

# THE THIRD WEEK OF LENT

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**Sunday**    **The Third Sunday of Lent**  
**March 19**   **A Call to Live Divine Love**  
A reflection inspired by a text of Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

**Mon**        **Solemnity of St. Joseph**  
**20**        **Living Spousal Love with Christ**  
A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Bernardo Olivera

**Tues**       **Tuesday of the Third Week of Lent**  
**21**        **Learning to Love God in Loving our Neighbor**  
A reflection from St. Bernard's Treatise on the Degrees of Humility and Pride

**Wed**        **Wednesday of the Third Week of Lent**  
**22**        **Thirsting for the Water We Truly Need**  
A reflection developed from St. Augustine's Commentary on the Gospel of John

**Thurs**      **Thursday of the Third Week of Lent**  
**23**        **Compassion is the Heart of Lent**  
A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Peter Chrysologos

**Fri**         **Friday of the Third Week of Lent**  
**24**        **Serving God through Compassion**  
A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Gregory of Nyssa

**Sat**         **Solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord**  
**25**        **Celebrating God's Coming Among Us**  
A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Basil the Great

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# **THE CALL TO LIVE DIVINE LOVE**

**A reflection inspired by a text of Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller**

**God listens and responds to us with extraordinary patience, even when we are in a bad mood and speak sarcastically, as did the Samaritan woman Jesus spoke to at a well. We are under obligation to imitate Jesus, and we know it. So we need to very carefully observe him. Suppose you were exhausted and thirsty, sitting at a well with no way to get at the water. A woman comes bringing what is needed but when you ask her for a drink she gets offended. In effect, she asks why you are violating the ordinary code of behavior according to which men didn't speak to unaccompanied women if there was no one else present. Then she does on to note that he's a Jew and so shouldn't have anything to do with a Samaritan like her. When he tells her he has a sort of water that frees people forever from thirst, she gets sarcastic: If you got water like that why are you asking me for a drink? Why don't you give me some of that water so I won't need to come here for water every day? Would you lose your temper and respond in kind?**

**Jesus turns her sarcastic questions into an opportunity to speak to the thirst that is in her heart. Go get you husband and come back so I won't be violating any code, Jesus says. That reminds her of her real thirst and she answers with truth: I don't have a husband. Yet she has lived with many men and now with a fifth, looking for love and someone to be there for her in good times and bad. When Jesus states this she realizes that God is speaking through him, and so she asks him about the cause of the ill-feeling between Jews and Samaritans: Should we worship God, here in Samaria or only in Jerusalem? Jesus' answer is for us all: You should worship God in sincerity and truth, and if you do that you can worship God everywhere. Indeed, to satisfy your real thirst you only need to turn to God in sincerity and truth.**

**Lent asks us to meditate on God's humble, considerate way of interacting with us, and to pray for the strength and grace to respond to others with the same listening ear, gentle heart and patient forbearance. How badly we need these qualities. When Jesus' disciples returned from buying something to eat and found him talking to a Samaritan woman they were shocked. Jesus said to them: Open your eyes! Look at the harvest waiting to be reaped. In the meantime, the women went into town and began to tell others about Jesus and proclaim him the Messiah. They came out to him—the harvest came to the reaper and received the gift of faith. That's the result of accepting the grace of imitating Jesus' love. The harvest God wants to reap in us this Lent is that of sharing the wonder that is Jesus as Divine love incarnate. We share it by how we live with others and respond to their heart's hunger and thirst.**

# **LIVING SPOUSAL LOVE WITH CHRIST**

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Bernardo Olivera

St. Joseph was called to live a spousal but not a conjugal love with Mary. That may sound strange but it emerges from the teaching of St. Bernard and from the Rule of St. Benedict. At first it might seem exaggerated to speak of “spousal spirituality” in conjunction with the Rule of St. Benedict, and yet at the end of the Prologue our patriarch says, “Never swerving from his instructions, then, but faithfully observing his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve to be “consorts” in his Kingdom. The word ‘consorts’ is Benedict’s alteration of what he found in the Rule of the Master. ‘Consort’ means not only “associate” but “spouse”, especially when used in relation to a king. In the context of Benedict’s statement about intimately sharing the sufferings of Christ, our King, the spousal meaning fits.

