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THE DIFFERENCE CHRISTIAN VALUES MAKE

A reflection from a homily of St. John Chrysostom

“Blessed are you who are poor, but woe to you who are rich.” Only a Christian can have a true sense of values. What’s more, only a Christian can have the joy that comes from true values! It is not only our values that are different but our joys and sorrows. Have you every watched a boxing match? Even if the winner is bruised and hurt, still the winner’s attention is not on pain but on the fact of being a winner. If all you could think of was the pain you would never have the least idea of the joy that fills a winner’s heart and mind. When people see what Christians suffer but know nothing of what they genuinely value, people have no idea of why Christians accept sufferings and deprivations with joy. In the eyes of those who don’t share Christian values, Christians are only suffering; they see the struggle to face danger but they can’t see what Christians are looking forward to—they can’t even imagine the rewards and sense of being victorious that fills a genuine Christian.

When Paul talked about possessing nothing and yet having everything what did he mean by “everything”? He was talking about good things, ones that are both earthly and heavenly, physical and spiritual. Entire communities looked upon Paul as a messenger from God and received him with joy and honor. Isn’t that an earthly gift? If people were ready to sacrifice themselves, even baring their necks to the sword of an executioner for the sake of what he had taught them, wasn’t this an earthly honor? Yet these were nothing in comparison to the spiritual wealth that truly made Paul rich.

The King of the universe, the Lord of angels, loved Paul so much that he shared his secrets with him in a vision. Didn’t he surpass everyone else in riches because this was given him? Can’t we say that he possessed all things? The same was true of Peter. If it had been otherwise demons wouldn’t have been subject to them and sickness and suffering wouldn’t have been banished by their mere presence! Shouldn’t we suffer for Christ’s sake and do it not merely with courage but even with joy?

If we have to go hungry can’t we be as glad as if we were enjoying a banquet? That’s what happens when you value what Christ values and so gain true values. We value unity with Christ more than anything else! If we are insulted, we can feel elated as though we were being showered with praise, because we value suffering with Christ. If we lose all we possess, we can consider ourselves gainers because we have Christ and that means we have all things. If we provide for the poor, we regard ourselves as receiving a great gift. When we give alms, we don’t think we are losing anything by gaining the great gift that is heaven. This is the way it is in regard to all the virtues we practice.

We don’t think of painful efforts or any negative thing but only of being with Christ and God in their life. Our struggles are for the Lord in two senses. We are struggling to let go of our old values and put on Christ’s and we are struggling to love all whom Christ loves. If we do both, we will be made able to rise above all struggle and live in the happiness of knowing we are doing and having exactly what we want. Nothing brings more happiness than this.

HOW CHRIST MAKES US FREE

A reflection from Beginning to Pray by Bishop Anthony Bloom

“Jesus came down with the Twelve and stopped at a piece of level ground where there was a large gathering of his disciples with a great crowd of people from all parts of Judea and Jerusalem and from the coastal regions of Tyre and Sidon. All had come to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. Fixing his eyes on the disciples he said: Blessed are you who are poor; yours is the Kingdom of God” (Lk.6:17ff).

We must remember that all we possess is a gift. The first beatitude is about poverty and only if we live according to this beatitude can we enter into the Kingdom of God. It has two aspects. First, there is the very clear fact that we possess nothing which we can keep—no matter whether we want to or not. This is the discovery that “I” am nothing and that I have nothing. I am totally, hopelessly and irremediably poor. We exist because we have been willed into existence. We have done nothing to make it happen; it wasn’t an act of our free will. We don’t possess even life in a way that makes it impossible for someone to take it away from us. All that we are and all that we possess is like this, passing. We have a body, but it will die. We have a mind, but if a little blood vessel in our brain bursts that mind is extinguished. We have a heart that is sensitive and yet a moment may come when someone in need stands before us and our heart is like a stone.

This illustrates the fact that we can possess nothing and are masters of nothing, even if it is in our possession. This might easily lead us to despair, but it can also lead us to the Kingdom of God and to rejoicing. Despair comes from remembering that nothing of what we are or have can be ours in such a way that it can’t be taken from us. Joy comes from the knowledge we possess all as gift.

This knowledge is the second aspect of the beatitude. We are rich because all that we possess is a sign of the love of God for us, and that all we are and have is a continuous gift of divine love. As long as we possess nothing of ourselves the divine love is manifested continuously and fully in and through us. It means that everything we regard as strictly our own is by that fact removed from the realm of love. What if everything were yours permanently, yet love was lost?!

