

Understanding What God Would Teach Us

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Emeric Lawrence

In the first reading of today's Eucharist we hear how the Torah (the first five books of the Bible) was read to the whole community of those who had returned from Babylon to rebuild that community which was Israel, God's People. Tradition says that Ezra, who did the reading, was the person who edited the Torah into the form we still use. Now while he read, Ezra also "interpreted" the Torah, explaining what each section of it meant practically for the community to which he was reading. As the reading continued people realized what a burden of sin they carried and more and more began to weep. Ezra told them to stop. It wasn't their sin which was important but God's gift of the covenant and salvation. "Joy in the Lord must be our strength" he told them. That applies to us.

As Ezra's audience heard the Law all were swept away in a common feeling, first of sorrow and then of joy. In the Gospel of today's Eucharist Jesus proclaims himself, and the Good News he announces, the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy of redemption and favor toward His Chosen People. Everyone was amazed, pleasantly. But if you read about what happened next in next Sunday's Gospel you see that congregation swept away by rage and trying to kill Jesus. The cause was Jesus' "interpretation" of God's promise as extending also to Gentiles. Not everyone initially felt rage, but got swept away by those expressed this emotion by rejecting Jesus' "interpretation" of God's intention.

St. Paul reminds us that we, as a community, have to put our faith in Jesus' interpretation of God's Word and will. Such a unity with Christ forms us to feel and do what he asks. We begin to act like members of one Body, one that includes all the diversity the natural and human world contains and not just that of Jews and Gentiles. Do we let ourselves get swept away by his "interpretation" of diversity as an enriching gift from our God? Do we trust God's love to transform everyone so that what they are and do will enrich rather than harm? Will the transformation so unify all with God as to make each a gift for the others?

All this begins with God's call to "me". When "I" stand up in front of everyone to imitate Jesus' love for our God and for all God's children individually, will others get swept away and into a like commitment and enthusiasm? As we hear the Scriptures about Jesus in Nazareth, and interpret it with St. Paul, we began to appreciate the awesome task that lies before us.

We are to let ourselves be stretched enough to love absolutely every child of God—and that means every human person! Then we have to help each other find a way to use the unique set of gifts that make him or her "different" in ways that build up the whole community of Christ's Body, together with each person who is one of its members. We start, perhaps, by learning to care for all and for each as we want to be cared for ourselves. Do you believe this is possible, starting today? You have to let Jesus' love, and his utter confidence in God, sweep you away.

Jesus' Calls to Conversion

A reflection derived from a text by H. Daniel-Rops

What Paul had been doing to the Christians in Jerusalem was not enough for him. He tracked them down, denounced them, had them arrested and beaten and tried to force them to deny Jesus, and even had some executed. But he knew that Christian groups were appearing in Jewish communities across Syria and he wanted to stop that. That was his mission, authorized by the High Priest and his council, but suddenly a blinding light struck him down as he approached Damascus: "Saul, Saul!" he heard a voice say, "Why are you persecuting me?" Who was speaking? He heard the voice again, "I am Jesus!" "Lord, what do you want?" "Get up, go into Damascus, and you will be told what I want of you."

This was an event with prodigious, almost incalculable consequences for Christianity and the entire world. Yet it is a fact that the voice of Jesus has not ceased to speak and to send more people on the mission given to Paul. You and I are two such people. Perhaps that is a hidden reason why the scene of Paul's conversion so impressed his contemporaries, and why it is told three times in the New Testament. Paul himself tells it in trying to explain what he is doing by preaching the very message he had tried to destroy, by preaching the person he had previously persecuted. How do you and I explain what we are doing, or failing to do? How do we explain why we are or aren't proclaiming Jesus our savior and the savior of all?

Paul experienced a staggering psychological shock on the road to Damascus. He had believed in what his Pharisaic education taught about the meaning of the Torah and the prophets; at a single stroke this had all been cast away. He was transformed in a radical and even complete way. This is God's power to save and to transform even enemies into close friends and companions. We only have to let the "light of Christ" strike us down, to be ready to hear a call to service and to the cross.