St. Bernard and William of St-Thierry have a fundamental importance for explaining the doctrine that the human soul is called to be a spouse of the Word. Bernard asks: *“If marriage according to the flesh constitutes two in one body, why shouldn’t a spiritual union effect even more the joining of two in one spirit?”* St. Bernard’s entire re-reading of the Song of Song’s is governed by the principle that carnal love is to be transformed into spiritual love, a passage from one flesh to one spirit. Thus divine grace perfects nature without destroying it.

“Spousehood”, the spousal relationship, is a way for human beings to live reciprocally, complementarily, where as “conjuality” is more restricted. Conjugal love is a way of living and showing spousal love but it is not the only way. Nothing excludes an experience of spousal love for God and from God, even for those who never experience conjugal love.

Those in love live a state of reciprocal indwelling, with a shared project of helping one another live a happy and fruitful life. This is where the spousal relationship is found, in mutual belonging and complementary enrichment, a life rooted in and flowing out of the depths of one’s being precisely as created in the image and likeness of the Triune God. The spousal relationship takes us back to God’s project at the beginning of creation. St. Bernard shows us who this relates to our Lenten journey: *“Every soul, even if burdened with sin, has the power to turn and find it can’t only breathe the fresh air of the hope of pardon and mercy but also to dare to aspire to the nuptials of the Word, not fearing to enter into a covenant with God”*. It was to this that St. Joseph was called and it is to this that each of us is called.

## **LEARNING TO LOVE GOD IN LOVING OUR NEIGHBOR**

### **A reflection from St. Bernard's Treatise on the Degrees of Humility & Pride**

Knowledge of the truth comprises three degrees, which I will set forth as briefly as possible. We begin by seeking truth in ourselves, then we seek it in our neighbor and finally we search for truth in its own essential nature. We discover truth in ourselves when we pass judgment on ourselves. We find it in our neighbor when we suffer with another in compassion. We search out its own nature by contemplation of God in purity of heart.

Notice not only the number of the degrees but their order. So, before we inquire into the nature of truth, the Truth itself must teach us to seek Him in our neighbor, and then only will we understand why we must find Him in ourselves even before we can seek Him in our neighbor. Indeed, only then do we understand why we must not just seek but find Him in ourselves before we can seek and find Him in our neighbor.

The the Lord's Beatitudes mercy comes before purity of heart. The merciful are quick to see truth in their neighbor and to reach out in compassion to identify with the neighbor—responding to the joys and sorrows in another as if they were their own. They make themselves weak with the weak and burn with indignation when others are led astray. They share joys with the rejoicing and sorrows with those who mourn. Only when one's inner vision is thus cleansed by mercy can delight in the contemplation of divine truth. For real "love of truth" makes one take upon oneself the misfortunes of others. But you can't find truth in a neighbor if you refuse to support them.

People say that one who is healthy can't feel the pain of sickness and one who is well-fed can't feel the pangs of hunger. By the same token, the more familiar one is with sickness and hunger the greater will be one's compassion for the sick and the hungry. We cannot show compassion for the wretchedness of others until we recognize our own wretchedness. Then we will see how to come to their help. This is the example shown us by our Savior, who suffered himself and learned how to show compassion and mercy. He learned the meaning of mercy. He learned by experience during his days on earth. Will we refuse to learn as he did? Will we refuse the suffering of penance and self-denial? Let us learn mercy from our Savior that we may also learn how to love one another.

## **THIRSTING FOR THE WATER WE TRULY NEED**

### **A reflection developed from St. Augustine's Commentary of the Gospel of John**

A woman went to draw water. She is a symbol of the Church not yet justified but on the way to justification. The text tells us, you see, that she was ignorant of Jesus but encountered him by chance and he entered into conversation with her. Now we know that she was a Samaritan and that the Samaritans were not accepted as Jews but were seen as foreigners. This woman came from a group that had only partly recognized God's call to them. That describes us too. But, in view of what Jesus said and did, let's be thankful to God for what we are. The woman was an image of what God called her to be but not yet the reality. But she was to become the truth God created her to be, like us, by believing in Jesus.

