Fidelity – a Gift of Gods and a Merit of People
Christian reflection of the story of Philemon
and Baucis from Ovid´s Metamorphoses
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The fact that the work of a pre-Christian author may serve for a Christian reflection of a certain topic might seem rather strange at first sight. However, it is not a new method, on the contrary, it is a very traditional way, verified through centuries. It was particularly in the ancient poets where all generations of Christians sought and, what is more important, found the natural wisdom containing natural truths; they do not only contradict the Christian revelation but they anticipate it and point at it in the same way as the time of the Advent does. Let us give one example for all: Vergil used to be given the title poeta christianissimus (the most Christian poet) in the Middle Ages. Although the title might seem hyperbolic, it gives evidence of the large degree of authority not only of this poet but of the whole Ancient culture for the Middle Ages.¹

Ovid² also used to be very popular, especially in the 11th and 12th centuries. One even speaks of the so called aetas Ovidiana (the age of Ovid)³. Reminiscences of his work appear both in secular compositions and in sacred ones. One would quote an anecdotal story documenting the popularity and knowledge of his work: King James I of Aragon opened his speech at a convocation of bishops with a quote which he considered to be a biblical one. In reality they were some verses of Ovid.

¹ Cf for this topic E. R. Curtius: Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter, Tübingen/Basel, 1993 (11th ed.)
² Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BC – AD 17/18) was a Roman poet of the Augustan age who is well known as the author of the Metamorphoses ("The Transformations"), a mythological hexameter poem. He is traditionally ranked alongside Virgil and Horace as one of the three canonic poets of Latin literature. His poetry influenced European art and literature.
He composed works that were often copied, imitated, translated, and allegorized by Christian authors during the Middle Ages. "Among the scholars who came from all over Western Europe to the court and royal school of Charlemagne were such poets as Modoin, bishop of Autun (815, d. 840/843), who took the name 'Naso' and celebrated Charles as the new Augustus. Modoin was in turn complimented by Florus, deacon of Lyon (d. ca. 860), in a long epistle borrowing from most of Ovid’s works. This court devotion to Ovid was continued in the French cathedral schools by such poets as Godfrey of Rheims (d. 1095), who composed a long elegiac and allusive description of a beautiful lady. Such elegiac matter is combined with biblical learning in the work of Hildebert of Lavardin (d. 1133), but the peak of secularization can be seen in the poems of Baudri of Bourgueil, archbishop of Dol from 1107 to 1130, whose two epistles – 'Florus to Ovid' and 'Ovid to Florus' – are sophisticated school exercises based on the Tristia."

Another work from the 13th century is the pseudo-Ovidian tale *De vetula* which presents Ovid as a Christian convert. In medieval France the Metamorphoses were elaborated into the Ovide moralise, i.e. 70,000 verses of Christianizing moralization. Similarly, John Ridevall, a friar (early 1300s) provided, in his Fulgentius metaphoralis, a handbook for preachers that made examples of virtue and vice inspired by Ovid’s verse.

His famous work *Metamorphoses* (The Transformations), a hexameter epic poem comprising 15 books, was written about 8 AD, used to be interpreted and commented on allegorically for centuries. Symbolic or allegorical sense used to be assigned to the myths (e.g. the pursuit of Daphne by Apollo as the temptation of the soul by Satan). "This question is particularly curious, of course, because one could hardly find a classical work that is less obviously Christian than this one – it is thoroughly pagan in spirit, without any apparent trace of a vision of life compatible with Christian doctrine." And yet in the Middle Ages the popularity of Ovid was very high. Christian writers and commentators tried to make this poem acceptable to the Christian culture. Also at the beginning of the modern times, Ovid was popular and frequently read at church schools, e.g. at Jesuit colleges and grammar schools as an example of artistic perfection. In Shakespeare’s early work, approximately three quarters of the classical imagery is derived from Ovid’s poem. As much as modern poets are concerned, let us mention Eliot’s *Waste Land*, in which references to Ovid are very frequent, too.

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6 Cf R. A. Dwyer: *Ovid in the Middle Ages*.
The basic motif of Ovid’s Metamorphoses is the change, the change of everything - forms of matter and the man, too. The stories describe human beings transformed to new bodies — trees, animals, flowers, rocks, constellations, etc. Almost 250 different myths from Greek and Roman mythology are mentioned from the emergence of the cosmos to the deification of Julius Caesar. There is a lot of space for astonishing deliberation of transcending the limits of one’s own being. Forms of everything are changeable, nothing has a stable shape, one form of being turns into another.8

Thus the mode of being of two persons, two old people - Philemon and Baucis- this essay is about, transcends by the intervention of gods (at the request of both of the mentioned) into another form of a higher quality; it is not only stable but also given directly by gods: "Nam vos mutatstis et illas"9 (Ye Gods, from whom these miracles did spring), can be read in the prologue to the opus as a sign factorized to all the changes. A metamorphose, a permanent change, is not considered so positively in the whole poem as it is in the story of Philemon and Baucis. Once it is a part of a creative act or apotheosis (deification) or a reward for piety (as in our poem), other times, however, it is an instrument of the punishing gods. In the opus of the Metamorphoses there are about 250 stories (depicted in 12,000 verses), carefully linked together although not read as a whole in most cases. The reader selects relevant stories or passages according to his topical interest. Some of the poems, on the one hand, are arranged in a given order on the basis of certain parallels (e.g. Arachne - Nioba), without regard to the chronical succession, others, on the other hand, create contrasts (Erysichthón - Philemon and Baucis). It is the mode of linking the story into the whole which may also help to understand the partial plot more thoroughly.