Was Saul of Tarsus more sinful than you or me? Saul's hands were stained with the blood of the faithful. Yet he had the vast good fortune to meet Jesus personally and to be called by name to a mission. Why was Saul singled out and made into the Apostle Paul? It happened because God loved and loves him. And God, and Jesus, love us, and have loved us from all eternity, just as much as Paul. We don't need to be envious of the way Jesus called Paul, any more than we need envy "how much Paul had to suffer for Jesus' Name"—as Ananias was told when he objected to baptizing Paul.

Paul found the hours of his lifetime too few to attest adequately to his love for the One who had loved him enough to strike him down with light, to show him a meaning for Scripture that he had ignored, and to fill his heart with joy and energy for attesting how much God has done for each of us. That is what God calls us to do when we celebrate the conversion of Saul the persecutor into St. Paul the apostle to the nations. For each of us God has a call that needs all the gifts we have been given to bring his light to someone else, perhaps to many.

Dedicating Oneself to What Is Essential

A reflection drawn from the “Exordium Parvum”

The founders of the Abbey of Citeaux, which they called the “new monastery”, sought only one thing—to live St. Benedict’s Rule for Monks fully and without additions or subtractions. They pointed out that they had vowed to live this rule and that they had not. Although the failure was due to changes which had grown up over the centuries, this did not alter the fact they were “perjuring” themselves by failing to do what they had vowed to do. Since they could not persuade the monks of the monastery in which they were living to change, they asked to be allowed to found a new monastery where Benedict’s Rule would be lived according to its actual provisions, interpreted literally.

In the first chapter of the document known as the Exordium Parvum they present an outline of what they propose to do, and how this differs from what was then commonly done in monasteries. They eliminate all that doesn’t make one more like Christ and more ready for the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus the monastic habit is simplified. It is a way of “turning away from the world”, because what had been changed did not promote conversion to Christ. All a monk does should promote turning to God and away from the world. Simplicity helps one seek nothing but Christ.

The challenge they faced is seen in the effort to live by the work of their hands, which Benedict had recommended. They forbade the use of the many forms of “endowment” that then enabled monks to avoid most manual labor. Yet how can monks devote themselves to praying all the hours of the “Divine Office”, as St. Benedict describes it in the Rule, unless the labor of some freed the others for this sort of praying? So they continued to distinguish “choir monks” from “lay brothers”; the first devoted themselves primarily to prayer and the second primarily to manual labor. Besides, those who prayed had to know Latin, the language in which the Divine Office was prayed. The difficulties that faced the founders of Citeaux derived mostly from economic and social considerations.

The holiness of the leaders of the reform, celebrated today, rested on the rock of whole hearted devotion to seeking God, imitating Jesus in every practically possible way, and living in a way that prepares one for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven. They were determined to do what they have vowed to do.

St. Benedict says that his Rule provides a program for beginners. Yet living it strictly and literally seemed to the founders and their contemporaries challenging and demanding. However, for Benedict monastic life must not be designed to provide a “comfortable” way of life but to inspire people to do violence even to themselves, in order to pass through the narrow gate by which one enters the Kingdom of Heaven.

Their goal is our goal. What are we willing to do, and to refrain from doing or having, in order to enter the Kingdom? What gets in the way of a life that leads to that Kingdom—a life of loving God with all our heart and mind and strength and loving our neighbor as ourselves? Are we eliminating such things and doing all that we can to live a Kingdom-oriented life? That is the founders’ challenge to us.

Keep Your Eyes Fixed on Jesus!

A reflection by Origen of Alexandria

“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and his reputation spread throughout the countryside. He taught in their synagogues and everyone sang his praises.” When we read about Jesus teaching in the synagogues of Galilee and everyone praising him, we must be careful not to look at those who heard him as uniquely privileged and at ourselves as deprived. If Scripture proclaims the truth, it was not only to the Jewish congregations of his own generation that our Lord spoke; he still speaks and to us. We are assembled here today to hear him. We know he speaks not only to us but to other congregations as well. Throughout the world Jesus comes looking for instruments through whom he can continue to teach and save. Pray that each of us may be such an instrument. Pray that Jesus will find you and me ready and fit to sing his praises and proclaim the Good News of his coming as Savior.

