I. Introduction

A young teacher named Maggie was assigned to an inner-city junior high school during the middle of the year, and the principal told her only that the former teacher had left suddenly, and that class was one of “special” students. Maggie walked into a scene of pure bedlam: spitballs were flying through the air, students had their feet up on the desks, and the room was filled with noise and confusion. The new teacher opened the attendance book, and saw that next to each name on the list was number ranging from 140 to 160. “Oh,” Maggie thought, “no wonder the students are so high-spirited: they all have exceptionally high IQs.” She smiled to herself, and brought the class to order. Over the next few weeks she found that this group of budding geniuses wasn’t easy to work with; many of them didn’t hand in their assignments, and the papers that were turned in were done in a hasty and sloppy manner. Rather than getting angry or giving up, Maggie patiently explained to her students that because they were so gifted and capable of excellence, she expected nothing but the best from them. They had a duty to use their talents and abilities, she said, and she was going to keep on insisting that they do so.

It took awhile, but finally Maggie’s message began to sink in. The students started sitting up tall in their desks, paying attention in class, and working diligently. In trying to take pride in their work, all of them now completed their assignments, and their work was creative and of a high quality—and Maggie happily told them that, as a class, their grades were probably the best in the entire school. All this came to the attention of the principal, who called Maggie into his office and asked, “What have you done to these kids? They’re outperforming all the other students!” “Well, what do you expect?” said Maggie. “They’re gifted, aren’t they?” The principal responded with surprise, “Gifted? No, they’re the special-need students: the socially and mentally challenged, and those with behavioral problems.” Maggie was stunned, and asked, “Then why are their IQs so high on the attendance chart?” and the principal explained, “Those aren’t their IQs; those are their locker numbers!” (Linda Kavelin-Popov, Chicken Soup for the Teacher’s Soul, p. 247). A new and inexperienced teacher, laboring under the happy misconception that her students were exceptionally gifted, managed to turn them into a superior class just by her caring and patient encouragement. Sometimes love—true love which won’t settle for anything but the best—can turn weeds into wheat.

II. Development

When we hear Our Lord’s parable in today’s Gospel of the weeds mixed in with the wheat we might say to ourselves, “OK, good—all those evildoers in the world, including the ones I know personally, are finally going to get what they’ve got coming to them, while I and all the other good people are rewarded.” This may be a natural response on our part, but it’s not the best one. Instead, Jesus wants us to be concerned for the well-being not only of the just, but also of hardened sinners. Yes, there will finally be a day of judgment in which everyone is held accountable for his or her actions and choices—and for some people this experience may be horrible and disastrous. Before this happens, however, God passionately desires that everyone
on the path to damnation repent and accept the gift of salvation. The 1st Reading from the Book of Wisdom speaks of how God balances justice with mercy, and asserts that He has given His children good reason to hope He would welcome their genuine repentance and turning away from their sins. Moreover, as St. Paul tells us, the Holy Spirit searches our hearts and helps us pray in our weakness. God has ordered all things for our good, and so we are truly blessed when we cooperate with His plan—and one of the greatest ways of doing this is by using whatever opportunities we’re given to help other sinners repent.

III. Conclusion

When St. Therese of Lisieux was a girl, she became greatly distressed at the idea that some people might reject God and consequently choose eternal damnation for themselves; this prospect was so upsetting she began praying fervently for the conversion of sinners. When she was fifteen, she saw a newspaper story about a convicted murderer named Pranzini; though guilty and facing the death penalty, the man stubbornly refused to repent of his crimes. Therese was filled with excitement, for here was the chance to pray and sacrifice for a particular sinner! “Dear God,” she prayed, “send that poor sinner the grace of repentance, because of the merits of the passion of Jesus!” The saint offered many prayers and sacrifices for Pranzini, and asked Jesus to give her a sign he had repented. Her prayer was answered, for when Therese read the newspaper account of the criminal’s execution, she was delighted to learn that Pranzini, who had previously ignored all attempts of the prison chaplain to help him convert, suddenly asked the priest to hand him a crucifix, which he kissed three times before being put to death.

It is a wonderful thing to change weeds into wheat by helping sinners repent; all Heaven rejoices when such a miracle of grace occurs—and Jesus wants us to be aware of and responsive to our opportunities to help such things happen. The example of St. Therese gives us a good starting point: we should pray not only for the innocent victims of crime, terrorism, and other forms of violence, but also for the criminals and murderers involved; even as they’re rightly imprisoned and held accountable for their crimes, we can offer prayers and sacrifices for their conversion. It’s just as important to pray for people we know who are leading less than a Christian life: the family member who no longer goes to church, the neighbor who never has a kind word to say about anyone, the young person constantly getting into trouble with the law, the relative who snubs or criticizes us for reasons unknown to us, the former friend who refuses to let go of a grudge, and anyone else who makes our life harder and less joyful than it needs to be. We must turn the other cheek, if necessary, and always respond to the person in a charitable way, making it clear by our example that we sincerely desire his or her well-being. It may seem useless, but Christian charity—nourished by regular prayers, sacrifices, and even fasting on occasion—sometimes results in a breakthrough of grace.

Instead of waiting until people become lovable and them loving them, we’re called to make them lovable by loving them first—the way God does with each of us. Maggie’s high expectation of her students helped them achieve a level of success that everyone thought was impossible. When we allow God’s love to flow through us, even greater things than this can occur—and when we reach Heaven, each conversion in which we’ve played a part will be the source of a glorious and eternal friendship, and an everlasting reason for joy and delight.