



# **Choosing to Decide for God**

**A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant**

When I was young I thought being obedient was hard. I gradually realized that what is hard is making good decisions, and particularly when there are many options. This is why every society has a wisdom tradition containing insights gleaned from experience. The first thing it does is give us a fundamental value to help shape decision making. That is what Jesus does in this Sunday's gospel. The basic value is to love and serve God. All decisions have to act this out.

The Book of Wisdom says we need the gift of God's Spirit to see how best to love and serve God. Indeed, we needed it to choose to put God first and make our relation with God our most important one. Take the example of St. Paul asking Philemon to treat a runaway slave as a brother in Christ rather than what he is in the world's eyes. Love and respect Onesimos rather than punish him! The ministry Paul has shared with Onesimos is most important for God and Philemon is asked to send him to do this work. It is what God asks so the Gospel may be spread. Onesimos' ministry is worth more than any worldly consideration.

Jesus calls us to "hate" all that we were in a worldly way in order to walk the Gospel way. That requires a radical decision, from us as it did from Philemon. We can lead a life based on family ties, or on membership in a community of faith and commitment to God as revealed in Jesus, the Christ. We can base our life on the norms of our society and its customs, or on following the way of God as proclaimed to us by Jesus. It is hard: Whoever does not take up the cross and walk as I have isn't my disciple, is what Jesus says. This is truly the weightiest decision anyone can have to make.

Jesus emphasizes it is "my" decision. I am like someone building a watch tower in an especially valuable vineyard. Make sure you know what the job will cost and prepare yourself to pay it! You are like a President, or congress, making a decision about going to war. Do you have what it takes to win? You have already made that decision in principle but prepare to follow through consistently. The cross can be so heavy! Go back and review all that went into your decision. What was it that you found yourself unprepared for? Turn to the Holy Spirit for strength, and for the wisdom needed to use that strength well in loving and serving God. Perhaps the cross is a "neighbor" or one of your own household. What does Jesus say? Love God with all your mind and heart and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Perhaps you need to learn to love yourself in a new way. That means, in a symbolic sense, turning your back on your "old self" and putting on a new one. In God we can do all things—if we have faith and are willing to trust.

# **The Dignity and Meaning of our Work**

## **An extract from a document of the Second Vatican Council**

Over the centuries human persons have exerted a vast amount of individual and communal labor seeking to better their life circumstances. This work is according to God's will; this is settled. Human beings are created in God's image and have been commanded to make the earth and all it contains their responsibility, and to care for it in a just and holy fashion. All is to be brought into relation with God as Lord and Creator and should show forth the wonder of God's name.

This command concerns the most ordinary of everyday activities. While gaining sustenance for self and for one's family we are to act in a way that benefits society and discloses God's work. We are to do it in a way that benefits all human beings and contributes to the realization in history of a divine plan. Christians are convinced that the triumphs of human creativity are signs of God's greatness and of God's mysterious design. There is no rivalry between what is produced by human talent and energy and what God's power accomplishes.

The greater human power becomes the farther human individual and communal responsibility extends. No one is prevented by the Christian message from building up the world nor is anyone commanded to neglect the welfare of others. Rather we are more strongly bound to do these very things. Sacred Scripture teaches what the experience of ages confirms, that human progress is of great advantage but brings with it a powerful temptation—if the order of values gets jumbled so that what is bad is confused with what is good and individuals and groups pay attention to self-interest and not that of others and of the whole.

This mistake causes the world to cease to be a place of fraternity. A monumental struggle against the powers of darkness pervades human history. Caught in such a conflict we have to struggle continually to cling to what is truly good. Preserving our integrity is impossible without the help of God's grace. The Church echoes St. Paul's warning: "*Don't be conformed to this world!*" Don't let vanity and malice transform your human energies into instruments of sin rather than of service to God and all peoples. Human activities must be purified and perfected by the power of Christ's cross and resurrection. Redeemed and made a new creature in the Holy Spirit we can respect and reverence all created things. We must learn to work as having nothing yet possessing all by directing all we do to love of God and service of others. "*All things are yours, and you are Christ's and Christ is God's*", as St. Paul proclaims. That is the meaning we seek to realize in our daily labors. That is the example we need to give to one another.

# **Renouncing All Things to Follow Christ**

A reflection taken from the Conferences (#3) by John Cassian

The tradition of the Fathers affirms with the Holy Scriptures that there are three renunciations that everyone must strive to practice in following Christ. Let us turn our attention to them.

First, on the material level, we have to devalue all possessions and worldly wealth. Second, we must put away our former way of life with its vices and its attachments, both physical and spiritual. Third, we should withdraw our mind from all that is merely fleeting and visible so as to contemplate only what lies in the future and to desire what is now unseen.

We read that the Lord commanded Abraham to make all three of these renunciations at once: *Leave your country and your kindred and your father's house*. He said "your country" as meaning worldly wealth and possessions. He said "your kindred" as meaning the former way of living with its habits and vices that grow up with us and are as familiar to us as kith and kin. He said "your father's house" as meaning every worldly memory aroused by the things we see.

