

HOW HUMILITY FOUNDS HOPE

A reflection taken from a text by Fr. Carroll StuhlmueLLer

We have just celebrated the fulfillment of our hope for a Savior. And without a break we begin the observance of what is called “Ordinary Time”, a period of 34 weeks that will bring us back to Advent and the call to hope for a Savior. We seem to be going around in a circle. Are we getting anywhere? Let’s answer that by asking ourselves what “ordinary” time teaches us. The answer is humility, and the reason is that only humility can give us the kind of hope that will help us serve God like Jesus.

The Lord Jesus gave himself completely and without reserve to the service of the Heavenly Father. In doing this he accomplished the salvation of the entire human race. Yet it is equally true that this salvation will not be accomplished fully until what we call the “Last Day”. Jesus explicitly said that those who come after him will not only do the works he did but will do yet greater works. Jesus knew that others would be sent to carry further the mission he had, in some sense, completed. The same thing is true for us.

We are called to the same humility as our Lord; i.e., we are called to realize that what we accomplish is but a beginning others will build on to accomplish even greater things than we have—no matter how much we accomplish in serving our Lord and God! Accepting that requires humility! We have to realize that another generation will come closer than we did to the ideal for which we have reached with all the energy and hope God has given us. What we achieve will blossom in a community achievement even greater than ours, and in ways we haven’t anticipated. But we don’t lose anything because of this. It actually fulfills our hope, love and trust in God.

This is exemplified in the readings of this Sunday’s Eucharist. The prophecy of the one we call “Second Isaiah” was uttered as he and his message were being rejected by his community. Yet he trusted in God to use what they rejected to draw all the world to recognize and worship the only True God. His was heroic humility. It is through this that he and his People, Israel, were made “light to the nations”. This is why we hear John the Baptist proclaim yet again that he only prepares the way for one who is greater than he is. That is almost exactly what we hear St. Paul proclaiming. He labors to bring Christ to many, but it is the community of believers that actually draws them to faith and hope (note!) in Christ. That is true for us too.

These biblical readings call us to heroic humility and the knowledge that a new generation will build on what we do and achieve things we couldn’t, or maybe didn’t even imagine. There will be a continuation and a growth and blossoming! Can you believe that no matter how dark things seem? We are helping to build a family of faith that will reach out into a future whose full glory and joy will be realized only when all are gathered into the heavenly homeland we hope for.

FOLLOWING JESUS AS JESUS FOLLOWS GOD

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

What we call “ordinary time” in the liturgical year is a period in which we are called to pay close attention to what it means to be disciples—followers of the Lord Jesus. What this means is spelled out in the titles we give Jesus. For example, Second Isaiah speaks about a “Servant” of God. We Christians traditionally understand this to be Jesus. To follow Jesus is to let ourselves be servants of God. Then we listen carefully to what Second Isaiah says God’s servant does. We are told a servant ministers to others and the others are identified as Israel and all the nations of the world. So we are to give or share something with everyone we meet, and, in theory, every human person. What are we to share? We are to lead others to be servants of God, to love God with all their heart and mind and strength; i.e., observe the Great Commandment. We can’t lead others to do that if we don’t do it ourselves. Jesus showed us how by his life and by his death.

Of course, I have already given Jesus the title “Lord”. That means he rules and guides us and shows us what to do. But we also use this title to express our belief that Jesus is God. Jesus is God and Jesus is a human being. So we follow Jesus as he teaches us to follow God, and to do it without reserve. This simply spells out further what we learned by learning to call Jesus God’s servant. In effect, we serve by learning how to follow God’s directions and guidance and helping others do the same. That is what Jesus did all the time; it is Jesus’ very being as both divine and human. So it is to become the center of who you and I are.

We also call Jesus “Messiah”, “Christ”. That means, if we follow St. Paul, that we believe Jesus has been anointed by God to inaugurate the “reign of God”, what we usually call “God’s Kingdom”. To be anointed was to receive a mission or a role to play in relating to others. Jesus’ mission, and ours, is to live and “be” the realized Kingdom of God. God reigns where God’s will is done. So our mission, like that of Jesus, is to do God’s will as perfectly as possible and to help lead others to make this the objective which shapes their lives and everything they do.

