-law,” Booz replied, “leaving your parents and your country to come with her” (Ruth 2:11). He then added: “May the Lord render unto you for your work, and may you receive a full reward of the Lord the God of Israel” (2:12).



— Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld. *Ruth In Boaz' Field*. 1828.

After leaving Ruth in the field to glean corn, Booz approached his servants. He confidentially ordered them to deliberately drop handfuls of corn and leave them on the ground so that Ruth could gather them.

Ruth continued collecting corn and barley in the field until evening. Afterward, she took what she had collected and beat it out with a rod. In total she had gathered three bushels. She then returned home, and, presenting her mother-in-law with the grain as well as some of the lunch that Booz provided, Ruth told her all that Booz had said and done.

Hearing the name of the owner of the field, Noemi cried out, "Blessed be he of the Lord: . . . The man is our kinsman" (Ruth 2:20). She then told Ruth to continue gleaning in Booz's field with his maids and servants until, at length, the harvest came to a close.

The remainder of the Book of Ruth is best summed up in the words of Father George Johnson. In *Bible History* he writes: "As the days went on, Booz came to love Ruth very dearly. Finally, he married her and placed her in charge of his house. He likewise made a home for Noemi" (170).

The marriage of Ruth and Booz was celebrated with great joy by Booz's relatives and friends. A great feast was held, and all Bethlehem shared in their happiness. The kinsmen of Booz went so far as to express their joy in this prayer for Ruth: "May the Lord make this woman . . . like Rachel, and Lia, who built up the house of Israel: that she may be an example of virtue in Ephrata, and may have a famous name in Bethlehem" (Ruth 4:11).

The words of these people proved to be even more

true than perhaps any of them thought at the time. The name of Ruth became famous in Bible history, she was a glistening example of virtue, and she was instrumental in building up the house of Israel by giving birth to a son. Booz and Ruth named him Obed. In time he became the grandfather of King David, of whom Our Divine Savior Himself, in His human nature, was a direct descendant.

"May the Lord make this woman like Rachel, and Lia, who built up the house of Israel: that she may be an example of virtue in Ephrata, and may have a famous name in Bethlehem."

"The story of Ruth," writes Father Thomas Williams in *Dramatic Stories of the Bible*, "is a beautiful picture of God's providence, watching over His children, and of the filial love and devotion of this young Moabite woman" (324). As one pours through similar stories, it would be hard to find an example of filial fidelity and love that can rival that of Ruth for her mother-in-law. Ruth left her family, her home, and her country to go to a foreign land for one reason: her love for Noemi. And, God, for His part, rewarded her beyond all expectation.

"Saint Jerome tells us," writes Father Thomas Williams, "that we can measure the greatness of [Ruth's] goodness and virtue, by the greatness of her reward; for of her posterity Christ the Lord was born" (324). God thus rewarded Ruth's piety by making her the great-grandmother of King David and, ultimately, an ancestor of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Many virtues characterize the life of Ruth, but one that particularly stands out is her piety. In his theological masterpiece *A Tour of the Summa*, Monsignor Paul J. Glenn defines piety as "the virtue which disposes a person to show due deference, honor, and veneration to those who hold a place of excellence, and who have conferred benefit upon him" (253). And so, piety is paid, above all, to Almighty God, Who is Supreme Excellence and the Giver of all good gifts. After giving God His due, piety is practiced by means of the honor and veneration shown to one's parents. Finally, piety consists in due reverence and respect paid to superiors in Church and state, as well as in the love one bears for his country.

When considered as the reverent respect and honor paid to one's parents, this virtue is often called *filial piety*. "It is a virtue," writes Monsignor Glenn, "and

therefore consists in more than suitable outward conduct” (253). In other words, it is more than just behaving in a certain way towards one’s parents. “It involves,” as the Monsignor explains, “the heart and mind and will; it means looking after one’s parents, lending them needed support, making sacrifices to give them care and comfort in their age, and seeing that they are well attended in illness” (253).

