

THE FOURTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

- Sun. **The Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time**
Feb.3 **NEVER FORGET YOUR CALL**
 A reflection by St. Cyril of Alexandria
- Mon. **Monday of the 4th Week in Ordinary Time**
4 **UNEXPECTING PEOPLE ASKED THE UNEXPECTED**
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- Tues. **Memorial of St. Agatha**
5 **GOD HAS CHOSEN YOU!**
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- Wed. **MONASTIC DESERT/PRAYER DAY**
6 **Memorial of St. Paul Miki & Companions**
 SHARING IN CHRIST'S VICTORY BY HOPE
 A reflection based on a letter by St. Paul Miki
- Thurs. **Thursday of the 4th Week in Ordinary Time**
7 **WHAT WE ARE TO BELIEVE ABOUT OURSELVES**
 A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Bernard
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8 **RENUNCIATION IN ORDER TO FOLLOW CHRIST**
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NEVER FORGET YOUR CALL

A reflection by St. Cyril of Alexandria

God, our Heavenly Father, seeks to win over the whole world to a right worship and a right life. The goal is to bring all to himself and so to raise everything to a higher condition. God seeks to renew the face of the earth. With this in mind, the Lord of the universe took upon himself the form of a slave in order to bring good news to the poor. He tells us explicitly that this is why he came.

What did Our Lord mean when he said he had come for the “poor”? We can understand this as referring to all who lack spiritual blessings. As Scripture says, these people live in a world without hope because lacking the True God. These people are found in Israel and among the Gentiles. But all who have been enriched by faith in Christ have been gifted with a divine and heavenly treasure. That is the saving proclamation that is the Gospel.

It is through this Gospel that so many have inherited blessings impossible for us to describe or to understand fully. They have become sharers in the Kingdom of Heaven and companions of God’s holy ones. *“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him.”* This promise is given us in Scripture.

Christ promises healing and release to the brokenhearted. Christ promises sight to the blind. Who is blind? Whoever worships a created reality is blind; all those who, in Scripture’s words, say to a piece of wood or a stone “you are my Father” and “you gave me life” are foolish. All who fail to recognize who the real and true God is are blind. They have minds that are empty of spiritual and divine light. But the Heavenly Father is offering them the light of true knowledge.

Once a person is called by faith that person can know God—better, that person is known by God. They had been in night and darkness and are now made children of light. The Day of God shines on them and the Sun of Righteousness has risen for them; the Morning Star has appeared in all its brilliance.

Christ came first to Israelites, proclaiming a “year acceptable to the Lord”; i.e., the day of Christ’s crucifixion came and made us fully acceptable to God. Though Christ we bear fruit. Listen to his words: *“All power has been given to me in heaven and on earth! Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”*. That is a task for each and all of us. What is its beginning and fulfillment?

“I tell you that unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains as it is, a single grain; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest.” That is why Christ says, *“when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw the whole world to myself”*. These facts explain why faith in Christ’s resurrection is so important for each of us. When he rose again Christ trampled underfoot all death’s power. There is no power that can effectively oppose the preaching of the Gospel. Do not be afraid of your own cross, or even death, so long as by it you proclaim Christ, and Christ risen! Christ is with you always. Never forget to share the Good News.

UNEXPECTED PEOPLE ASKED THE UNEXPECTED

A reflection from The Lord by Fr. Romano Guardini

What is supremely scandalous and off-putting? It is someone without special qualifications calling upon us to do unexpected, unfamiliar things. When Jesus preached in Nazareth all were astounded at his gracious words and at his claims to be sent by God with real news about God's coming to them. But they were scandalized that a person they had known all their lives and worked with and talked with and taken for granted should claim to be God's messenger. Didn't they know all his family members? Were they like everyone else? How could this fellow claim to be anointed by God to lead them to salvation?

Jesus' most powerful adversary is his ordinariness. Scandal at this flared up in Nazareth, as it had in another way when John the Baptist sent disciples from his prison cell to ask Jesus if he were really the "one to come" after him. Jesus' reply was: Look at what I'm doing! But the problem was what he wasn't doing the expected, separating the wheat from the chaff with fire! Of course, Jesus' enemies were ready to use any excuse to discredit him: He's not living like an ascetic! He's always eating and drinking, and with bad people! He heals on the Sabbath! The real reason, behind all the others, is that he didn't do what was expected and was too ordinary to be a holy messenger of the All Holy God.