“Then Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day as was his custom. When he stood up to read they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling it he found the place where it is written: “The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me...” It was no coincidence, but in accordance with the plan of divine providence, that Jesus unrolled the scroll and found in it this chapter prophesying about him. After all, it is written, “not a single sparrow will fall to the ground without your Father’s permission”, and the apostles were told that every hair on their heads had been counted; we can be sure indeed that it was not by chance that the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was produced rather than some other, and that this precise passage was found and used to speak of the mystery of Christ: ***“The Spirit of the Lord has been given me, for He has anointed me”***.

When Jesus had read this prophecy ***“he rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed upon him”!*** Here too, in this synagogue, in this present assembly, you all can at this very moment fix your eyes upon your Savior—if you wish to! Whenever you direct your inward gaze toward wisdom and truth and the contemplation of God’s only Son, then your eyes are fixed on Jesus.

Blessed is the congregation of which it can be said “all eyes are fixed upon Him”! How we long for our own assembly to deserve to have this said of it. Let’s all of us—men and women, young and old, faithful and enquirers—turn our eyes toward Jesus. Let’s turn not only the eyes of our bodies but those of our souls to Jesus!

Why? From Jesus comes the light that enlightens everyone whom God calls. The radiance of Jesus’ face becomes a radiance within us, one that shows itself in the love that shines from them and onto all we meet. It lets us proclaim the Good News of this love and lets us show the world how Jesus’ love and wisdom can transform a person. It is through transforming each of us that God will transform the world. We have been called to do a beautiful thing, and doing it makes us beautiful with the same beauty that shines from Christ Jesus.

God Alone Can Teach What Is Most Important

A reflection & prayer taken from Thomas Aquinas

The complete good of human beings consists in knowing God. Because of this, and the fact that there are many ways of trying to know God, a way of ascending to God has been given us. As all creatures come from God starting from the highest and ending with the least noble we are guided to begin with the least and work upward toward God. As causes are always nobler and greater than their effects, we know that by explaining the lesser we can draw closer and closer to God, the highest and first of all. We know that above all lesser things there must be a greatest and most perfect; God is, so to speak, the roof and crown of creation.

In this way we can ascend to God using our understanding. But it is weak and only with difficulty can our minds penetrate beyond and through perceptible realities to a knowledge of what things are in themselves, a knowledge of what things are inwardly. We perceive only certain effects which have to be produced by a higher reality and power. Think of the fact that no matter how well we know perceptible things in their inwardness we still do not clearly see the order of things and how it rises to God. We know little of the mutual relations of things and the way God directs them to their ends, since we can't grasp the plan of Providence. So our grasp of the first beginning of things and of what transcends all the created falls far short of complete knowledge. And even if we know such things perfectly we should be far from a complete knowledge of their Origin and Starting Point, God.

Any knowledge a human being can attain is feeble and inadequate. But God has revealed to us certain facts about Himself—ones that surpass the human ability to understand. Yet even in revealed knowledge there seems to be a gradual transition from the imperfect to the perfect. So revelation is given to be heard and believed. There is, then, a kind of threefold gradation in knowledge of God. We first seek to ascend through creatures to know their creator. We seek to grasp a truth of revelation but find that understanding it surpasses our ability. But in the end God will lift up our understanding so that we receive a perfect insight into what is revealed. For this we can only pray.

O Creator, beyond any ability of ours to describe, in the fullness of your wisdom you have established angelic creatures and placed them over other creatures. You are the source of light and wisdom; you are the first and final cause of everything. Pour out now a ray of your clear light upon our murky understanding. Take from my mind its darkness as well as all ignorance and sin. Grant us a clear discernment, a strong memory, an ordered approach to inquiry and study, and willingness and docility.

Instruct our beginnings, direct our progress, and bring our work and understanding to the proper completion. You are the true God and you have become truly human, and you draw all to yourself. As we struggle each day to better understand and serve you may we be led to live with you forever in the fullness of truth and peace.

How God Reveals From Concealment

A reflection derived from a text by Hans Urs von Balthasar

The Word of God became human and by doing so manifested perfectly what had seemed to be concealed without possibility of discovery. Yet it does this in a way that leaves so much concealed! The manifestation consists in the fact that God is revealed to us through our humanity. The concealment consists in the fact that God isn't revealed primarily in words but through human deeds and the living of a human life. Something familiar is suddenly made a revelation of God!