This forgetfulness will be achieved when, dead with Christ to "*the elemental spirits of this world, we contemplate not the things that are seen but those that are unseen, for what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal*". It will be achieved when in our hearts we leave this temporary and visible house and turn the eyes of our mind toward that house in which we will live forever. Though living in this world we will cease to follow the spirit of this world in order to fight for the Lord, proclaiming by our holy way of life that "*our homeland is in heaven*".

It does no good to undertake the first renunciation, even with wholehearted devotion inspired by faith, unless we carry out the second with the same zeal and fervor. Then we shall be able to advance to the third, by which we leave the house of our former father, the one who fathered us as members of a fallen race and as children of wrath and turn our inward gaze solely toward heavenly things.

We will attain perfection in this third renunciation when our mind is no longer dulled by a pampered body but cleansed by the searching purification of every merely worldly feeling and attitude. Our mind must be raised by constant meditation on divine things and by spiritual contemplation of the realm of the invisible. It will then lose all awareness of the frail body that encloses it and of the place it occupies and is absorbed in things that are divine and spiritual. That is our daily task.

# **Interpreting All Things with & in Christ**

**A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Carroll Stuhmueller**

**Does Jesus ever contradict himself? Obey the commandments; honor your parents, yet “hate” your parents and love God. That’s what we seemed to hear last Sunday. Of course, we have been taught to interpret “hating our parents” as putting them and their values in second place relative to that of loving and serving God with “all” our heart and mind and strength. We must find ways to honor them that are ways of loving and serving God. Yet Jesus tells us there will be difficult problems about loving one another. For instance, we may need to take two or three witnesses with us when when we meet to be reconciled with one we think has wronged us but doesn’t admit that. Even if all want to put God first they may disagree about what that amounts to practically.**

**Last Sunday we heard Philemon asked to redo his relation with a runaway slave, Onesimos. Why didn’t Jesus tell us that slavery is always wrong? That’s now what the Church has come to believe, but why did we have to go through thousands of years of struggle to learn it? And there is still slavery today and we don’t know how to help people see that what they are forcing upon others is slavery and is wrong.**

**Does the Book of Wisdom help by asking: Who knows God’s counsel and who can conceive what the Lord intends? Does it help to hear Isaiah tell us: By waiting and by calm you shall be saved; in quiet and in trust your strength lies; the Lord is waiting to show you favor and blessed are all who wait for the Lord. Both are right, yet waiting isn’t always right. Ecclesiastes tells us: There is a time to be silent and a time to speak. To know what a given moment requires takes prayer and advice and experience. Yet even advice can’t coerce, as Paul refused to coerce Philemon’s decision about Onesimos.**

**Once a Canaanite woman begged Jesus to heal her daughter. He refused since he understood his mission as exclusively to the “lost sheep of Israel”. Yet God gave her extraordinary faith, shown in her response. Jesus changed his way of understanding of his mission and healed the girl. One has to be sensitive to the Heavenly Father gifts of grace, especially as shown in faith. Was that easier for Jesus than for us? If we are to put God absolutely first we have to let God tell us where the boundaries are in each problematic situation perhaps causing us to reinterpret our understanding of his will. We say that charity is the first law and we say that second to it comes love of neighbor. Yet Jesus reinterpreted that as meaning we are to love our neighbor as Jesus has loved us. The Bible Scholars of Jesus’ day didn’t have a solution to this challenge, nor is there a set answer today. Perhaps our response should be to trust God’s Spirit working within us and our community. Can you do that?**

# **Mary's Birth & Our Rebirth**

**A reflection developed from a homily of St. Augustine**

**At last the longed-for feast day of the blessed and venerable Mary ever-virgin has come. Let the earth rejoice with exultation and let us rejoice with it. We have been illuminated by the birth of such a virgin; she is the flower of the field from which came forth a precious lily. This is because through Mary's child-bearing the injury inherited from our first parents is transformed and guilt is blotted out.**

**Mary symbolizes the remission of the sentence passed on Eve. Our first mother was told that she would bring forth her children in pain but Mary brought forth the Lord Jesus in joy. Eve mourned but Mary exulted. Mothers still give birth as did Eve, but they also rejoice in the birth of their children as Mary did. What is the difference? Eve carried weeping in her womb but Mary carried joy. It is the difference between Cain and Jesus. We can follow Jesus in our life, and love one another rather than commit murder. Eve gave birth to a sinner who made life worse and Mary brought forth the innocent one who showed our race the path to love and joy. The mother of the Lord brought salvation into the world.**

**Eve did us harm; Mary brought help. Eve brought forth death; Mary life. Eve wounded but Mary brought healing. Don't follow Eve but Mary. The disaster of Eve's sin was caused by disobedience. Obedience can take the place of disobedience and fidelity compensate for infidelity.**