In sending Jesus, God forces out into the open what separates us from God. We doubt and we whisper and object to the unexpected. Well, if he's so special let's see some of those miracles he's supposedly done elsewhere! But he can't work wonders apart from faith and he isn't accepted in faith! Beware, he says to the people of Nazareth and us, what happened in Elijah's and Elisha's time—God worked wonders for Gentiles but not Jews precisely because they didn't believe but the Gentiles did. When he said this, people who had been heaping praises on his discourse burst out in paroxysms of rage.

They push Jesus out of the synagogue, drag him through the streets to the brow of the hill Nazareth is built on, and try to throw him over the edge. This is what it means to reject the Kingdom's inexpressible abundance. The cross stands waiting! Darkness has its hour. But then Jesus does do a wonder. He simply walks through the enraged crowd and goes his way. It is the same Jesus who threw all the authorized animal sellers and money-changers out of the Temple. He does something even more impossible to a hysterical mob, infuriated by hatred at his insistence they have to change. It's Jesus that's the problem!

Jesus doesn't react to violence with violence. Soundlessly, without effort, divine freedom walks right through the sound and fury of the mob; everything depends on God's decision about the hour to reveal Jesus. The experience must have stunned them! Did they learn from it? When God does the unexpected, using the "wrong people" to ask what is wholly unexpected, does that open your mind, or your heart, to receive what God wants to give you, even when you aren't ready and don't want it right now? What if it comes from someone without official standing or authority? Can you recognize Jesus in such a guise?

GOD HAS CHOSEN YOU!

A reflection by St. Pope John XXIII

What does the world know about the mysterious forces that stir the depths of a person, especially through the example of another? In the last century there has been a reaction against certain traditional ways of recounting the lives of saints by making it seem that God grabs them by the hair and drags them out of ordinary life into one that's out of this world. Often, we've overreacted and thought only of the human element in a saint. Does that mean we've thereby neglected the working of grace?

What is a saint—when one has stripped away all that makes them look like figures out of a novel? To deny oneself at times, to suppress within oneself things that the world takes to be admirable and to guard in one's heart a pure love for God—one far surpassing what one gives to things of the ordinary world—like sacrificing oneself for others, this sort of thing is holiness in reality. One trusts in God even more than in other people, one lives humbly in loving God and others, and one tries to imitate Jesus—all this is what a saint does.

What we need is a profound Christian delicacy of feeling. We need to let this permeate all that we do and read. We need to spread “the aroma of Christ” by the way we grasp things. We often give in to extremes—e.g., get unnecessarily aggressive and controversial, and we exaggerate without need. This can corrupt public and private discourse. It isn't found only in newspapers or in the media or in politics but even in religion and in the Church.

Our goal isn't to manipulate people but to lead them to a truly and thoroughly Christian way of life—like that of the “saints”. A saint is God's equivalent of a masterpiece in natural beauty or in music or pictorial art. A saint is a call to sanctity, and that is a call to service and love.

Though we know almost nothing of the human St. Agatha, we do know that she didn't live or act alone and that she received the grace to persevere in faith and love though the help of her mother and other Christians. Perhaps God would call us on this day to make ourselves more available to help others walk the path that leads to a sanctity that embodies another masterpiece of divine grace. Do you think that is impossible? Those who help Agatha didn't realize what a wonderful creation God was forming in and through her life of self-forgetfulness and charity. Why should it be more difficult for God to do this with our help, than it was for God to do it with the help of those who surrounded Agatha?

We are sinners and God has forgiven us. God never stops being willing to forgive. When we let ourselves experience this, we taste something of the joy God offers all in Christ. How many gifts God has showered on us! We have the love of God and of one another, we have a longing that all be well for and with others, we forgive those who offend us, we try to be generous to all, we pray for people, then we live in faith and hope and charity and so on and on. God even gives us what might be called gifts of glory—those of success in efforts to share faith and love. Happy those whose God is the Lord! How can we not rejoice in all these gifts? Sharing this joy is one of the best ways to help others find God and grow in holiness. Let God make a masterpiece out of you today!

SHARING IN CHRIST'S VICTORY BY HOPE

A reflection developed from a letter by St. Paul Miki

"I want to tell you about the trials through which I am passing in order to inflame you with love for God and to ask you to join with me in praising God—God's mercy is everlasting! In the midst of things which terrify many I am filled with joy because I am not alone—Christ is with me."

Paul Miki saw Christ's death and resurrection as a promise and so a reason to hope in God. Death would lead to life! It would be a life such as none had ever known before. He heard St. Paul's declaration that whoever shares in Christ's death will share in his resurrection, and he believed it and put his trust and hope in that promise. His letter shares this faith and hope.