With all this in mind, think of the title John the Baptist gave Jesus: “The Lamb of God” and the “lamb who takes away the sin of the world”. To speak of Jesus as “lamb of God” was to point out that he was called to sacrifice himself for others, and does it in order to bring them into a right relation with God. What this relation is like is indicated when Jesus calls God “Father”. It is a unique and uniquely intimate union with God the Heavenly Father. We can’t call others to this if it isn’t first given to us. John the Baptist was, in effect, pointing out to us what a wonderful closeness we are given with our God. If we are so close, if we are loved and love that much, then certainly we will be ready to give everything—all we are and have—to God, just as Jesus does. Now we begin to see what ordinary time, our daily time, is for.

TRUSTING WHOLLY IN THE LORD

A reflection of St. Anthony recounted by St. Athanasius

Anthony exhorted his fellow monks thus: Let us not lose heart. Let us not think that the time of our struggle is too long or that we are doing something great. *“For the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”* Let us not consider, when we look at the world, that we have given up anything of great value. Even the whole earth is small in relation to the heavens. Suppose that you were lord of all the earth. It would amount to nothing as compared with the Kingdom of Heaven. For just as you think little of a single copper coin compared with a hundred gold ones, so if you ruled the entire earth and renounced it, you would lose little and receive a hundred times more.

If all the earth is not equal in value to the heavens, one who gives up a few acres sacrifices virtually nothing, and even if one gave up a house or much wealth there would be no reasons for boasting or growing careless. If we don't surrender things for the sake of virtue won't we die and leave them behind anyway? Let none of us yearn to possess anything. What benefit is there in possessing things that we cannot take with us? Why not rather own things that you can take with you—like prudence, justice, temperance, courage, understanding, love, concern for the poor, faith in Christ, freedom from anger, and hospitality?

With such thoughts we can convince ourselves to be the Lord's servant, obliged to do the master's will. A slave wouldn't dare say, “Since I worked yesterday I won't work today”. Each day, as the Gospels tell us, we must show the same eagerness in pleasing our Lord and avoiding danger. We must trust wholly in the Lord and so persevere in the ascetic life. We know that if we are lax even for one day, the Lord will not overlook it because of previous performance. Therefore, let us hold to the discipline and not get careless.

We have the Lord for our coworker. It is written that God works for good with everyone who chooses to do good. If we think in this way we will not sin nor crave anything nor bear a grudge against anyone. If we trust in the Lord we will not lay up treasures on earth, but like people who anticipate dying each day, we will be free of possessions and will forgive everything to everyone. We have made a beginning and set out on the way of virtue. Trusting in God, let us press onward to what lies ahead.

It is written: Human anger doesn't work the righteousness of God. It is also written: Desire, when it has conceived, gives birth to sin and when sin is full grown it brings forth death. Conducting our lives in watchfulness let us keep our hearts fixed on the Lord. We have no one in whom to trust if not our God and Lord.

A WEAPON THAT CONQUERS DEATH & MAKES ALL ONE

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Fulgentius of Ruspe

When we celebrate the birth of Christ we also celebrate the rebirth of those who give their lives for Christ and for God. Jesus, our Savior, came in humility and yet not empty-handed. He came with a powerless that transforms power and changes death into life. For this reason we celebrate the rebirth of several martyrs together with the birth day of Christ. To say Christ came in humility is not to say that he came without weapons of might, and the most powerful is love.

The same love which brought the Only Begotten Son down from heaven to earth, raises martyrs from earth to heaven. To die and to die for Christ and in Christ are very different things. To die with Christ and to die in Christ are both ways of dying into everlasting life. The dead in Christ are not dead, as the people of this world understand death. Their death is a transformation is rather a passage from a kind of half-life into the fullness of life.

Martyrs, in order to earn their right to the crown of everlasting life, have to take up the weapon that is love. Armed with love they can force death itself to be a path to life. Love for God, love with one's whole heart and soul and strength, is a weapon that wins every battle and for everyone.

