

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

A WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY BEGINS

SUN. THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Jan. 14 The Source of All Our Hopes

A reflection based on a commentary by Fr. Demetrius Dumm

MON. Memorial of SS. Maur & Placid, Disciples of Benedict
15 Answering the Call to Fullness of Life

A reflection based on the “Dialogues” of St. Pope Gregory the Great

TUES. Tuesday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

16 We Find Ourselves in God

A reflection taken from “God’s Work” by St. Hildegard of Bingen

WED. Memorial of St. Anthony the Great

17 Perseverance in Walking the Way of Jesus

A reflection extracted from St. Athanasius’ “Life of Anthony”

THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY BEGINS

THURS. A Day to Remember Our Dead

18 God’s Coming Means Eternal Life

A reflection from “The Eternal Year” by Fr. Karl Rahner

FRI. Friday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

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20 Mary, Teacher of Trust and Obedience

A reflection adapted from St. Irenaeus’ “Against Heresies”

THE SOURCE OF ALL OUR HOPE

A reflection adapted from a commentary by Fr. Demetrius Dumm

In John's version of the call of the first disciples, we read that Jesus had been pointed out to two of them by John; they then followed him, literally. "*When he turned and saw them following him, he asked: What are you looking for? They said, Rabbi, where are you staying?*" It would be a mistake to see this as simply an account of a friendly exchange between Jesus and the two disciples. The story implies that Jesus perceives in them a deep longing. He finds it in us too. It is characteristic of humans generally, if they allow themselves to get in touch with their actual condition. It is as if Jesus had said: "You two must be earthlings, for I see that you are searching for something!"

In response, the two call him "Rabbi", because they sense that if he knows their innermost yearning, he must also know where to find what they seek. He must be a teacher of this truth. So, they ask, "Where are you staying?" They are certainly not asking for his address. Their question means, "Where can we find you and learn from you about our true home?" Jesus says in reply, "Come and see!" Jesus doesn't give vague answers but offers an invitation to walk with him and learn what living in hope means.

What our journey, our life, means, in its pain and its joy, is the truth Jesus teaches. Most of all he teaches about its happy ending, our true homecoming. He teaches the ability to live in hope. That is what we learn from the Bible and its stories. It is a lesson not taught us anywhere else. Take worldly ideologies or philosophies and you can only find advice about making life as much a success as it can be here and now in our world. Such messages are about immediate fulfillment. Time is seen as one's enemy, most because we all are growing older and this relentlessly erodes opportunities for enjoyment and happiness; certainly, in our present situation this is so!

From the perspective we learn from the Bible, a promise dominates life and doesn't fade or become less as time passes. True fulfillment is reserved for "the end". The only real concern in our present life is to assure that we have chosen the right path to an end whose promise never fades. The thing is to stay on the path leading to our genuine homeland. This is not an easy path.

We have to put aside personal gratification for the good of others. It is the Jesus-path of loving care and self-sacrifice. The length of life is not a major concern because one step in the right direction is as good as a thousand. We are freed from excessive anxiety or angry frustration. Old age is not just meaningless and helpless waiting for death. It is the joyful expectation of looking forward eagerly to our arrival at our longed-for home. It may be that not all experience aging this way, but all can. That we fear we won't is only a proof that we need to be more and more converted from the infection of merely worldly hopes. Look to the bright hope of God's revelation as given to us in the Bible. In every tale this hope is glimpsed around the corner of daily incidents; it calls us to God and to share in God's life. It never ends. We meet Jesus today, and we recognize him as the source of all our hope.

ANSWERING THE CALL TO FULLNESS OF LIFE

A reflection based on the Dialogues of St. Pope Gregory the Great

Maur and Placid were given by their parents to Benedict so that he would raise them to like the monastic way of life, believing they would find it a life of fullness and joy. Their parents, in other words, thought the boys had no hope in the world for the kind of life that fulfills a person, but that being made a monk would give them such a hope. They were, literally, given to St. Benedict's monastery with the intention that their life should be "monastic".

This was the practice called "oblation". Most young people expected to continue in the life and professions of their parents. This was required by Roman Law at this time in history. If parents judged that this would not lead to a good life for a child they might give him or her to a monastery. It would be a way to give the child a better life. Benedict was seen as a father who could lead them to such a way of life.