Now we see why it is only those who give everything away and become aware of their true, total, irremediable spiritual poverty can possess the love of God as expressed in gifts. A theologian has said, “All the food of this world is divine love made edible”. I think that is true, but, more important, it is true that the moment we try to be rich on our own and try to keep something safe in our hands, we become losers. As long as we have nothing our hands are freed to receive, and to give away, and to leave anything behind. That makes us truly free! That locates us in the Kingdom, where are free to have nothing so that everything may be ours as a gift of love—both divine and human.

WHAT OUR DEPARTED CONTINUOUSLY DO

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

The dead are alive. In God they are more alive than we are. Their life expresses itself in prayer and praise. This is directed to God, but it is also done for our sake. These friends are enwrapped in God's love and that is only possible if they, like God, are love. The Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium*) reminds us that those God has chosen to be holy and entirely his now intercede for others. This is likened to Christ's intercession.

Christ is the sole mediator between God and the world, and those with God take part in that mediation. It is love. That means their love constantly helps us in our weakness because they intercede for us along with Christ. They are bound to him in virtue of God's election; this makes them holy. This is the total gift of self to God which they are always making, or perhaps still learning to make. That is what Christ is.

We are called to unite our prayer with those of the dead in the same adoration and praise and intercession that is Christ's. Insofar as we are one with them, we are one with Christ and so with God! But that is the purpose of our living. Let me speak about the power of example. This is given by our departed sisters and brothers and it is proportioned to the completeness of their union with Christ. It is by this union that God is in them. That means they can manifest to mankind the presence of God and God's face fully shown to us in Christ. They show us Christ, and Christ shows us God, and we can then live in a way that shows to all who know us the face of Christ and of God.

The Council says this finely, "*He himself speaks to us in his chosen ones and shows us the meaning and reality of the Kingdom*". Those in the Kingdom were, and are, signs of God's presence, and that of the Kingdom, among us. That means they are God's word, and help us to see more of what God's unique Word, Christ, means for the life of our race and its members. Each of our departed showed us something of what the living Word of God can mean by their daily life. This is a witness to the truth of the Gospel's Good News. For those who are now with God there are no more half-measures. They no longer have moments of uncertainty. They have now realized what God meant to say to us through them and as we pray with them, and even for them, we are better digesting that message and seeing how to make it real and true practically.

The Gospel tells us all this. It helps us live what may be called the culture of the Beatitudes. They are tools to form a common mentality in our race and to guide our acting and thinking as we try to show God's presence to others. We do what our departed have shown us how to do—and what they continue to do by reminding us of their lives as we remember them. To think of them is now to think of God and Jesus Christ. That is what we are called to do today in a special way. By the grace of Christ may this be true. What they now do continuously we can begin to do with them as we pray with them.

ABANDONMENT INTO GOD'S HANDS

A reflection from Abandonment to Divine Providence by Fr. J-P de Caussade

Offer a right sacrifice, the prophet says, and trust in the Lord! This indicates that the great and solid foundation of the spiritual life is giving ourselves to God. We make ourselves subject to God's good will in all things, inwardly as well as outwardly. Then we forget ourselves so thoroughly that we look upon ourselves as sold and handed over and claim no right over ourselves. God's will become, then, our joy and good and God's glory becomes our sole concern.

Once this foundation is in place, we only have to spend our lives rejoicing in the fact that God is God; we abandon ourselves so entirely to God that we are equally content no matter what happens and what the divine good will disposes for us. We no longer complain about the uses God's will makes of us.

To abandon oneself is the great duty that always has to be discharged. After we have faithfully done all the obligations that go with our state in life, then the perfection with which we abandon ourselves to God becomes the measure of our holiness. Holiness simply means free submission to the divine will with the help of grace. All that follows is the work of God in us and not the work of a human person. This is all God asks of us.

The key to everything is seeing through faith that everything which happens does so by Divine Providence. That means it truly comes from God. In consequence, we respond by surrendering ourselves to God through our dealing with each event as it comes. God has plans and God chooses in accordance with them, as an architect marks off and specifies how the material available are to be used to construct a building.

All we need to do is love God and God's commands wholly. We should love them just as they come to us, without wanting anything more or less! The fact that such and such a thing is sent to us, really offered to us for our acceptance, is not something we have to worry about. That is God's business. Our task is to trust that all God sends us is for our best good.

