

THE SEVENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

Sunday **The Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Feb. 19 **Preparing for God's Kingdom**

A reflection from the Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux

Mon **Monday of the Seventh Week in Ordinary Time**

20 **The Work of Love Within Us**

A reflection from The Ladder of Perfection by Walter Hilton

Tues **Memorial of St. Peter Damian**

21 **The Monastic Way Is the Way to Life**

An exhortation from Letter 18 by St. Peter Damian

Wed **Feast of the Chair of St. Peter the Apostle**

22 **The Church's One Foundation**

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

Thurs **Memorial of St. Polycarp**

23 **Giving Yourself Back to God**

A letter from St. Polycarp's church about his martyrdom

Fri **Friday of the Seventh Week in Ordinary Time**

24 **Whence Comes the Greatness of Obedience?**

A reflection from Christ, the Ideal of the Monk by Bl. Columba Marmion

Sat **Memorial of Our Lady**

25 **Never Cease to Pray the Hours**

A reflection from letter 17 of St. Peter Damian

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PREPARING FOR GOD'S KINGDOM

A reflection from the Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux

“You must be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” In the Gospel the Lord explains what his new commandment amounts to. In Matthew he says, “You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies ... pray for those who persecute you.” No doubt we have no enemies in our Carmel, but we have feelings! One feels an attraction to this sister, whereas with another one would make a long detour in order to avoid meeting her. And so, without even knowing it, she becomes the subject of a persecution.

Well, Jesus is telling me that it is this sister who must be loved. She must be prayed for even though her conduct would lead me to believe that she doesn't love me; *“If you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Even sinners love those who love them”*. It isn't enough to love; we must prove it. We are naturally happy to offer a gift to a friend; we love especially to give surprises. But this is not charity, for sinners do this too. Here is what Jesus teaches me: “Give to everyone who asks of you and from the one who takes away your goods ask no return”.

Giving to those who ask is less sweet than offering oneself by the movement of one's own heart. When another asks for something politely it doesn't cost so much to give, but if, unfortunately, another doesn't use very delicate words then one is immediately up in arms, unless one is solidly founded in charity. One finds a thousand reasons to refuse what is asked, and it is only after convincing the asker that she has been tactless that one will finally give what was asked—and then only as a favor. Or one will do a little service that could have been done in one-twentieth of the time one spent in setting forth one's imaginary rights.

And if it is difficult to give to one who asks, it is even more so to permit one to take what belongs to oneself, and without even asking for it back. Oh that is difficult! I should have said that this seems difficult, for the yoke of the Lord is sweet and light. When one accepts it, one feels its sweetness right away, and can cry out with the Psalmist, “I have run the way of your commandments when you enlarged my heart”! It is only charity that can expand the heart. O Jesus, I want to run in his way until the blessed day when I can join in the procession in Heaven to follow you into the Heavenly Courts, singing your new canticle, which must be love.

THE WORK OF LOVE WITHIN US

A reflection from The Ladder of Perfection by Walter Hilton

When love acts within it acts wisely and gently but it has great power to kill anger and envy, and all the passions that come with wrath and depression. Love brings the virtues of patience, gentleness, peaceableness, and friendliness toward one's neighbors.

People guided only by their own reason find it very hard to be patient, peaceful, sweet-tempered and charitable to others who treat them badly and wrong them. But true lovers of Jesus have no great difficulty in enduring all this. Love fights for them and kills wrath and depression with amazing ease.

Through the spiritual sight of Jesus love makes such people at ease and peaceful and ready to endure. Thus it conforms them to God. If they are despised and disregarded by others or suffer injustice or injury, shame or ill-treatment, they pay no attention to the fact. They are not greatly disturbed by such things and do not permit themselves to be, for then they would lose that comfort they feel within; they aren't willing to lose this. They can more easily forget all the wrong done them than others can, even if the others are asked for forgiveness. They would rather forget than forgive and it seems easier to them.

It is love that does all this. Love opens the inner eyes to the sight of Jesus and confirms one in the pleasure and contentment of the love that comes from this sight. It so comforts one that one becomes quite indifferent to what others do against one. The greatest harm that could befall such a person would be to lose the spiritual sight of Jesus. They would rather suffer any injury than this.

True lovers of Jesus are so strengthened by the grace of the Holy Spirit that they are made truly humble and patient and peaceable. They retain their humility no matter what harm or injury is inflicted on them. They do not despise or judge their neighbors but pray for them in their hearts and feel more compassion and pity for them than for others who have never harmed them. In fact, they love them better and more fervently desire their salvation. They see that they will have such great spiritual profit from such a neighbor's deeds, though this wasn't the neighbor's intention. This love and this humility are beyond human nature. They come only from the Holy Spirit and are given to those the Spirit makes true lovers of Jesus.