The famous story of how Benedict sent Maur to save the younger Placid from drowning, when he fell into a lake near the monastery, shows what kind of life they learned. They came to forget themselves in helping one another. Maur so forgot himself in running to pull Placid out of the lake that he ended up walking on water without noticing what he was doing. This is presented as a lesson in the good of obedience, but notice that the obedience is directed to helping and caring for another. Maur's obedience shows that he was learning truly how to live the monastic way of life.

In writing up this story, St. Pope Gregory, who himself had been a monk, shows us a way of life that all Christians can live. Monks are presented as belonging to the Christian community as examples and lights showing others how to walk the way of Christ's love. Gregory's Dialogues are about the wonders that God does for those who love him and follow in the footsteps of the Only Begotten Son. We are told that Maur and Placid, in particular, went on to lead monastic communities and so share the grace and Good News and wisdom they had learned as disciples of Benedict. It is clear that we are to follow in the same footsteps, whether called us to monastic life or not.

The life stories of Maur and of Placid have happy endings, for them and for others. That, we are told, is the normal result of a monastic life lived fully and out of love for Jesus Christ. In other words, the result of giving them as Oblates to a monastery had led them to exactly the happiness their parents had in mind when they destined them for this life. If left to ourselves few of us have a clear idea of the direction we must take if we would find a good life, both for the present and forever. Each of the boys was born into a family of Christian faith and their parents had shared that faith with them. They saw that building an entire life on faith was the path to happiness now and forever. So, they arranged to set their sons' feet on this path by making them monks. It was a way of living Christ's love as completely as one may on this earth. These ideals, and hopes, are ours today and we are called to help one another find the path that leads to their fulfillment.

WE FIND OURSELVES IN GOD

A reflection extracted from the “Works of God” by St. Hildegard of Bingen

Everything God creates existed in God before the beginning of time. All things, visible and invisible, were in the pure and holy divinity from eternity. If trees grow near a pond, they look as though they were in the water because they are reflected in it. They appear there, however, just as they really are. So it is with God’s creatures. God said, “Let there be!” and all creature immediately took on the form they had had in God before being created. That should hold for us.

How could God exist without knowledge of all his works? After being created each exists as fulfilling the task that God eternally intended to share with it. Each knows, and ministers, and even understands, as God gives these capacities. Just as a single ray of light causes things to cast shadows so God’s fore-knowledge shadows forth the forms all creatures are to receive.

When we see the splendid light of the sun we are pointed toward the sun, as it were. In the same way, when we learn of the angels they point us toward God. All creatures are the praise of God embodied, though only as shadows of God’s fullness. The sun doesn’t exist without giving light. God’s creation only exists as praise of God. When God said, “Let there be light”, rational light arose. First the angels came to be—both those who chose to remain true to God as well as those that fell into outer darkness where there is no light. Some denied God was their true light and wanted to make someone like God, though that was impossible.

So, God called another light into existence and clothed it with the body that is our humanity and he then gave us the place and the task that the fallen angels deserted. We are to achieve in praise of God what those others refused to do. We show angels in a human form to show that serving God continually in the spirit is an angelic work now shared with us.

We, like good angels, must never forget we are works of God and spirits in the service of God. Our faces must ever be turned to our God, as we imply when we picture angels turned to the east where the sun comes from. We have life in God and by God’s gift and in turning to God we find holy living and so happiness as well. This is what it means to “live in the light”.

The angels are messengers of God to share with others what God has shared with them. Thus, we learn to stand in their place by giving constant praise to God, a praise we live out by sharing thereby with others the gifts God has given us. Can there be a better and more blessed way of life than this? This is the kind of life that God has given us. We have only to live it in order to enjoy it forever.

PERSEVERANCE IN WALKING THE WAY OF JESUS

A reflection taken from St. Athanasius' "Life of Anthony"

The devil, who hates and envies all who do good, couldn't bear to see a person as young as Anthony persevering in the way of Christ. First, he tried to make him desert the ascetic life by reminding him of his property, the need to care for his younger sister, and his kinship bonds. He also sought to awake in him love for money and honor and the myriad pleasures of eating and a comfortable life. Second, he caused him to imagine the austerity of his new way of life and the toil involved in acquiring virtue, pointing out that our bodies are weak and life can drag on for a long time. He raised up in Anthony's mind a great dust cloud of arguments designed to get him to abandon his purpose.

