

THE THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

&

CONCLUSION OF THE WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

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SUN THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

JAN. 21 What Holds You Back from God?

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

Mon. Day of Prayer for Legal Protection of the Unborn

22 Making Room for Life and for Hope

A reflection taken from a text by Fr. Thomas Merton

Tues. Tuesday of the Third Week in Ordinary Time

23 What Makes Us One in Christ

A reflection taken from a text by St. Pope John XXIII

Wed. Memorial of St. Francis de Sales

24 Learning to Run the Way of God's Commands

A reflection taken from a letter by St. Francis de Sales

CONCLUSION OF THE OCTAVE OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Thurs. Feast of the Conversion of St. Paul

24 Living Christ's Choice of Us with All our Hearts

A reflection taken from a meditation by Henri Daniel-Rops

Fri. SS. Robert, Alberic & Stephen, Founders of Citeaux

25 The Founding of Citeaux

A reflection from the Exordium Magnum

Sat Memorial of Our Lady

26 The Wisdom Mary Teaches Us

A reflection taken from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

WHAT HOLDS YOU BACK FROM GOD?

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

“Whoever is from God hears the words of God” and I find great consolation in these words, because they remind us that we have been chosen. But then I remember the statement that “everyone who is born of God doesn’t sin”, and I know we are all sinners. We have heard the Lord’s call to repentance and yet we cannot be certain that we will remain faithful to the end. We have no certitude but can have a confident hope. Think of St. Paul’s words telling us that those whom God has foreknown have also been predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus. We find our hope in the process of being gradually conformed to Christ.

God’s word is living and active, and it is clearly opposed to those vices that enslave people. We must not minimize or deceive ourselves about our sins and vices. O Lord, when shall I be drunk on the riches of your house? When shall I drink from the torrent of your delight? Everything now is given only in part so when shall overwhelming fullness come? When will we be set free from this slavery? Perhaps when we have learned to fulfill the Ten Commandments and are filled with the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. When will that be? When the hindrances that weigh us down are removed.

We are weighed down by our concern for sleep, food, clothes and all the things by which we care for our bodily self. We are hindered by unseriousness, suspicion, impatience and envy, as well as what weighs down our hearts and spirits as we labor to care for ourselves inwardly. We groan under the burden of the search for prosperity, of our fear of adversity and things going wrong. We are even more hindered by ignorance, too often having no idea of how we should act or deal with the circumstances in which we find ourselves. And then there is Satan, who always seeks to devour us like a hungry lion. On top of these there are false Christians and false brothers and sisters in faith. Inwardly we are urged to do what God does not want, and outwardly we must cope with bad example, rude words, evil opinions, flattery or calumny and so on and on.

Yet we find support and strength against all these obstacles in the Holy Spirit. All those hindrances get in the way of obedience to the commandments, yet the Spirit’s strength is greater and overcomes all opposition. You are ready to hear and obey the words of the Lord—isn’t that true? This is from the Spirit. Look at all the ways in which the Spirit brings you helps and aids you to overcome all hindrances! Rejoice in the Lord and let this take away the sadness that flows from our burdens. Look forward to the day when you will begin to sing the everlasting Hallelujah! Even as you labor let that sound fill your heart. Let our strength be our joy in the Lord.

MAKING ROOM FOR LIFE AND FOR HOPE

A reflection taken from a text by Fr. Thomas Merton

We read in the Gospels that when it came time for Christ to be born there was no room for him in the Inn. The fullness of time had come and it proved to be a time of decision. Will it be for us a time of mercy and love or a time of rejection and of no more room? God's primordial blessing, "increase and multiply" has become a terror. We are numbered in the billions and we have no more room. Do you have room in your life for a new life? Do you have room to care for nature? Do you have room for quiet and solitude? Do you have room for thought and for attention to your state of heart and soul and room for awareness of the results of a decision that there is no more room?

Perhaps the greatest tragedy is that there is no room for God. The time when there is no more room is the time of ending. The time of the end is that of demons who occupy hearts pretending to be gods and bringing it about that people find no room in themselves for themselves. There is no space for rest in our hearts, not because they are filled, but because in them there is a void. There is no more room for the longing to go on living and too many wish they did not exist. Why is this? Because life itself has not been chosen and so can't be accepted when it would come to birth. We have room for armies and missiles and new weapons and concentration camps for refugees, and race riots and murders and all sorts of other crimes, but not for a new life.