THE 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; in both a stand of grain and a cluster of grapes God seems to hide. Notice the leaf on the tree trembling in the wind and perhaps about to fall. And to add to our wonder the ground is strewn with fallen leaves. But this leaf that hasn't fallen bears witness to the beauty of all trees in leaf. Remembering this why should we marvel when we see so much of the monastic order decaying. Almighty God, who cares for the leaves of his tree and holds some firm while others fall, strengthens some in the monastic way of life while others fall away.

I give boundless thanks to my Creator who wished me to have the office of an unworthy servant in a small but good community. I only need to keep up with the footsteps of my brethren. But I want 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 our 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 a cell they recite two complete psalters daily, one for the living and the other for the dead. There are three lessons 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 is also done by us.

One practice exceeds all the rest in importance—love among the brethren. Unanimity of will is forged by the fire of mutual charity so that each sees self as born to serve all and not self. If one appears ill, all will at once inquire about his condition so that he will not delay giving up his accustomed rigor and be promptly furnished all necessities, and all take joy in offering themselves as willing nurses. So too if one dies all fast for seven days for that person and take the discipline seven times, each with a thousand blows, and then perform seven hundred prostrations, chant thirty psalters and offers Mass, all for the deceased.

So strive to persevere in the good work you have begun. Do not deviate from the Rule as it is now observed. You must enter the narrow gate that leads to life and that is imaged by our observances. This we seek to do each day that God gives us.

THE CHURCH'S ONE FOUNDATION

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

We like to compare the Church with a ship. Thus we declare that even though the Church has been tossed to and fro in storms of controversy and sin and persecution it has never sunk. Using another comparison we say the Church is a house built solidly on an immovable rock, Jesus Christ. When we celebrate a person who has done wonderful things for God and for Jesus, and so for the Church, we are called to remember that the real source of the Church's survival, and of its flourishing, is Christ. Today the Church is being as tossed as much as it ever has been, and yet the Church stands firm. Indeed, in the last two centuries the Church has doubled its membership and spread to every corner of the world. The Holy Spirit continues to build upon the foundation that is Christ.

When we remember Christ's call to Peter to be a rock and serve as a firm foundation for the growth of the Church, we also remember that he was speaking to Peter the Penitent, and to each of us. Peter denied Jesus out of fear and misunderstood him because he clung to ideas that were purely human and did not come from God. Yet Peter never ceased to love Jesus, his Lord and our Lord. He is uncomfortable like us in our weakness, yet, where the depth and constancy of his love for Jesus are concerned, we need to be as like him as possible. Peter could fulfill his office as rock only by clinging tightly to the rock that is Jesus Christ. That is true for us.

Christ is the one who commissioned Peter and Christ is the one who assured the Church of fidelity to God and God's call. It was Christ who gave the apostles strength to bring the Gospel to the world as they knew it. To know them is to be sure they didn't do it through any talent or skill of their own—unless sinning and running away is a skill! We celebrate the fidelity of Peter. Initially he was found wanting. It was the Lord, however, who lived and worked in and through this unworthy but passionately loving man. So he proclaims God's mercy in all that he is and does. He calls us to do likewise.

It is not simply to one another that we turn in order to cope with our weakness and the huge challenges that face us. Jesus did not found the Church on human weakness but on clinging to God. As we cling to God we open doors and windows to God's grace and mercy and love. We too are living proclamations, and evidences, of God's loving mercy. We glory not in ordinary strength but in the weakness that is the Cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

GIVING YOURSELF BACK TO GOD

A letter from St. Polycarp's church on his martyrdom

St. Polycarp was martyred by being burnt alive. This is how it happened: When the pyre was ready Polycarp took off his outer garments and loosened his under-tunic. He made an effort to take off his shoes, though others had long done that and he was clumsy about it. The faithful had long competed with one another to touch his body because long before his martyrdom he had received every sort of mark of honor due to the holiness of his life.

Then the fuel for the pyre was heaped around him, but when they wanted to fasten him to the stake with nails he said, "Leave me as I am. The one who gives me strength to endure the fire will also give me the strength to say quite still on the pyre even without the precaution of your nails". Tied to the stake as he was, with his hands behind his back, he stood light as a mighty ram chosen out of the flock for sacrifice. He seemed a worthy victim made ready to be offered to God.

Looking up to heaven he prayed: "Lord, Almighty God, Father of your Beloved Son, Jesus Christ, through him we have come to know you, God of angels, of powers, of all creation, of all the race of saints who live in your sight, I bless you for judging me worthy of this day and this hour. In the company of your martyrs may I share the cup of Christ, your anointed one. May I rise again to eternal life in body and soul, immortal through the power of the Holy Spirit. May I be received among the martyrs in your presence today as a rich and pleasing sacrifice. God of Truth, stranger to falsehood, you have prepared this moment and revealed it to me and know you fulfill your promise. I praise you for all things, I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal priest of Heaven, Jesus Christ, your beloved Son. Through him be glory to you, together with the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen."