But the Enemy saw he was powerless in the face of Anthony's determination, constant prayers, and solid faith. He then put his trust in the weapons found near the belly button, which are his favorites in attacking young men. He caused Anthony to be bothered day and night by such thoughts, so that all who saw him could tell a struggle was going on within him. The devil would suggest impure thoughts but Anthony would clear them away with prayers. That only caused him to intensify his prayers and fasting. The devil even masqueraded as a woman by night, but Anthony filled his thoughts with Christ and reflected upon the nobility of the soul, and thus quenched the hot coals of temptation. The devil suggested thoughts of pleasure but this only angered Anthony and kept him thinking of hell's fire and pain. He came through all the temptations unscathed. Thus, all who fight in earnest can say: "Not I, but the grace of God with me" wins.

Gradually, Anthony became known, and many were attracted to follow his example. Solitary cells in the hills were filled with divine choirs, as it were. There were to be found the singing of psalms, the studying of Scriptures, fasting, praying, rejoicing in the hope of the life to come, and laboring in order to be able to give alms. All the monks persevered in love and mutual harmony. It was like seeing a land of piety and justice instead of the world. There one found neither wrongdoer nor sufferer of wrong, nor were there complaints or the threats by tax collectors. There was a multitude of ascetics, all with the goal of virtue.

When the time for Anthony's death drew near, he summoned his brethren and said: "I am going the way of my fathers, as the Scriptures call it, for I see myself called by the Lord. You are to be on your guard so as not to bring to nothing the asceticism you have practiced for so long. Make it your task to keep up your enthusiasm, as though you were always just beginning. Let Christ be your life's breath, and place your confidence in Christ. Live as if dying daily, being careful with yourself and remembering the counsels you have heard from me. And now, my children, Anthony is going and is with you no more.

GOD'S COMING MEANS ETERNAL LIFE

A reflection from "The Eternal Year" by Fr. Karl Rahner

There is a moment when we have to conquer the melancholy of time and say softly and sincerely what we believe in faith. We believe in the eternity of God who has entered into our time. Life that no longer knows death is already secretly growing here. It is already here, it is already in me as it was in those who went before me. This is so precisely because I, and they, have believed. For the cycle of birth and death to stand still in the true reality, all that is necessary is the act of believing. We patiently bear with time, with its hard and bitter demand that brings death in its wake.

Listen, my heart, God has already begun to celebrate in the world and in us. God has taken us and our world into his heart, softly and gently, so much so that we can miss the fact. God has planted divine life in us. This is precisely what is happening in you, my heart, and happened in those who have gone before you in faith. It is the grace of the gradually falling away of the fear of time and death. One who is more powerful than death has done a great thing. God is gathering together our earthly moments and our friends into himself.

No brighter joy could be expected by you, my heart. Yet God will say to me, as to those who have gone before me, "Enter into the joy of your Lord". Perhaps now you still feel too keenly the harsh press of the shackles of time, even though they have already begun to fall from your hands and feet. The only thing that must live in you is a humble, calm joy of faithful expectancy which does not imagine that the tangible things of earth are everything. Ours is a joy like that of a prisoner who is not yet released from his dungeon but whose freedom is guaranteed. Think of those who have already been freed and only wait to welcome us as well.

Is joy difficult? Are resignation and a kind of hidden despair really easier? Are you stubborn like a contrary child? Do you rightly recognize such feelings in your heart even though you run away from them? Only a heart that doesn't really want such feelings recoils and runs from them, under the impulse of an eternal life already growing within, is really ready for your coming. Are we perhaps afraid that we, or some loved one, haven't been chosen? Is the joy of God's coming growing in you so that it is overcoming that fear along with the coldness of death?

Do not ask. Do not doubt. You, my heart, have already chosen joy. That is the choice of faith. Haven't those you love, and have watched enter into God's coming through death, also made this choice? Let yourself enter more and more deeply into the joy that comes from the coming of our Great God. God made the past of your life and of the lives of those you have loved holy. Life's eternal boundless future is drawing us all together into a single everlasting Now. Into my heart comes the One who is Boundless Future and Unending Joy, the Lord himself. He came to redeem us and now he is ready to complete that deed of love. Open your arms to Love!

THE TASK OF LIVING UNITY IN CHRIST

Statements by Popes and Cardinals

Pope Adrian VI's instruction to the Diet of Nurnberg (1523)

God has permitted this persecution to be inflicted on His Church because of the sins of men, especially of priests and prelates of the Church. We know that for some years now there have been in this Holy See many abominations, abuses of spiritual matters, misuses of authority, and finally all has become decadent. It is no wonder that sickness has passed from the head to the members, from the pontiffs to lesser prelates. All ecclesiastics have deviated, each in his own way. Wherefore, in what touches on Our Office We promise you that we will use all means so that this Curia first of all, whence perhaps this evil has issued, shall be so reformed so that from here the health and reformation of all will proceed. This sickness is not a simple thing but complicated and multiple; its cure must proceed step by step.