It is also concealing that God is revealed through a particular human being, one among the endless crowd of human beings. How can one human reveal the infinite God? If a human being becomes God's language, it is not done by making that human being somehow superhuman or especially renowned or powerful. The human being revealing God seems to be like everyone else and to reveal uniqueness precisely through ordinariness: "He won't wrangle or cry out and no one will hear his voice in the busy streets"; that's how Isaiah put it.

Part of what makes God's self-revelation puzzling for us is that God reveals not only divinity but our humanity. We were created in God's image and likeness but we haven't realized what this means. We haven't known ourselves and so we can't grasp the revelation of God that takes place only through our humanity. God has taken on human nature and made it his own, so that God's self-expression comes from within it. By becoming human God actually brings the humanity he assumes to its full perfection and shows it to human persons.

God is able to reveal in Christ, who is simultaneously divine and human, the intimate perfection of human nature and life. Further, what is human is not oppressed or violated by being simultaneously divine. This happens in you—in each of us—each day. It happens as we imitate Christ's deeds and attitudes and so act as Christ has shown us how. People get to know each other well by sharing life. They experience how another responds to difficulty and success, how each deals with other people and shows them respect, even when they do what is offensive. We learn about God in the same way. As the Bible says, we get to know "God's ways" by sharing life with God. It is another way in which our life with God shows the perfection of what a marriage is meant to be. In effect, we speak the language of God by our deeds. We speak the language of God's love. We speak a language of mercy and respect and consideration, as well as "tough love" at times. Today we begin again to learn that language well enough so that when we speak it others will be able to understand. It is what Jesus did. The only "new" command he gave us was to love as he loves. Without opening our mouths we can speak this language at every moment and in every circumstance. Only practice can make perfect. That is God's aim: We are to speak "love" and keep speaking it until we know it perfectly. Then we will be fully human even as we share what God is. God "is" love.

The Wisdom Mary Teaches Us

A reflection drawn from talks by St. Pope John Paul II

After Christ's ascension the disciples, together with Mary, gathered in the Upper Room to pray. They prayed for the strength and courage to carry on the mission which had been their Master's. They prayed for the wisdom to know how to go about continuing the mission he had been killed to stop. We too have been entrusted with that mission. It calls us to live as intensely as we can the mystery of Christ. We do it together with Mary, whom we call mother of the Church and its model. She models the maternal love that should inspire all who cooperate in this mission for the rebirth of human kind. We do this by walking a path of trust in God's mercy that Mary has already trod.

When the holy family returned to Nazareth after Herod's death a long period called the "hidden life" began. Elizabeth had greeted Mary as one "who believed there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord". The Lord had given her child the name "Jesus" and an angel explained its meaning as, "He will save his people from their sin". Mary didn't cease to believe this promise just because the "hidden life" dragged on and on. To say "Jesus" was to renew her belief the promise embodied in this name would be fulfilled.

Mary's faith was, in a sense, hidden. It was not for her to do anything to bring God's promise to pass. She experienced God's revelation in Jesus and she believed all the world would come to know it. Are you ever impatient with God's time table for saving us and our world from our sins? Mary lived that temptation as she waited. Jesus was being obedient not only to Mary and Joseph but to his Heavenly Father.

The Spirit brings many gifts; we receive them by opening our hearts to the Spirit. It may involve painful experiences and much waiting. We need the interior openness and availability that was Mary's and comes from faith. The hidden years were years of faith that refused to demand proofs of the coming fulfillment of God's promise. We are called to the same faith, to entrust ourselves to God and God's promises as Mary did, and to learn from her example how to be "faithful" and "trusting". We are to believe that "nothing will be impossible for God".

We can only be amazed at God who knows all that can be accomplished through inadequate seeming human instruments. Think of Mary's Song and what it tells us about trust in God "to put down the mighty and life up the poor and weak; to fill the hungry but let the rich suffer hunger". There is no human situation that can't be dealt with by the faith expressed in this song. It is to become our song, day by day, all though our sharing in the "hidden life" which God's promise lives. The prophesy that is Jesus' name and Mary's faith response is a gift for us all. We and everyone wait for the fulfillment of God's promises. There is still a fulfillment to come. During this time the Church lives in many Upper Rooms of prayer. Mary is there praying with us and showing us the Way of Faith. Do not be afraid to live this hidden way. God's promise will be fulfilled for nothing will prove impossible for our God.