The passage we are dealing with follows up the preceding story as an evidence of the miraculous power of gods that is being challenged by one of the listeners of the preceding story. Actually, it is a cogent answer to the blasphemy the other attendees were shocked by. This fact emphasizes the importance of its utterance. The story beginning with:

"inmensa est finemque potentia caeli non habet,  
et quicquid superi voluere, peractum est"  
(Heav’n’s pow’r is infinite: Earth, Air, and Sea,  
The manufacture mass, the making Pow’r obey)

8 Ovid takes over the conception of the world’s variability from pythagoreism, as shown in a philosophical excursus on this ancient teaching in book XV of the Metamorphoses.  
It is a reaction to the arrogant blasphemy of Pirithous. Being told by an eyewitness (not of the event itself, yet of the remaining traces), the story is highly plausible.

The story depicts the event which could be found in various modifications as a common motif in a lot of mythologies and even in the Old Testament, that is how the god, gods or their messengers go through the world, not recognized, examining its moral state, evidential especially in carrying out the duty of hospitality.

"Mille domos clausere serae"
(Not one of all the thousand but was lock’d)

This verse expresses their experience of this journey. Only in a very poor dwelling are the wayfarers accepted by an old couple, Philemon and Baucis. Further the story goes on depicting modest hospitality the old people try to offer to the guests. Both the description of shabbiness and scruffiness of their dwelling and their endeavours to prepare an adequate dinner from meagre supplies and on an modest „service“ are touching. Also here Ovid’s artistry of depicting not only nobility of gods, high-mindedness of heroes, beauty of palaces but also things and situations of everyday life, simple and shabby, is verified. The reader may agree with those who speak of colourfulness and plasticity of almost artistic kind. All preparation of meals flows in a friendly conversation, one cannot tell how quickly the time passes. Then the gods sit down (or rather lie down according to the ancient manner) at the table with the modest feast and a surprise comes soon; their hospitality is rewarded by a miracle:

"Interea totiens haustum cratera repleri
sponte sua per seque vident succrescere vina"
(Mean-time the beechen bowls went round, and still,
Though often empty’d, were observ’d to fill;
Fill’d without hands, and of their own accord
Ran without feet, and danc’d about the board.)

The couple trembles with a sacred awe and tries to prepare even a richer feast for the gods. Afterwards they reveal the sense of their visit and the decision which stems from their knowledge of conditions on the earth:

"di que sumus, meritasque luet vicinia poenas
inpia" dixerunt; "vobis immunitus huius esse mali dabitur."
("The neighbourhood," said be,
"Shall justly perish for impiety:
You stand alone exempted; but obey.")
Philemon and Baucis are taken up to the top of a nearby mountain where they can see the devastation of the flooded land. Behold, another miracle – it is only their dwelling which stays untouched and is turning into a temple. They are addressed by Zeus:

"dicite, iuste senex et femina coniuge iusto digna, quid optetis!"
("Speak thy desire, thou only just of men;
And thou, o woman, only worthy found
To be with such a man in marriage bound.")

And here the main topic of the poem – fidelity (together with piety) - shines in the culmination of the story:

"esse sacerdotes delubraque vestra tueri
poscimus, et quoniam concordes egimus annos,
auferat hora duos eadem, nec coniugis unquam
busta meae videam, neu sim tumulandus ab illa."
(We crave to serve before your sacred shrine,
and offer at your altars rites divine:
And since not any action of our life
Has been polluted with domestick strife;
We beg one hour of death, that neither she
With widow's tears may live to bury me,
Nor weeping I, with wither'd arms may bear
My breathless Baucis to the sepulcher.)

Their wish was fulfilled totally, both of them served the gods in the temple and when the time arrived, they passed away together. And it was the gods’ gift not even asked for that their unity was not broken by their death either; they turned into trees instead:

"… ostendit adhuc Thyneius illic
incola de gemino vicinos corpore trunços."
(Ev’n yet, an ancient Tyanaean shows
A spreading oak, that near a linden grows;
The neighbourhood confirm the prodigy,
Grave men, not vain of tongue, or like to lie.)

Now, how can this story be useful for us, for our Christian perfection of virtue and deepening of knowledge of the human matters as well as the „divine“ matters? It is especially the conception of piety and other related virtues, including fidelity which should be especially dealt with. The main topic of the story as well as a lot of motives can bring many incentives
which can enrich our Christian views of fidelity; that is the main topic of the poem (this part, not all the Metamorphoses) together with piety (no matter whether experienced in a community). The very first characteristic of Philemon and Baucis, offered by Ovid, is the mention of poverty:

"parva quidem, stipulis et canna tecta palustri"
(A homely shed; the roof, not far from ground,
Was thatch’d with reeds, and straw, together bound.)