Not only does it win never ending life for the one who wields it, but it can so overcome those who kill believers in God's love as revealed in Jesus the Christ, that they too give themselves to this same love even unto death for God. Think of the death of the first martyr, St. Stephen, and how it won Saul to become St. Paul for love of Christ.

But this is not a victory that only a martyr can win. Anyone who confronts death with the weapon of wholehearted love for God in Christ wins the same victory. All the beloved dead whom we remember so often have won this victory, even if we did not realize it when we witnessed their passing from this life to God's risen life.

Now Paul, who approved of Stephen's death, rejoices with him because he received from Christ the same weapon that Stephen used to win his victory. And with them all those who have died in Christ's love rejoice as well. In the cases of Paul and Stephen love overcame anger and rage. How many other evils were overcome in the living and dying of our Christian brothers and sisters!

Love, Scripture tells us, covers a multitude of sins. Love wins possession of the Kingdom of Heaven. Love is the source and origin of every sort of good. It is an unrivaled protection for the road that leads to salvation. One who walks in love can neither be lost nor afraid. Since Christ has set up stairway of love by which every Christian can mount to heaven, keep a firm hold on love alone. Love one another and by growing in live climb together to heaven.

THE TASK THAT LIES BEFORE US

A reflection developed from a text by St. Cyril of Alexandria

“When John the Baptist saw Jesus walking by he said, Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” Before that John had continually cried out, **“Prepare the way for the Lord”**. He says this no longer. Preparing would now be out of place. The one for whom he prepared has come and is before our very eyes. The nature of the case now calls for a different task. We are now called to tell others, like John, who Jesus is and why he has come to us from God so that they might receive and follow him.

John the Baptist says, Look, the Lamb of God! Jesus is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah says: **“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and like a lamb before his shearer he didn’t open his mouth”**. Once the task of God’s servants was to proclaim the Law of Moses. It was only a foreshadowing of salvation and its lamb was a figure of a mercy which did not reach out to the entire world. Now the true lamb, the victim without blemish, has been led to the slaughter and has banished sin from the entire world.

Once we were condemned to death under a curse: **“Dust you are and to dust you shall return”**. But now the Second Adam has come and he is not of earth but of heaven. He has died for the entire human race and released us from the curse. He is for us the source of every blessing. Our task is to lead others to him so that they too may be given eternal life and be reconciled with God. Now the task is to teach all to reverence God & live upright lives.

We are to help one another along the way to the Kingdom of Heaven. One lamb died for all in order to restore an entire flock to God even here on the earth. We are to gain all for God so that all might live no longer for them-selves but for the one who died and was raised to life for all.

Because of our many sins we have not been able to do the task we have been given. That task is to lead all to entrust themselves to the one who died for all so all might live in Him. Death tried to swallow the Lamb but was forced to disgorge him, and along with him disgorged all who are in Him and live in Him. All who are in Christ died and in Him, and so are risen in Him.

The key to destroying death for all is that sin be destroyed. If the root is destroyed then the branch cannot remain. What power can death have when sin is blotted out? It is destroyed in Christ and all who are in Christ turn away from sin and so are freed from death. If we can’t convince others to follow Christ is that not because we do not put away sin? Christ has shown us how to live without sin. We must follow him. The key is our rejoicing in the Lamb and his sacrifice. **“O death, where is your victory? O grave, where is your sting?”** In Christ the weakness for which sinners are denounced will be swallowed up. God is the one who acquits so who can condemn? You have been acquitted so live like Christ. Then you will be able to do the task of proclaiming Christ as salvation. Show salvation by your lives and all will see the goodness and glory revealed to us in Jesus Christ. All will be members of the redeemed flock of God.

THE TASK OF RECONCILIATION

A reflection developed from a Homily by St. Pope John Paul II

The life and witness of Father Cyprian Tansi is more than an inspiration to the people of Nigeria, the people he loved so much. He was a lover of God and spent long hours praying before the Blessed Sacrament, the food of love and of a generosity and courage that in him strove to bring God's love to as many as possible. Those who knew him testify to his great love of God. Everyone who met him was touched and moved by his personal goodness. He was a man for others. He always put others' good in first place and was especially sensitive to the pastoral needs of families.