She was on her way to draw water and Jesus saw her. Listen! He said: *"Let me have a drink", for his disciples had gone into the city to buy food. The Samaritan woman replied, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask me for a drink when I am a Samaritan?' since Jews have no dealings with Samaritans."* The woman was carrying a vessel to draw water but Jews wouldn't even touch vessels used by Samaritans, and besides this Jew was asking her, a woman, for a drink. Actually Jesus' thirst was for her to believe. She didn't know his real thirst, nor did she know her own.

Jesus responded by saying *"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you 'Let me have a drink' you could have asked him to give you a drink and he could have given you living water."* From what fountain is Jesus going to give her a drink? It was from the fountain which Jesus is. Scripture says of him, *"With you is the fountain of life."* That does not refer to a fountain of ordinary water because it is not "water of eternal life", such as Jesus gives. Jesus is leading her to understand that her need is for a kind of life she has not yet understood as the true source of her true thirst.

Jesus was offering her the fullness of the Holy Spirit. Although she didn't understand she replied, "Sir, give me that water so that I won't be thirsty again or have to come here to draw water anymore." Her lack was knowledge of God's call and promise. Had she known what she truly needed she would have seen that it was not ordinary water she lacked. Do we know what our heart truly seeks? Do we recognize the thirst God has planted within us? When we do then we will know that this thirst is satisfied only in Jesus. That is what we are called to believe with all our hearts. When we believe this we will live as Jesus lived during his days on our earth.

# **COMPASSION IS THE HEART OF LENT**

**A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Peter Chrysologos**

There are three things that make us firm in faith and constant in devotion. They are prayer, fasting and compassion. Prayer knocks at the door, fasting opens the door, and compassion wins all that we ask for. These three are really one and each gives life to the others. Fasting is the soul of prayer, and compassion is at the heart of fasting. They cannot be separated. If we have only one of them we have nothing. Whoever prays must fast and whoever fasts must show compassion. If you hope that your prayers will be heard you have to respond to those who turn to you in need of compassion.

Fasting is a way of showing compassion to those in need and who suffer hunger. If we want God to feel pity for us, if we hunger for spiritual food, we have to show mercy both to the physically and spiritually hungry. If one hopes to be shown mercy one has to show mercy oneself. If you want to receive start off by giving. You cannot ask for yourself what you refuse to another.

Each person has a special way of being compassionate. Ask yourself how you want mercy to be shown to you and how much and how urgently you need mercy. Then show the same sort of mercy to others, and just as speedily and fully. Let prayer, compassion and fasting become a single plea before God, a single presentation of your own case and that of others. What we lose by selfishness and tight-fistedness we need to recover by fasting leading to mercy and compassion. We can make our very selves a sacrifice by fasting. The prophet says: "A sacrifice to God is a broken spirit; a contrite and humbled heart God does not despise."

So let each of us offer our soul to God together with fasting and so make them both a single gift and a pure oblation. They will be a living victim, your very heart and self. There is no excuse for not doing this. Remember that the person who gives self cannot fail to find self. And remember too that prayer and fasting have to be joined to compassion. If compassion runs dry, prayer amounts to nothing. However much you tend your soul, nothing good can grow in you unless it is watered by compassion. Whatever we try to keep for ourselves we lose. Whatever we give away, spiritually as much as physically, comes back to you a hundred fold. Give to yourself by giving to others. All you have received was given only to be shared. Imitate the Lord Jesus.

# **SERVING GOD THROUGH COMPASSION**

A reflection from a sermon by St. Gregory of Nyssa

*Blessed are the merciful, Scripture says, for they shall receive mercy.* Mercy is not the last of the virtues to be counted among the Beatitudes. Another text reads: *Blessed are those who care for the poor,* and another: *The good are moved by pity to be generous, they are ready to lend all day long.* Lay hold of this blessing. Be known for understanding, kindness and compassion.