Into this word, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for Christ, Christ has come uninvited. His place is with those who don't belong, who are rejected because they are weak and marginalized and denied the status of persons, and so are exterminated. Is this the time of the end? It is the time to end all those fantasies that tell us there is no more room. It is the time for the beginning of a New Creation. Isn't that what Christ's coming means? But will we believe this? That is a decision we face now and every day.

Christmas didn't come because a great mass of people had done something very good. It came as a miracle. A child comes when the time of gestation has been fulfilled and comes as a gift of our God. Have you waited for years to be freed from some burden, and then a solution came and was wholly unexpected and not what you had imagined? Hasn't that happened to you? And so it shall be with our yearnings for the redemption of humanity and for a new shining forth of the word and world of God when we think we have failed and are discouraged. We must pray in trust for "the time will be fulfilled". We must look to our Savior, for whom there was no room in the Inn, but who has enlarged everything so that there is room for endless life. God will do his part and we must do the part God has allotted us. We must live in hope, and by love for God's gift of life that is to be shared.

WHAT MAKES US ONE IN CHRIST

A reflection taken from a meditation by St. Pope John XXIII

“That they may all be one, even as you, Heavenly Father, are one in me and I am one in you, may they be one in us so that the world will believe that you have sent me.” (Jn.17:21) This is a prayer for the culmination of the miracle of love which began at Bethlehem and of which the faith of shepherds and Magi came as a first fruit. The full harvest will be the salvation of all. Seeking this will bring them to their union in faith and in love. We pray it will be realized in the visible Church of Christ, its center and its foundation.

“That they may be one!” is the divine Redeemer’s purpose. We must do our best to further it. This is a serious responsibility and it has been entrusted to every person’s conscience. On the last day, the day of our individual and of the universal judgement, every person will be asked, not about success, but about praying, laboring, suffering for this unity and its restoration. Did you impose upon yourself a wise and prudent discipline that was both patient and farseeing, and did you give full scope to all the impulses to love, and love directed to this oneness? That is what we will be asked.

The prayer for oneness is a prayer from Christ’s heart. It has to persuade each of us to renew and intensify our efforts so that all believers may continue faithfully to love. You recall that the Church’s unity is considered its distinguishing mark. In the vast and varied field of Christian denominations, and even beyond that field, there is being formed that unity so ardently desired by all honest and generous hearts. Where is my heart? What am I doing? How ardent is my prayer? To seek unity means learning to love and pray.

O Eternal Word of the Father, Son of God and son of Mary, renew once more in the secret depths of human hearts the miracle of your birth! Re-clothe with immortality the children you have redeemed and thus make them become aflame with charity. Gather together, in that unity which is your Mystical Body and the Communion of Saints, all who look forward to your coming. Bring us, and bring through us, real joy, sure peace, and genuine fraternity for all persons and all Peoples. Amen. Amen.

LEARNING TO RUN IN THE WAY OF GOD'S COMMANDS

A reflection taken from a letter by St. Francis de Sales

If you ask how to set about becoming devout and having peace of heart I can only answer by reminding you that the virtue of being devout is an inclination of the heart that makes one ready to do whatever we believe to be pleasing to God. Devotion is an opening of the heart to God. Psalm 108 proclaims "I have run in the way of your commandments when you enlarged my heart". Thus, St. Benedict could promise devout monks that their hearts would be so enlarged that they would run, not walk, in the way provided us by the commandments. Many good people walk in God's ways but the devout run and the really devout run quickly.

If you want to be genuinely devout first obey God's commandments as they apply to all faithful Christians. Over and above this you should be very careful about the duties that pertain to your particular state in life. Bishops, for instance, are commanded to visit the people of their flock. If I spent my whole week in prayer and fasting while neglecting my people I would be lost. These two kinds of observance are the foundation of all devotion. But the virtue of devotion demands you do them promptly and willingly. So let's consider promptness.

It is God's will we seek to fulfill. We are in the world for no other purpose and so we should hasten to do this. If we find it difficult we can say in our hearts, "Lord, I am yours and I give you my heart!" How can we say this unless we are prepared to make our will conform with God's? Next, we should remember that God's commands are gracious and gentle and pleasant. That is true especially for the ones that pertain to your state in life. Why do they seem hard? It is because you actually want something else. We want to serve God, but in our own way. But God says that even sacrifice is less important than obedience.