"Each day emperors, mandarins and those of their retinues blaspheme the holy name of God and of Jesus. But our Savior is enthroned above the Cherubim and Seraphim. And your power, my God, is shown in our weakness. Grant that I may not grow too weak to bear you witness but let me hold fast in your strength.

"God has chosen what is weak in the world to confound those who, in the world's eyes, are strong. God chose what is despised and low to confound those who see themselves as noble. God has confounded the wise of the world by the faith of those who seem to know nothing". These truths are used as a kind of profession of faith ending with the words: "I anchor myself in God and this becomes a living hope in my heart."

He saw himself as being tested. He knew that a like test might come to his fellow Christians. "So run that you may attain the crown. Put on the armor that is faith. Know that it is better to enter life without an eye or as a cripple than to be cast away with your body whole." He sees all of us as in a race which all must win. The prize will be the ability to sing God's praises forever.

During their imprisonment, the martyrs lived a very unpleasant life but otherwise their challenges were very like those all Christians face. One must keep hope in God strong and must keep one's eyes fixed on Jesus. The Gospels show us Jesus doing every sort of work, including the thirty years spent in Nazareth doing ordinary work to support Mary and himself. There is almost nothing asked of us which was not asked of Jesus. He lived all his life as a gift of self to the God the Heavenly Father. He asks us to do it too. This applies whether people physically abuse or mistreat us or whether our life seems relatively pleasant.

Perhaps it is more difficult to face challenges which are not obviously heroic. We are called to a kind of daily witness that can be as difficult as the witness of a martyr. We need to live it, however, in the same spirit of hope and trust that kept the martyrs faithful. We are to love even those who do not love us by living Jesus' new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you.

WHAT WE ARE TO BELIEVE ABOUT OURSELVES

A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Bernard

It is better, that for the sake of all, individuals should be blackened by living in sinful flesh than the whole human race should be lost. The splendor and image of the divine nature are obscured beneath the nature of a slave living an enslaved life. Let the radiance of eternal truth and life purify our flesh darkened by sin. Indeed, the fairest of all human beings allowed himself to be darkened by that flesh so that all might be enlightened. He let himself be defiled on the cross, grow pale in death, have no beauty, yet gained the Church as a beautiful bride without spot or wrinkle.

I recognize the image and likeness of our sin-blackened being in our tunics of skin, those given our first parents after their sin. I know, Lord, that you are gentle, meek and humble of heart, pleasing in every way, and anointed with the oil of gladness above even kings. How is it, then, that you can look so unkempt and rough? Whose is that wrinkled and scared face I see in my mirror? It is mine. All these things are mine, for I am made like Esau the self-preoccupied sinner. I admit all the damage I have done to myself in living the life of a sinner. And yet God, my Savior, has taken all my sin upon himself and cleansed me.

It is in Mary that we see what the image and likeness of God, cleansed by the grace of Christ, can look like. As she clothed her son in human flesh and flesh that was even the likeness of sin, so she has allowed God to enter into all this and transform it. Jesus took on my likeness, and yours, because it is for us that the lost blessing is being reclaimed and restored. He heard the words, *“Ask of me and I will give you the nations that are your heritage, and the ends of the earth that are our possession”*. My heritage? My possession? And how can you give this to your only Son when it is his already? What does it mean that you ask him to ask for it? Oh, but it is for us that he asks, the one who clothed himself in our nature in order to plead our cause! *“He bore the chastisement that brings us peace”*. That is what Isaiah the prophet says. *“The Lord has laid on him the guilt of us all”*. But listen to what St. Paul adds: *“He had to be made like his brothers in every way so that he might be merciful.”* This is why, in the tale of Isaac’s blessing of Jacob we hear the words, *“the voice is Jacob’s voice but the hands are the hands of Esau”*.

What we hear from Christ’s lips and see in Him, is ours! The words the Lord speaks are spirit and life. What we see when we look upon ourselves is mortal and subject to death. But there is more to be seen than we see. One thing is seen but another is believed. Our senses tell us what we look like as sinful persons but our faith assures us that we are bright and beautiful. How can this be? It is because we have clothed ourselves in Christ—more exactly, we have been clothed by God through the gift of faith. We are transformed in Christ.

God called us to faith. He has called us to a vocation that is nothing more or less than putting on Christ. As we do this, we see ourselves anew. We see the beauty that God created and recreated in us, not the ugliness of sin. Let your eyes be opened. See yourself as God recreates you from day to day. Could any sight be more glorious? How much we have for which to give God thanks!