**Mary sings a song showing the path of life. To repeat it is to walk with her in serving, so many may be born to proclaim Jesus as forerunners of salvation for those lost along the ways of Eve. Listen to how Mary sings. Pay careful attention to the way she leads us. She teaches us how to love so we may magnify the Lord and rejoice in God as our savior. We not only see these things but we live them, even as Mary did for her cousin Elizabeth. God has become our savior.**

**God looks upon us with love even as he did upon Mary. We are lowly in the sight of the world but will be exalted above the world in our Savior. All who see what is given us will declare us blessed. Listen to yourself; can you hear yourself singing Mary's song? He who is mighty wants to do great things through us, even as he has done a great thing through Mary. The world was collapsing under an ever increasing burden of sin but Mary's son took it upon himself and made an end of it. How can we rejoice? By following Mary as she goes with Jesus even to the cross and then to resurrection and the coming of the Spirit. How many will hear our singing the praises and the mighty works of God? How many will be drawn to faith and new life by God's grace working through us? How should we know? Let us rejoice that this opportunity is given us. We too can bring Christ to the world and with him salvation and life everlasting!**

# **Speaking the Language of Compassion**

**A reflection developed from a letter by St. Peter Claver**

Peter Claver was a Jesuit, raised and trained in Spain. He had all the presuppositions and prejudices of ordinary Spaniards. He asked to be sent to the missions and they found a ministry to the Africans who were being shipped into Spanish America as slaves. It was something he personally undertook in spite of the fact that other Jesuits thought what he was doing was crazy. He had no special gifts and was concerned only with slaves! He wasn't a doctor and had no gift of speaking the various languages of those brought off the slave ships. The languages he spoke with them were nevertheless understood clearly. He spoke compassion and personal concern for their suffering and well-being.

Many came from the ships sick, and all were more or less debilitated by the inhumane conditions, so his efforts to help and heal them were deeply appreciated. These were perhaps the first signs of compassion and care they had received since being captured and sold to Spanish slave traders. Peter Claver was not concerned only for their physical and psychological well-being, however. He cared even more for their spiritual life. He wanted more than anything to bring them to Christ. Like most contemporaries, he thought that those who did not accept baptism were lost but that God would save the the baptized, even if they knew next to nothing about Him or Jesus.

So once he had cared for them physically and renewed their hope by showing that someone still cared for them he found ways to preach to them, using whatever interpreters he could find. When he saw evidence that they understood something of what was being said to them, especially when they asked questions, "we went on to a more extensive instruction, namely about the One God, who rewards and punishes people each one according to his merits. We told them the mysteries of the Trinity, the incarnation and the passion and showed them a crucifix with blood flowing from Christ's wounds. We led them in reciting an act of contrition in their language." This was sufficient to baptize them.

Thousands responded by accepting baptism. Why was he successful? He taught of the one necessary thing, God's love for them. They understood the language of his compassion and concern. They could see what sort of God he presented to them in his own behavior. The lesson of his life is that one preaches best by who one is and by the concern one shows for those in need. In a quite unusual way, he was a minister of reconciliation to all that had happened to them, because it brought them to this love.

He brought God's love and respect to people treated as though they had no human dignity but were mere items of merchandise. He showed this is not God's way of seeing anyone and the indifference of many was not God's. The message still needs to be heard. We are God's messengers. As we know God through Jesus someone will know God through us. The only condition is that we live love and respect and care for others as Jesus did.

# **How to Turn Toward True Happiness**

**A reflection by Fr. Anthony de Mello**

**What is happiness? Very few people know and even fewer can tell others. The fact is that happiness can't be described any more than one could describe light to those who have been blind from birth. Take another example: Could you describe reality to someone who was living in a dream? If they could understand the trap they are in, then they could wake up and know reality. If we understand our false beliefs for what they are we will discard them. Only then do we first become able to come to know what happiness is, because we will have become able to experience it.**

**If people want happiness so badly why don't they attempt to understand the falsity of their beliefs? First, it never occurs to them that their beliefs are false. They see them as facts and as presenting reality as it is. Second, losing their belief would seem to them to be the loss of everything; they can't lose the only world they know, and so they are caught in desires, fears, social pressures, guilt, worries, and occasional flashes of relief that pass for pleasures. Think of someone who was afraid to let go of a nightmare because there had never been anything else.**

**Jesus says that if we want to attain happiness we have to be prepared to leave behind family, possessions, even our own "old" life. It isn't a matter of giving them up but of seeing them for the nightmares they are. How many families live a life that is really a nightmare?! But if those who live in this way recognize the truth, then what trapped them in the nightmare loses its hold on them.**

**Each of us has things or people we cling to. Spend some time seeing each of them for what it really is. It may be a nightmare. Father and mother, are they a nightmare? Spouse and children, brothers and sisters, are they a nightmare? Everything you cling to and think you can't be happy without—unless it's Jesus—is a nightmare. Once you realize that how much easier it will be to leave them and follow the Lord instead. When you have stopped clinging to them their loss can't any longer scare you or hurt you. Then you are at last free to experience that mysterious state that we can't describe and call abiding peace and happiness. That is what the Lord Jesus wants to give you. Let go and follow him.**