God commands us to serve souls and seek their good. Perhaps you want to give yourself to contemplation. That is very good but not if contemplation interferes with obeying God. We have to begin by finding out what God wants and how God intends for us to serve. We must not try to serve as we want but as God wants. God gave Israel manna in the desert but they didn't want it. They wanted garlic and onions like they had in Egypt. As we come to have less self-will we find it easier to obey God's.

We must remember that every state in life is in some way irksome. People are always wanting to change places with someone else who seems to have a better life. We have to admit to a certain innate disposition to rebel against constraint. But no matter what we do, we won't find peace in it until we are wholly resigned. As long as a person does God's will, the matter of what has to be done or how is to be done is unimportant. We want to have no preference with regard to what God's will requires.

But this is not all. I need to do God's will cheerfully. We have to school ourselves to the things we do so we do them well. To enjoy doing God's will we only have to do it as well as we possibly can—then we will find it a pleasure and a joy. Our Lord knows how he is bringing us to union with him. The thing is to trust him and stay where he put us.

LIVING CHRIST'S CHOICE OF US WITH ALL OUR HEARTS

A reflection taken from a meditation by Henri Daniel-Rops

What had Paul done to the Christians in Jerusalem? But it wasn't enough. He had to track them down even outside Jerusalem and Palestine. Suddenly a light shone round him and he fell to the ground. He heard a voice: "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" Stammering he replied: "Who are you, Lord?" He heard: "I am Jesus!" All he could do was ask what was expected of him. "Get up, go into Damascus, and you will be told what you are to do. I have appeared to you to appoint you my witness."

This was a prodigious event. Without it the whole future of Christianity would have probably been changed. It impressed the imagination of Saul's age, as much as it astounds ours. The Book of Acts narrates it three times, the last two by the lips of Paul himself. The three narratives are identical, except for details about who fell to the ground and whether Paul's companions saw the light or heard the voice. The authenticity of the event is not disputed, and if further confirmation were needed there are references in several of Paul's Letters.

On the road to Damascus and in the mid-day sun Paul found himself face to face with Jesus and heard himself called by name. Thus, was accomplished what is ordinarily called the "conversion of St. Paul". As Paul attested all his life, though he still felt himself permeated by his Jewish convictions, he was caught up in an overwhelming event which changed him completely, at a single stroke. His transformation was radical and complete. What he had hated one day he adored the next. The cause he had fought so violently, he was to serve with the same violence. In a single second on a desert road God conquered his adversary and bound him forever in love.

The person whom the Lord struck down upon the road was conquered but in this defeat his heart's most profound desires had been fulfilled. How can we regard him without emotion, and, we must admit, without a sort of envy? Saul of Tarsus, more sinful than we ourselves, the executioner whose hands were stained with the blood of the faithful, had this inconceivable fortune of meeting Christ personally. Why? Why was this one person singled out? We find ourselves in the midst of the Pauline mystery of grace, where, in the secret design of Providence, all is obscure and yet all leads to one goal, which is the decisive Light.

It is toward this goal, towards this Light, that Saul will henceforward move. The Christ who conquered him will parade him on the highways of the world, as though a captive and slave. As for Saul, he will find the hours of his life always too few to witness adequately his love for the One who had loved him enough to strike him to the heart. And we are offered the same stupendous opportunity, and right now. Christ has called us by name. We can, by God's grace, respond as Paul did.

THE FOUNDING OF CITEAUX

A reflection from the Exordium Magnum

” Hugh, archbishop of Lyon and legate of the Apostolic See, to Robert, abbot of Molesme, and to the brothers who desire with him to serve God according to the Rule of St. Benedict. Be it know to all who rejoice in the advance of holy Mother Church, that you and some of our sons, brothers of the monastery of Molesme, who stood in our presence at Lyon, want to observe more strictly and perfectly the Rule of St. Benedict, which you have professed and which is kept somewhat tepidly and negligently in that monastery. Because many obstacles prevent you from doing this at the aforesaid place, we give you leave to go to another location which the bounty of God will show you, and there serve the Lord more wholesomely and in greater quiet. We do this for the salvation of both parties, both those who go and those who remain. At that time, we advised you who were present—Abbot Robert, with your brothers Alberic, Odo, Stephen, John, Letald and Peter—and any others whom you decide to ally to yourselves in accordance with the Rule, and by your common consent carry out those holy proposals. And we have commanded that you persevere in this, and by Apostolic authority we confirm this in perpetuity by the impression of our seal.”