RENUNCIATION IN ORDER TO FOLLOW CHRIST

A reflection from The Ladder of Ascent by St. John Climacus

There is such a thing as spiritual exile, an irrevocable renunciation of everything that hinders one from attaining holiness. Such exile is a discipline of the heart, unheralded wisdom and unpublicized understanding. It is a meditation, a striving to be humble, a wish for poverty and a longing for what is divine. It is an outpouring of love, a denial of vainglory and a depth of silence.

For those who would follow the Lord, this manner of thinking is very strong at the beginning, and some are greatly disturbed by it. It is like having a kind of holy fire within you. I am talking about separation from people and things you love. It is done for the sake of simplicity and self-denial, such as drives on those who love what is truly good. Yet, for all that it is praiseworthy, it demands discretion. Not every kind of exile is good, especially if taken to extremes.

An exile is a kind of fugitive. Exile is a separation from everything so that one may cling totally to God. It is a chosen pathway that includes much grief. An exile is running from all relationships that don't lead to God.

Detachment is good and its mother is exile. Someone withdrawing from the world for the sake of the Lord is no longer attached to possessions. If you have left the world, then don't begin to reach out for what you have left. If you do, your passions will come back. Suppose that for some time we manage to live away from relatives. One practices piety, compunction, self-control; and then empty thoughts come seeking to turn one back to the places and people one knew. They tell us what a lesson and example and a help we will be to those who witnessed our former wicked deeds. But it is better to imitate Lot than his wife. Run from Egypt; run and don't turn back.

Leaving home, beginners may be full of innocence. Their souls are clean, but soon they want very much to go back. They want to be like Moses, who saw God and returned to save others. But he too ran into many dangers in Egypt and was caught up in the darkness of the world there. There is no greater example of renunciation than that of the great person who heard the command, "Leave your country and our family and the house of your father".

In obedience Abraham went to a foreign country where the language was different. And so it is that anyone following this model of renunciation is glorified primarily by the Lord. One has to be satisfied with this. Yet, even though the glory is given by God, it is still good to deflect it with the protective shield of humility. When demons or men lavish praise on us for our exile, as if it were a great achievement, let us remind ourselves at once of Him who came down from heaven for our benefit, and exiled himself to earth. Nothing we could ever do would match that.

LEARNING PURIFICATION FROM BLESSED MARY

A reflection extracted from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

We are gathered to receive the bread that is God's word. *"Heaven and earth will pass away but the word of the Lord shall endure for all eternity."* Indeed, *"this is the bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world"*. We have all received this bread and the Lord tells us to portion it out to those who still do not have what they need to satisfy their hunger.

The bread of our pilgrimage on this earth is the mystery of Christ's incarnation. We seek the truth of this teaching as well as the example of his humility, as well as that of his faithful ones. And so, may we hasten toward the full fellowship with Christ and his holy ones to which God calls us. Today we must think of the purifications we need. The Lord directs us to Blessed Mary as a guide. Let's recall her going to the Temple after Jesus' birth in order to be purified, as the Law of Moses required.

When we read that a woman must be purified let's think of the word 'woman' as standing for our human nature. By sins and vices, we have made ourselves unclean and placed ourselves in dire need of purification. St. Paul tells us that *"Christ was given up to death for our misdeeds and rose for our justification"*. Until we believed Christ rose, we were unclean. But there are many kinds of uncleanness. One springs from nature, another from the will and yet another from weakness. The first is cleansed by baptism, the second by repentance.

When we wish to raise our hearts on high, and so attempt to enter the eternal Temple, there come to our mind thoughts of the evil deeds we have done and the empty things we have pursued. Until uprooted from the heart they drag it down. This requires fasting and inner toil. Only when this has been completed is one pure of heart and ready to "see God". All this is symbolized by the forty days a woman had to wait before being purified and thus being declare fit to enter God's temple and worship him there.

How did Blessed Mary enter the Temple? First, she entered with her eyes on Christ, with her heart set on Christ and with Christ in her arms. This last means she entered with the deeds of obedience to God which brought about the mystery of the Lord's incarnation. It was this obedience which cleansed her and showed the holiness she has received though God's grace and her response to it. We too need to come to God with Christ in our minds and hearts and hands.

Blessed Mary also brought Christ with her to the Temple to share with others—with Anna and with Simeon. She brought Christ to them not simply as hope but as fulfillment of all hopes. By such offerings we are cleansed too. With these offerings we ought to commend to God all our past actions with tears, and so carry the entire treasury of our deeds to our God in his Temple. Layup treasure for yourselves in heaven, commands the Lord. That is what we do when we do deeds of service and love for others and in the sight of others. Let us lift up all this, and all we are for God, and in this way, we will be found fit to live in God's Kingdom for ever.