Let me repeat: The whole of spirituality is summed up in this maxim: Give yourself up wholly and entirely to God's will and command. That allows one to spend all one's time loving and obeying God! A constant self-surrender becomes a continuing love for God. What may trouble us at times are fears, changes of mind, worries or temptations to complain. The very fact we so want to be God's and to be saved gives rise to such anxiety. But if we truly surrender self, we let go of this too. God has taken our salvation into his own hands. We believe that God is infinitely wise. How could he make a mistake once he has chosen us for his own in Christ? We need only the grace of trust.

HOW A MONASTIC WAY IS THE WAY TO LIFE

A reflection from Letter 18 by St. Peter Damian

Who can properly describe the greatness of God's work? Both in a stand of grain and in a cluster of grapes God seems to be hiding, even while God reveals himself. Notice the leaf on a tree trembling in the wind, and perhaps about to fall. Now in fall the ground is strewn with fallen leaves, yet a leaf that hasn't fallen bears witness to the beauty of all trees when they were in leaf. Likewise, when we remember this why should we marvel when we so often see the monastic order of life decaying? Almighty God, cares for the leaves of his tree and holds some firm while letting others fall. God strengthens those he chooses in the monastic way, and others in another way. Let us rejoice in God's grace and choice.

I give boundless thanks to my Creator who wished me to have the office of an unworthy servant in a small but good Carthusian community. I only need to keep up with the pace of my brethren. I want, then, to relate briefly a few things about our life so it may be handed down in writing. Those who come after us will be the heirs of this way of life and it should not be lost, even if they fail to imitate it.

Ordinarily we fast four days a week. We consider those to be fasting who take bread with salt and water. It is customary for the brethren on all Sundays to have two warm meals, but on others only one. Concerning the recitation of psalms, it is customary that when two brethren live together in one cell, they recite two complete psalters daily, one for the living and the other for the dead. There are three lessons, one for each fifty psalms. We observe continual silence in the cells, just as in the chapel. All year round neither shoes nor stockings are worn in the cells. In regard to other monastic practices, whatever is done in monasteries of strict and regular observance we also do.

One practice exceeds all the rest in importance—love among the brethren. Unanimity of will, forged by the fire of mutual charity, so that each sees self as born to serve all and not to serve self. If one appears ill, all will at once inquire about his condition so that the sick person won't hesitate to give up his usual rigor, and so he will be promptly furnished all the necessities and so all may take joy in offering themselves as willing nurses. Likewise, if someone dies all fast for seven days for that person and takes the discipline seven times, each with a thousand blows, and then performs seven hundred prostrations, chants thirty psalters and offer Mass for the deceased.

Strive, then, to persevere in the good work you have begun by your way of life. Do not deviate from the rule of life you have established, or which has been given you as a member of a community. This is how we enter the narrow gate that leads to life. This we should seek to do each day that God gives us. God has given us today and we should rejoice and be glad in it, because he has shown us how to live it in his service and for his glory. Help one another do this. That is how we love one another in God and in imitation of Christ.

FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF PETER

A reflection from a homily by St. Pope John XXIII

The Apostolic Chair of St. Peter is a wonderful symbol of that unity of the great human family which God wishes to give us. The Church draws many Peoples into unity, or at least into its beginnings. From Jerusalem and Antioch and Rome, the light of Christ is seen to beat most fully upon this “Chair” of Peter. Light is reflected from the words addressed by Jesus to Peter in one of the most beautiful and touching passages in the New Testament. *“On this rock I will build my Church... I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven”* (Mt.16:18ff).

What is the meaning of the keys entrusted personally to Simon son of John, to “Peter”? Aren’t they a sign that the universal leadership of the earthly Church had been given into his hands? From Jerusalem to Antioch, and then to the heart of the Roman Empire, the way lay open to the Apostle through Christ’s command. Christ is to be preached throughout the world under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the Lord has entrusted the task of maintaining the unity of all in Christ to Peter. To him, the Lord entrusted his sheep and lambs, his flock: *“Feed my lambs, feed my sheep!”* (Jn.21: 15f).

Peter was to be the leader and shepherd of all, even of other shepherds. He was to lead the flock to Christ in the name of Christ himself. This primacy was to be claimed by all Peter’s successors, and acknowledged by the united care of souls on the part of his brother bishops all over the world. From this Chair bishops all over the world are for ever consecrated. It must remain One, Holy, Apostolic and Catholic!