The second characteristic is piety (the mention of poverty is followed directly by the mention of piety). The third characteristic concerning the couple is fidelity expressed repeatedly in several verses:

"sed pia Baucis anus parilique aetate Philemon
illa sunt annis iuncti iuvenalibus, illa
consenuere casa paupertatemque fatendo
effecere levem nec iniqua mente ferendo;"
(There Baucis and Philemon liv’d, and there
Had liv’d long marry’d, and a happy pair:
Now old in love, though little was their store,
Inur’d to want, their poverty they bore,
Nor aim’d at wealth, professing to be poor.)

Their happiness and peace are depicted in contrast to their poverty. Despite their destitution they are happy. The lack of material wealth is balanced with the fortune of their inner life – their relations; the fact that these could be developed and cultivated for a long time is conditioned by their long life shared together. These are the four qualities mentioned by the poet repeatedly in the initial verses: fidelity, poverty, piety and peace in their souls. The description of their living together culminates with a magnificent expression:

"nec refert, dominos illic famulosne requiras:
tota domus duo sunt, idem parentque iubentque."
(For master, or for servant here to call,
Was all alike, where only two were all.
Command was none, where equal love was paid,
Or rather both commanded, both obey’d.)

These verses contain an interesting development of their faithful relationship. It is the fidelity which is essential not only in the relationship of husband and wife but also in the relationship of master and servant. It is expressed with a perfect picture in which either of them verifies both
kinds of fidelity – the one of a master as well as the one of a servant; the analogy to the Christian conception of service and power comes forward quite intensively. The fact that their mutual life is pleasant both to people and to gods (although not recognised, so far) is expressed by the verses:

"Interea medias fallunt sermonibus horas
sentirique moram prohibent …"
(\emph{The time between, before the fire they sat,}
\emph{And shorten’d the delay by pleasing chat})

and the reason is not the delicious dinner but the amiability radiating from the old people:

"… super omnia vultus accessere boni nec iners pauperque voluntas." (\emph{But the kind hosts their entertainment grace}
\emph{With hearty welcome, and an open face:}
\emph{In all they did, you might discern with ease,}
\emph{A willing mind, and a desire to please.})

This is also rewarded, one could say, by a typical divine gift – a bottomless jug, a jug out of which no wine dwindles. After finding out this gift, the unity of the couple is emphasized when they wonder and tremble in concord and all their activity is described as done together. All they do they do only in unity. Both of them try to prepare a better dinner together, they are leaving together, they look back together, they are crying together… . As if their unity had been strengthened by the divine gift. And it could be said so because it will be another divine gift that will make their unity everlasting and inseparable.

Also this fact can speak to us strongly in our Christian attempt for fidelity. We can see that fidelity is a common piece of work – human and divine. Fidelity demands human effort on the one hand and on the other hand such a faithful coexistence gains qualities unattainable by human means only.

From the Christian point of view, we could similarly consider the sacrament of marriage which demands a valuable human relationship for its effectiveness, however, at the same time the relationship is being improved by its effect, transformed and supplemented by its grace wherever the human force would be insufficient. Until the last moment before the change was completed, they always had something to tell each other. What a beautiful picture of the relationship which would not become ordinary even after long years!

The story comes out also thanks to the following myth placed in contrast; which is about the ruler of Thessalia, Erysichthon. On the contrary the
reader meets a rich and powerful but a sinful man who does not venerate the gods, blasphemes them, profanes sacred places and calls piety foolishness. He is punished deservedly with hunger, that is the opposite of abundance by which the poor Philemon and Baucis were rewarded. Similarly, the overall knowledge of the poet’s opus helps us to understand the chosen story. After all, it is the erotic love, sometimes even promiscuous, that is being extolled in Ovid’s poems. Ovid was miles away from any moralist works. He considered his poetry to be a play. He despised all conventions. The more suggestively does the poem about the fidelity of the two old people speak to us. The poem about the faithful love of Philemon and Baucis is in contrast to the destructive passionate, often perverse relations depicted in the Metamorphoses (e.g. Filomela, Myrrha, Prokné …).

At the end I would like to add a note on poverty and hospitality related to the topic of fidelity. This mythy story seems to confirm the experience that the greatness of the gift (the extent of hospitality and generosity in the case of Philemon and Baucis) does not relate to the quantity of property. After all, generosity of poverty not of abundance is already praised in the New Testament (see the story of the poor widow). It is the piety which orders to take charge of the needy, wayfarers or strangers. Hospitality always used to be (still is?) an attribute of Christian families and it used to draw on acts of Christian mercy among others. Here we are alluding to our topic of fidelity which is a source of concord, a link of people (the couple) and a precondition for good background for hospitality of the others. Of course, we do not get this impression always and unconditionally but we get this impression at least from the text discussed.

**References**