Cardinal Reginald Pole at the Opening of the Council of Trent

Before the tribunal of God's mercy, we, the shepherds, should make ourselves responsible for all the evils now burdening the flock of Christ. The sins of all we should take upon ourselves, not in generosity but in justice; because the truth is that of these evils we are in great part the cause, and therefore we should implore the divine mercy through Jesus Christ.

Pope Paul VI at the Second Session of the Second Vatican Council

The council aims at complete and universal ecumenicity—that is at least what it desires, what it prays and prepares for. Today it does so in hope that tomorrow it may see the reality. This council, while calling and counting its own those sheep who belong to the fold of Christ in the fullest and truest sense, opens the doors and calls out too, in anxious expectation to the many sheep of Christ who are not within that unique fold. If we are in any way to blame for the separation, we humbly beg God's forgiveness and ask pardon too of our brethren who feel themselves to have been injured by us. For our part, we willingly forgive the injuries which the Catholic Church has suffered, and forget the grief enduring during the long series of dissensions and separations. May the Heavenly Father deign to hear our prayers and grant us true brotherly peace.

A Summing Up by Fr. Karl Adam

We do not know what is the divine plan of salvation. But we do know that we ourselves, though we cannot create any final unity in Christendom, must do everything possible to prepare the way for dynamic unity, a unity of hearts and minds. If there cannot immediately be unity of faith, let there at least be unity of love. And this love must and will drive us to work in common in public life and to make common cause in our social, cultural, economic and political duties and interests. Nothing but this unity in love can provide the prerequisite foundations for our future unity in faith. It is then not only a moral but also a religious duty. As faith leads to love, so does love to faith.

MARY, TEACHER OF TRUST & OBEDIENCE

A reflection adapted from St. Irenaeus' *Against Heresies*

In accordance with the design of the Heavenly Father, Mary the Virgin is found obedient; when God's word came to her she replied, "Behold, the slave of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word". (Lk.1:38) Contrast Mary with Eve, who had disregarded God's word. Both were virgins though both were married—since in the Law betrothal makes a woman the wife of the one to whom she is betrothed. So both were faced with a decision about doing what seemed contrary to God's word. Eve was moved to take it upon herself to decide that whatever she wanted was good, even though God had said it was bad. Mary was asked to allow God to make her pregnant, although the Law forbade her to let herself be made pregnant by any but Joseph.

Mary chose to obey what she personally was certain God willed her to do, even if that meant disobeying what she had been told by others was God's will. In doing this she brought life, while Eve, who obeyed herself rather than what she had been told was God's will, brought death. They did this not just for themselves but for the entire human race. Notice that neither consulted her husband before making her decision. Joseph decided that her disobedience to the prohibition of becoming pregnant by anyone but him dissolved the bond stating that human beings may not separate what God has joined. Recall that God joined both Eve and Adam and Mary and Joseph in marriage.

The difference was that Eve was deciding to disobey God while Mary was deciding to obey God while disobeying a human interpretation of God's law. Eve and Adam both knew her decision treated God as a deceiver and liar, while Joseph and Mary both knew that her decision treated God's promise of a savior as true and believed God does not deceive in what we are told to do. God had to speak to Joseph as God had spoken to Mary so Joseph would disregard Mary's pregnancy.

So, Mary, and Joseph as well, gave obedience to God and gave that priority over any other call to believe that what God had commanded was not right. Eve believed one other than God but Mary believed God over every other. What Eve did caused death, and what Mary did brought life, and to the entire human race. By her deed Mary became the cause of salvation, to herself and to our entire race. She teaches us always to believe God, and to trust God as we wrestle with the practical consequences of this obedience. Because she did trust God, Joseph was given the assurance he needed that what had happened in her was God's work directly.

Eve and Mary are presented in parallel because they illustrate situations we all face in dealing with inclinations to obey or disobey God, and to believe or refuse to believe that God always does only what is for our good. Mary's obedience teaches us to accept even what is wholly new and unheard of when we have good reason to believe it is God's will. Eve's fate teaches us never to disobey what we are sure is God's word just because that would seem to offer some sort of benefit to us. The consequences of distrust and disobedience can be an evil that no one can undo, while the consequence of trust and obedience can undo all such evils as well as bring unheard of good.