When he had said "Amen" and finished the prayer, the officials lit the pyre. A great flame burst out like a ship's sail swelling in the wind and became like a dome encircling the martyr's body. Surrounded by it his body seemed like bread being baked, or like gold or silver made white-hot in a furnace. It was not like burnt flesh in appearance or in odor. So sweet a fragrance came to us and reminded us of the burning of incense or some costly sweet-smelling gum. And thus Polycarp died. It seems to us that we have been spared precisely to tell this story to others. Let us strive after the grace of giving ourselves to God as did Polycarp.

WHENCE COMES THE GREATNESS OF OBEDIENCE?

A reflection from Christ, The Ideal of the Monk by Bl. Columba Marmion

Obedience is acquired and strengthened only by obeying. In the measure that one advances in maturity of mind and is more inclined to take the initiative, one grasps the truth expressed by the Psalmist and recalled by Our Holy Father, Benedict: “Lord, you have placed authorities over us”. Moreover, Benedict teaches us that obedience can become very hard. In the Fourth Degree of Humility he speaks of hard and contrary things we have to face, even injuries, and that these may befall one in the course of obedience. He warns us that the way is narrow but adds the reassurance that it leads to life.

If we submit to obedience with faith, we may be assured, as St. Benedict guarantees, that each of our actions, even when done under such difficult circumstances, will turn out for the good and that our virtue will steadily strengthen. God’s glory triumphs precisely in using our frailty and errors for the good of those who trust in God. Let us keep our Holy Father’s words ever before our eyes. The more we see Christ in our abbot and the demands of obedience the more we enter into the life of faith. Our Abbot and our life become more and more causes of eternal salvation and of the perfection to which God calls us.

There is yet more. A monk who yields self up by an obedience like that of Jesus Christ and places self in God’s hands becomes a kind of “arrow of election”, shot by the hand of the divine archer. One acquires a supernatural suppleness that is proper to obedience. It makes one capable of great things. We know we can count on God; it is more important yet that God can count on us. Very often God uses persons who have learned these lessons for something that has placed God’s glory at risk in human eyes.

When God uses us through obedience God preserves us in humility. So we shouldn’t be surprised at prodigies performed by people who forget self and give themselves over in obedience to God. Recall the famous episode of Maurus saving Placidus by forgetting himself in obedience to Benedict. It is this sort of forgetfulness, trust and obedience—and that means faith—that brings us to Christ through our monastic life. Don’t be surprised at how much religious obedience depends on faith. It makes obedience great and fruitful and saving.

NEVER CEASE TO PRAY THE HOURS

A reflection from letter 17 of St. Peter Damian

I believe that the seven canonical hours of the Divine Office should be prayed by all Christians. For instance, there are seven types of venial sin into which even upright people fall daily. There are sins of of thought, of ignorance, of inconstancy, infirmity, forgetfulness and surprise. It was because of these seven types of wounds the Holy Fathers called us to pray seven times daily. Moreover, one whose spirit burns a little more fervently with love of God will find time to pray the hours of the Blessed Virgin. Let me tell you a story.

There was a certain cleric who was guilty of many sins, having especially defiled himself with sins of the flesh. At length he was overcome by sickness and was near death. He began to be afraid as his conscience accused him and he was filled with fear of God's judgment. Finding no hope in any of his good works, he turned to the Blessed ever-virgin Mary and begged for help in words something like these:

"I know well, O Blessed Queen of Heaven, that in many ways I have offended you, and in my body I have violated the seal of chastity and virginity, of which you are the mother. I have involved myself in countless kinds of sin, and am not worthy to call on you, sovereign of all purity. But, O Gate of Heaven and true Mother of God and man, you are my witness that seven times a day I prayed to you and in your honor, and although I am a sinner and unworthy, I did not cheat you of any of the canonical hours."

Just as he finished this prayer, the loving Mother of God appeared, and gently comforting him, declared that through the generosity of God's mercy his sins had been forgiven.

I tell this story with some hesitation since I am not sure it happened. But of this I am certain, that whoever strives to recite the Hours daily, and especially in honor of the Virgin, will have the mother of our Judge as advocate in the day of need.

And so friends, observe the lesson of this tale. Always demonstrate your devotion to God by praying the Hours and strive in every other way to lead a holy life. If you bend the neck of your heart to bear God's light yoke you will in glory enjoy your share of the Heavenly inheritance among God's children.