Sadly, the times in which we live are marked by a glaring lack of filial piety. Whether they be young children, teenagers, or even adults, many people seemingly have little, if any, respect for their parents. I see this firsthand in the airports and in various other places. I am not speaking about the “typical” disrespect and disobedience that is distinctive of undisciplined and ungrateful teenagers; what I am witnessing is far worse.

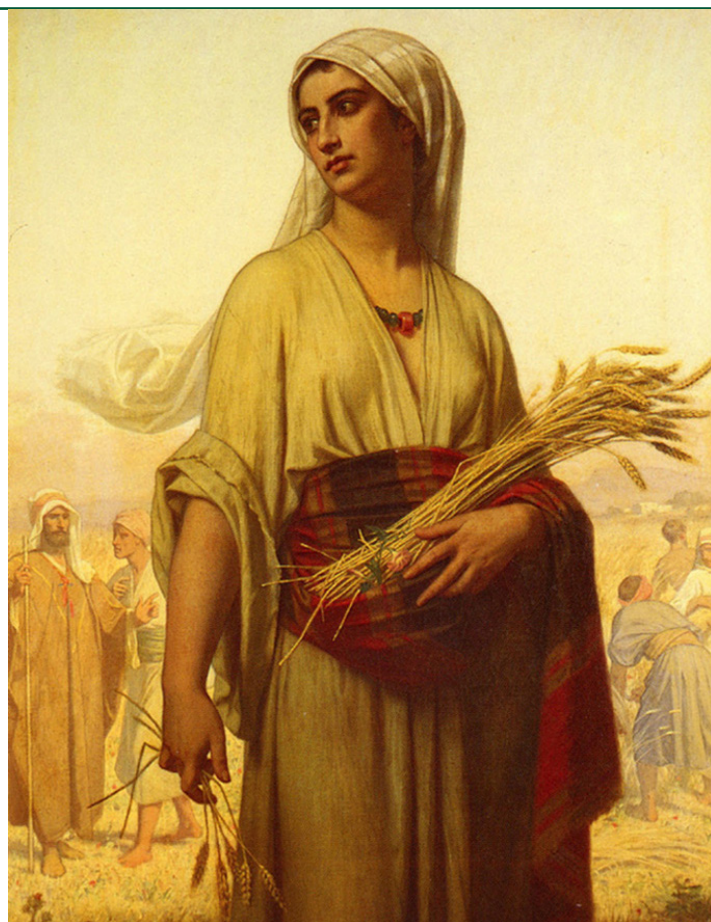
The lack of respect and obedience today for parents calls to mind Saint Paul’s words concerning the latter days. In his second epistle to Saint Timothy, he wrote:

Know also this, that, in the last days, shall come dangerous times. Men shall be lovers of themselves, covetous, haughty, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, wicked, without affection, without peace, slanderers, incontinent, unmerciful, without kindness: traitors, stubborn, puffed up, and lovers of pleasures more than of God. . . . (3:1-4)

In this passage Saint Paul numbers disobedience to parents—and we may add disrespect towards them—among the evils that would characterize the latter times. If truth be told, when one looks at this list, disobedience seems rather insignificant. But, Saint Paul obviously considered it serious enough to list it with greater evils.

With this in mind, let us strive to foster the virtue of filial piety in ourselves and in our homes. This virtue is so important to God that He even commands that it be practiced in the Fourth Commandment: “Honor thy father and thy mother.” Young children, of course, keep this Commandment and practice this virtue by respect and obedience to their parents in all that is not sinful. What about adults? How can adults honor their parents in ways that are fitting?

Although there is a tendency to think that the Fourth Commandment ceases to bind when adolescents grow to adulthood, this is not the case. Adults and children alike are commanded by God to foster filial piety. Below are six suggestions that may be helpful in cultivating this virtue, though there are certainly others. With each suggestion, I realize that there may be a temptation to think something along these lines: “Yes, but you don’t know my parents,” or “You don’t know how they have treated me.” I understand that in some unfortunate cases practicing filial



— Merle Hugues. *Ruth In The Fields*. 1876.

piety may be difficult or seemingly impossible. In difficult cases it might be helpful to remember that although one’s relationship with his parents is strained, God nonetheless expects him to honor them. This can be done by honoring their positions as parents. The military demands that soldiers respect the rank if not the man, and to some degree one can do the same with his parents—honoring the position given them by God even when they behave dishonorably. The adopted child, for instance, may have never known his birth parents, but he can still avoid speaking evil of them, thereby rendering them honor. Remember, if we are willing to put in the effort to practice filial piety, God will give us the grace to do so no matter what the circumstances.