Just as in the beginnings of grace, when Christ Our Lord and Savior was born, the world, while it knew him not, received a pledge of new redemption, of ancient reconciliation, and of eternal happiness, so too, in these last days, when charity is cold and iniquity everywhere abounds, the almighty and merciful Lord planted the seed of that same grace in the wilderness of Citeaux. Watered by the rain of the Holy Spirit, it gathered an incredibly plentiful harvest of spiritual riches, growing and developing into a great tree so surpassingly beautiful and fruitful that people of various nations, tribes, and tongues delighted to rest in its shade and satisfy themselves with its fruits. Yet although this fruit makes bitter the stomach of carnal desire by the work of repentance, it is as sweet as honey in the mouth of the developing conscience. Moreover, the Lord archbishop, legate of the apostolic see, acknowledged its solid foundation by his blessing, advice, and authority. Taking note of the poverty of the servants of God, moreover, and the fact that, in the barren place they were living in, they were able neither to subsist nor to construct a building unless they had the support of some powerful person, he wrote to the illustrious prince Odo, then Duke of Burgundy, asking and urging him to support the poor men of Christ who were so zealous for the Rule and monastic way of life, and to grant them his protection and come to their help with what they needed, as becomes the generosity of a prince. To his request and advice Lord Odo agreed, and was delighted by the fervor and devotion of the brothers. At his own cost he completely finished the wooden monastery they had begun in their poverty, procured for them everything they needed and supported them abundantly with lands and livestock.

THE WISDOM MARY TEACHES US

A reflection taken from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Mary, as mother, from the first knew her son according to the form of flesh in which she gave him birth. But this is far from knowing that form in which the Heavenly Father generated Him. In the first he was seen for a short time and in the other he is eternal and the splendor of eternal glory. Between the form of the flesh and the form of the Word, another form can be distinguished in Christ. It is spiritual in its nature yet shows itself clearly in the flesh. It is the form of the life Christ lived in order to convey his message to those who would believe. When Christ is formed in us according to this third form we are made capable of seeing both the form he took upon himself in his own person but the form which he will have formed in us. It is this form which Mary, our mother, wishes to see in us! That is, in part, why we describe her using words that Scripture speaks of Wisdom: "I am the mother of fair love, of fear, of knowledge, and of holy hope."

Behold, what a wonderful triumph God works in Christ, a new strength converts itself into love and by beauty draws the whole world, and not because it has seen his face itself but because it has heard so much that is loveable about his meekness, truth and justice. To know Christ, now and in this way, is to do loving service for Christians. It is the way Mary loves and serves Him. She seems to have understood this. Wishing to introduce the Beloved of her womb, the Beloved of her desires, into the affections of all her children, she describes him not according to the flesh but according to the spirit. It is as though she too were saying the words, "Even if I knew Christ according to the flesh, now I know him so no longer".

Mary longs to see her Only-Begotten formed in all her sons by adoption. Although they have been brought to birth by the word of truth, nevertheless she brings them forth every day by desire and loyal care until they reach the full stature of the perfect human, the maturity of her Son. She brought him forth once and for all. Therefore, she says to us: "I am the mother of fair love, of fear, of knowledge and of holy hope."

Her son is her beloved. My beloved is fair love in himself and is fear, hope and knowledge in whom we hope and who brings all these things about in us. As these realities grow in us they bring us strength, like that of the limbs of our bodies, and they bring to maturity in us Christ Jesus himself. When that happens, Christ will have been perfectly formed in each of us. Then his truth will have been made manifest in you, if you have acknowledged the truth which He himself is, and having acknowledged it you will have glorified it in reverent fear as well as in hope. And lest this hope be in vain charity too will have been poured into your heart.

We have been shown that fear is born of knowledge, that hope comes to sweeten this fear lest it fall into despair, and that love bears hope company lest it be in vain. In inverse order, love brings forth chaste fear and fear with love enlightens knowledge. The more truly God is acknowledged by a heart which has been enlightened the more trustingly that heart hopes in Him. Now one who rests in such hope lives a life that is holy. It draws all to its own likeness, the likeness of our love and Lord, Jesus Christ.