Our works of mercy should not cease even when night comes. Never say, “See me later and I will try to help”. Our good intentions should be acted on immediately. Kindness is the one thing that needs no second thoughts. Share what you have with those who need help, open your door to those who have nowhere to go, and do it with good will. If you are giving to charity then do it cheerfully, as St. Paul says, because your good spirit will double the effectiveness of the help you give. Helping reluctantly, as though under duress, is ungracious and even insulting.

We need to go about the good we do in a joyful spirit and not with a long face. If, to use Scripture’s words, we untie the bonds of those who reach out to us for release from some woe in a way that is not reluctant or suggesting that we don’t really think the other needs help, as though we were right to doubt and were grumbling about helping, what have we done? But if we act enthusiastically, then “our light will break forth like the dawn”, then we will grow in health ourselves as though we had just had a wound healed. What do all long for? All long for light as well as healing.

You are servants of Christ and my brothers and sisters, and if my words can convince you then while we have an opportunity let us help others as though we were helping Christ. Care for him, feed and clothe him, take him into your home and cherish him in every way you can. It is not a matter of inviting him for a meal, as various Pharisees did or of pouring perfumed oil on him, as Mary did, or of giving him a tomb, as Joseph of Arimathea did, or of providing burial spices as Nicodemus did. Nor do we have to come up with gold or incense or myrrh as the Sages from the East did. The Lord of All asks mercy from us rather than that we make some kind of sacrifice. Pity is worth more than a burnt offering of fat lambs. Offer Christ compassion by caring for those who have any kind of need and especially for the destitute and the outcast from our society. Then, when we leave this world, we will be welcomed into the eternal dwellings by Christ in person. May he truly be our Lord for ever and ever.

# **CELEBRATING GOD'S COMING AMONG US**

**A reflection developed from a homily by St. Basil the Great**

Once more we celebrate God's coming into our world. God lives among us! He hasn't come as a divine lawgiver, with flashes of lightening and trumpet blasts, or to a mountain wreathed in smoke and dense cloud and stormy winds, or in any way that could strike terror. This coming is as a human being with flesh and blood like ours and it is a gentle coming. Soon he will be able to enter upon familiar converse with us, no longer working from time to time through prophets, but through our own humanity speaking with us. By sharing in our state God has raised the whole of humankind to a divine state.

How can glory come to all through a single human being? How can human flesh contain Godhead? Think of how fire comes to iron. The two don't become one and the same thing but fire fills iron with its strength while remaining itself. This sharing in no way lessens the fire for fire's strength completely fills whatever it enters while both remain what they were beforehand. God the Word didn't relinquish his own Personhood when he came, as Scripture says, to " *dwell among us*". Nor did the Word undergo any change in becoming flesh, nor was Heaven left forsaken when the One who holds all things together came to earth. We receive into our midst one who dwells in eternal blessedness unchangeably.

Can we fathom this mystery? By coming in the flesh God has won a decisive victory over death. It was lurking in the flesh but just as disease is overcome by the curative properties of a medicine that is adapted to the body's needs, and as the darkness in a room is dispelled by light, in the same way death that held sway over our human condition has been abolished by the coming of the Godhead. To take a further example, as long as night and darkness last the ice which forms in open water covers its surface. But through the warmth of the sun it gradually melts. So until the coming of Christ, death was master but when the loving kindness of our God and Savior appeared, the Sun of Justice rose and death was swallowed up in victory. Death cannot endure in the presence of true life. How deep is the goodness of God and how great God's love for us!

So let us rejoice. Mary has heard the angel's message and has said her "Yes!" to our God. Soon a Savior who is Christ the Lord will be born for us. The light has come because the Lord God is our light. He is as yet hidden in the Virgin's womb but will soon burst upon us to set free all who have been captives. This is a feast in which the whole of creation shares. Rejoice!