From Christ to Peter and from Peter to every shepherd of the Christian flock, the power of the keys, bestowed from Heaven upon the person of the Roman Pontiff, is handed on. It comes through the bishops and the entire Christian community for the unification and sanctification of humankind as redeemed by Christ’s blood. Think now of Christ’s chose and reflect on his loving care for all.

St. Matthew tells us that one evening, after a tiring day, Jesus went alone to a hilltop to pray. The boat, with the disciples in it, was on the lake and was blown about by the winds. At night fall Jesus came upon the waves and called to the disciples: *“Take heart! It is I! Don’t be afraid!”* Peter responded: *“Lord, if it is you command me to come to you on the water.”* Jesus reply was, *“Come!”* Peter got out of the boat and tried to get nearer to the divine Master. But the violence of the wind alarmed him and he felt he was sinking. He cried out, *“Lord, save me!”* Jesus reached out and caught hold of him. *“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”*

When Jesus speaks to us his words are enough to save us and to give us victory over fear. This is a message for all of us. This is how the Church is led and how those who lead and help others are given strength for their task. We must all come to Jesus. Who but Peter, with all his doubts, can show us how to trust our Lord? That’s what those who follow Peter are charged to do. That is how one feeds the lambs and the sheep—the entire flock of God! Follow your leader. Cry out to Jesus! Let him reach out and save you!

A SUPREME WITNESS TO TRUST IN CHRIST

From The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp

Brothers and sisters, we send you a written account of the martyr, Polycarp, whose witness to the faith sealed, as it were, the persecution and put an end to it. As he entered the arena a voice was heard, *“Be strong, Polycarp, and act fearlessly!”* No one saw the speaker but the believers present heard the voice. When Polycarp was finally led to the tribunal there was a terrific uproar; people had just heard that he had been arrested. The proconsul asked if he were Polycarp and, when he admitted the fact, tried to persuade him to deny the faith. Polycarp looked sternly at the crowd and looking up to heaven replied: *“I have been serving Christ for 86 years and he has done me no wrong; how would I dare to blaspheme the king who has saved me!”* The proconsul repeated, *“Swear by the Fortune of Caesar!”* Polycarp replied, *“If you imagine I will swear by the Fortune of Caesar, let me frankly tell you: I am a Christian! If you wish to learn the teaching of Christianity fix a day and let me explain.”* The proconsul answered: *“Talk to the crowd.”* “You”, Polycarp answered, *“I consider to be entitled to an explanation for we have been taught to honor, in so far as it doesn’t harm anyone, to magistrates and authorities appointed by God; but as to the crowd I don’t think it would be proper to appeal to them.”*

“Well”, said the proconsul *“I have wild beasts and shall have you thrown to them if you don’t change your mind.”* “Call for them”, he replied, *“to us a change from better to worse is impossible; but it is a noble change to go from what is evil to what is good”*. Again, the proconsul answered, *“If you make little of the beasts, I shall have you consumed by fire unless you change your mind”*. “The fire that you threaten, Polycarp said, is one that burns for a short time and then goes out; you evidently don’t know the fire of the judgment to come and the eternal punishment which awaits the wicked. But why delay? Go ahead and do what you want.” As he spoke, he seemed filled with courage and joy, and his face was suffused with beauty. The proconsul was astonished. He sent a herald to announce three times: *“Polycarp has confessed to being a Christian!”*

The crowd screamed: *“This is the teacher of Asia, the destroyer of our gods!”* They called upon the minister of public worship to let loose a lion but he told them he couldn’t. So they demanded that Polycarp be burned. The crowd helped gather wood and when the pyre was ready Polycarp laid aside his cloths and shoes. When they wanted to nail him to a stake he responded: *“Leave me as I am. He who enables me to endure the fire will enable me to remain on the pyre without budging.”* They just tied him to the stake.

“Lord God, Father of your Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, ... I bless you because you have bestowed on me this day and hour that I may share with your martyrs and rise to eternal life. May I be a rich and pleasing sacrifice in your sight”. When he had said the Amen, they lit the fire and a huge flame shot up, but it formed something like a chamber surrounding the martyr’s body and he was in its center not burn but seeming to bake like bread, and we even caught an odor like incense. Since it would not burn him, they had him stabbed with a sword and so much blood gushed out that the fire was put out.