If Christians are to learn to love God above all else and love one another as they love themselves they must begin in the life of their family. Father Cyprian always took great care in preparing couples for Holy Matrimony. He preached the special importance of marital chastity. He tried likewise to promote recognition of the dignity of women. More, this was integral to his concern for the education of the young. He knew all such things depend on love for God and seeking God's face in prayer. He was thinking of his people in this way when he got his bishop to send him to Mount St. Bernard Abbey to pursue a Cistercian monastic vocation. He hoped to bring contemplative life to his part of Africa.

Prayer and sacrifice are the door to holiness and sanctification. But Father Cyprian knew there is something of the prodigal son in every human being. He knew all are tempted to separate themselves from God and seek to control their own happiness in a self-centered, independent way. He knew that all are disappointed by the emptiness this illusive quest brings, yet it fascinates us. He also knew we all eventually find in the depths of our hearts a road leading to our Heavenly Father's house.

He made himself an apostle of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but not as an individualistic turning to God. We must forgive one another and learn from one another in God's love. He wanted reconciliation to be a reality at every level of Nigerian life. Thus the Prodigal Father of Jesus' parable is given us. This realization alone can lead all Nigerians, all Christians, both Christian and Muslim people, to reconcile with one another. The call to reconciliation is also a call to the joy of restored communion—with God and one another.

Let us join Father Cyprian in inspiring people to come to true peace in God and to nourish a life of peace with others through the grace of God. We begin with the Sacraments, and especially that of Holy Communion. We are one with Father Cyprian now in Christ and in the Eucharist. With him let us pray to God that all may become one in Him.

KEEPING THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

A reflection developed from Butler's Lives of the Saints

There has been a great deal of controversy over the details of the martyrdom of St. Agnes, but there is no controversy about the fact that Roman Christians were already celebrating the martyrdom of a teen age girl in the 300s. What they found unforgettable was the way she turned ordinary values upside down to make them a way of witnessing to the necessity for loving the Lord, our God with all our hearts and selves and strengths. This means loving God more than our own life. Roman culture exalted fidelity to one's commitments. One of these was a woman's commitment to marital fidelity. For her this began at the time of her engagement to be married and continued during the life time of the man she was to marry. Roman culture exalted love as fidelity.

Sacred Scripture treats fidelity to the One True God as a form of marriage. Agnes interpreted this literally. In her eyes that meant that she couldn't accept any human person as spouse. So was a married woman and couldn't enter another marriage. More, no one is to be loved more than God and so she couldn't love another human being in a way that would violate her perpetual fidelity to God. That turned the way virginity was seen by Romans upside down. It turned ordinary Roman ways of valuing and thinking about marriage and marital chastity upside down.

The heart of the matter was that refusing sex with any human person thus became a realization of total love for God. It thus gave chastity and marital fidelity, and the ordinary act of refusing to have sex with someone, a much deeper meaning. This was why there was no way in which she could be persuaded to accept the traditional interpretations of marriage and marital chastity. So she was executed as one who was undermining the values the Roman way of life held sacred and depended on, or so it was believed, for its stability. In that she was declaring that no cultural value is more important than absolute fidelity to God she was indeed undermining what Roman culture took to be essential. The State did not come first but God came first and the common good was attained through unshakeable fidelity to God.

Thus the ways in which a Roman official tried to force her to accept the ideology of the Roman state are of lesser importance than her revaluation of marital chastity and chastity in general. Each of her refusals repeats this truth. Her struggles witness to this in ways that made the new value understandable to different groups of Christian Romans. It was what she witnessed to rather than the fact of her death as a martyr that make her so important to the Roman church.

Agnes showed how preserving one's virginity could make real absolute a dedication to love of God above all else. By a mere refusal of sex one could love God with all one's heart and soul and strength. The Great Commandment can be lived by ordinary people doing an ordinary thing. This gave a new meaning to the lives of ordinary people like you and me.