Speak Well of Them

The first way we can practice filial piety is by speaking well of our parents or by refusing to speak poorly of them. We live at a time when it is common for people to voice their grievances and opinions of others. They think little of telling the world what they think about their governors, their bosses, and even their parents. Such people believe this to be “therapeutic” or “healthy.” But, this is not so. “Render therefore to all men their dues,” says Saint Paul. “Tribute, to whom tribute is due: custom, to whom custom: fear, to whom fear: honor, to whom honor” (Rom.

13:7). We must honor our parents; we must speak well of them. Let us foster the spirit of speaking well of our parents not only while they are alive, but even after they have died. Let us speak well of them to our siblings, to our spouses, to our children, and to all our acquaintances.

Support Them

Another way we can honor our parents is by supporting them. I am not speaking here of financial support, but of other forms of love and care. When we are young, our parents raise us to be strong and independent. However, there is a trade-off, a passing of the baton, so to speak. As our parents age, they become feeble, they begin to lose, in a certain sense, their independence. Hence, we can practice filial piety by being patient with our parents and by giving them the assurance that we will not forsake them in their old age. Just as they cared for us, we will care for them. This is our responsibility and it ought to be our joy.

Give Them Time

A third way we can practice filial piety is by giving our parents some of our time. We live in a fast-paced world in which time is a valuable commodity. Sadly, I have seen, on more than one occasion, parents who have all but been abandoned by their adult children because they are “too busy.” By taking some time out of our week to visit with our parents whether in person or over the phone, we give expression to our esteem for them and thereby render them honor. Unfortunately, many children do not appreciate their parents and set aside time for them until it’s too late. Let us learn not to make the same mistake.

Provide For Them

We can also practice filial piety by providing financial assistance for our parents when they are in need. When children are young, God expects parents to provide for them. When parents grow old, it is then that the roles and responsibilities are reversed. We must thus look out for the temporal well-being of our parents. Saint Paul even alludes to this when he writes of making a return of duty to one’s parents. He says, “Let her learn . . . to make a return of duty to her parents: for this is acceptable before God (I Tim. 5:4). May we never look upon this as a burden, but as an honor.

Forgive Them

Sadly, it is not uncommon to meet children who harbor a certain amount of bitterness and resentment toward their parents for one reason or another. They find themselves unable to move past their parents’ unwise decisions, past

the things their parents have said or done that have left them wounded, past their parents’ faults. At such times, one must remember the example of forgiveness that Our Divine Savior set for us on Calvary. “Father, forgive them,” He prayed. It is true that some parents have done deplorable things to their children. But, the children, for their part, must take care not to render evil for evil, rather to forgive and to express this forgiveness by not harboring grudges and by praying for their wayward parents. In some cases this may be the most difficult way of practicing filial piety, but it is certainly one of the most pleasing to the forgiving Heart of Christ.

Pray For Them

That brings us to perhaps the most important means of filial piety—praying for our parents. By prayer, we ask God, Who is able to help our parents in a way far better than we or anyone else could, to help, strengthen, and protect them; to grant them the many blessings and graces they need. From time to time, it is also highly commendable to have a Mass offered for our parents, for their spiritual and temporal well-being. Even if our parents have finished their work in this world and have been called by God into eternity, let us not forget them. Instead, let us pray for them every day and have Masses offered for the repose of their souls. For, neither motherhood nor fatherhood ceases with death.

As we look back to Mother’s Day and ahead to Father’s Day, let us resolve to imitate the filial piety of Ruth. She viewed Noemi as her own mother and was thus lavish in her affection and daughterly care. In return God rewarded her in a sublime way. If we strive to attain Ruth’s degree of filial fidelity, then we, too, can be confident that God will reward us not only in this life but in eternity.

