



# **THE LEADERSHIP GOD CALLS US TO**

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

In the readings of this Sunday's Eucharist we hear about the leadership to which God call people and from three perspectives. First we hear from Isaiah about the service a leader performs. Then we hear from Jesus that the primary service is supporting each other in fidelity to God and God's call. Finally we see how that service has to be carried out as Paul seeks to persuade the Roman Church to support him in serving those who haven't as yet realized what God is calling them to in Christ.

The context Isaiah creates for these messages is taken from the service owed to a king. Kings are shepherds. That means their task is to secure the well-being of the people they guide and care for. We are all servants of a Heavenly King and we all need help in knowing what is being asked of us at any given moment and in each particular set of circumstances. So our King has chosen special servants to help the others make such decisions and make them well. The task is to see "openings", opportunities to help make our King's care more effective for all.

Jesus is God showing us the primary opportunities for helping others are exercises of love. In doing this we imitate Jesus. We see how this works in the way Jesus helped Peter. After all, Peter, for all that he declared total loyalty of Jesus, was unable to live out that loyalty when things got really difficult for him. But Jesus didn't turn away from him and called him to do things that would renew the lost loyalty, beginning with Peter's tears and ending with his accepting death on a cross as Jesus had. It is not just our life but our death that binds us inseparably to our Lord and God. And we are called to help one another do this. Loyalty to this way of loving one another is ultimately loyalty to God and we are called to it each time we celebrate the Eucharist.

St. Paul originally wrote to the Church at Rome to ask its support and help in carrying the Gospel to Spain. He wrote at such length because he knew that some at Rome thought they were just as effective as he was in missionary work and didn't need his involvement. In short, jealousy and competitiveness can easily get in the way of our caring for all of God's people, as all are called to do. But if we know the obstacles what are we doing to overcome them? Think of how hard Paul had to work to write his Epistle to the Romans!

Are we ready to work as hard as we can not just in doing things but in planning ways to get the help we will need to do them as God would have us? We know our call. We know Jesus is always ready to help us answer that call. We know that our fellow believers need our help too. Today we are called to give ourselves to the tasks involved, including that of finding ways to help one another without thinking about what we get out of it.

# **THE VOCATION TO SHARE GOD'S LOVING**

A reflection from a sermon by St. Augustine

I speak to you as fellow servants answering God's call to share his love and salvation with all the world. All of us have been reborn in baptism and each is a living proof of the power of God's saving grace. We are also the fruit of one another's ministry. Who drew you to Christ, first by deeds and then by words? And who will be drawn by your example and words?

We have answered the call to "*put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh and its longings*". We have entered the Church in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor freed person, neither male nor female. We are all one in Jesus Christ. Such is the power of the new life which began when we accepted baptism and were in symbol and in reality buried in Christ so that we might rise with Christ.

Now we live by faith and as if on a pilgrimage even though we seem to be away from the Lord and his Kingdom. But our steps are directed toward Christ. We know he has a superabundant store of every good thing and of all happiness, and wants to share it with us. But we begin to share this as soon as we share our faith and our new life with others. That is our first and most important work of love and love is God and God's Kingdom.

Your personal hope of resurrection, though it is not yet realized, is sure and certain because you have not only received the pledge that is the Holy Spirit and the sacraments of salvation but Christ's own promise. So a call comes to us: "*If you have risen with Christ in baptism then seek the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God; set your heart on heavenly things.*" How do we do this? We begin to live the reality that is heaven's life, the love we have received from Jesus Christ. Isn't it true that God is love? To long for God is to long for God's kind of love.

There is no better sign of this than our Sunday Eucharist. We gather together to help stir up one another's spirit by our enthusiasm and our singing and our praying together, and by our careful listening to God's very word given us in the Scriptures. What do we do with these gifts? We first ask ourselves inwardly how we can share such joy and gladness with other people we know, and know that they have not yet entered the unity that we have as members of Christ's Church, God's own People. We must live as Christ. Did Christ live in sadness and sorrow? No, Christ lived in the gladness which is God's love and giving of love. Think of the women who were the first to receive the gift of resurrection joy, and who went to share it with those who were still weeping. They weren't at first believed. But they didn't take back the good tidings for all that. They persisted in living in the risen Christ and so helped open the others eyes to behold the truth.

We are called to do the same by our way of life and our persistence. Never despair. Trust in the Lord and rejoice. Share your joy.

# **IMITATING JOHN THE BAPTIST**

**A reflection excerpted from a homily by Gueric of Igny**

***“Jesus began to ask the crowds about John: What did you go out to see in the desert?”*** John was not a reed trembling in the wind but a palm tree able to stand in any storm. Let Herod be angry. Let Herodias lay traps. Let the tempest seethe within them and bring malice forth from their hearts. John had born witness to the truth about Herod’s incestuous marriage, just as he had to the Pharisees sent from Jerusalem to find out what role he was playing in God’s plan of salvation. These storms didn’t shake him but they ruined the people who called them forth in themselves.

John had been sent to bear witness to God’s truth. He had been sent to help others see the truth they otherwise would not have seen. Some refused this help. Offering it is our vocation as well. We are to imitate John not only in pointing to Jesus Christ, God’s savior and only begotten Son, but in helping one another recognize our need to turn more powerfully to God, especially when we are doing leads away from rather than towards God’s Kingdom.

What did you go out to see? Someone wearing fine, soft garments? We must imitate John not only in his constancy and loyalty to God but in his contempt for all that does not help us drawn nearer to God. There are two stages by which our human lowliness climbs to things spiritual and divine: immovable perseverance in the face of temptations or threats, and bodily mortifications done out of a desire for the good things of the spirit. Even when temptations have been overcome we must persevere in the practices by which this victory is gained so that the spirit may thrive.

As Truth himself says, it behooves us to enter the Kingdom of God through many tribulations. Those who make the pleasures of the flesh their quest are enrolled in the kingdom of this world and not the Kingdom of God. Has this fire of desire entirely gone out in us? Will the winds of wanton words and excessive laughter find no ember they can fan into flame within us?

It is no business of mine to pass judgment on other’s consciences. I know that many have lived temperately and modestly in the midst of abundant earthly possessions. But many have behaved evilly, even if their garments were rough and their food rather sparing. Everyone must find others to help walk the way that leads to God. If you cannot imitate John in the roughness of his garments or in his sparing diet strive at least to imitate him in this: Don’t be a reed trembling in the wind but be steadfast in the way of the Lord and in helping others walk in that way.

This is what John did. He was a spark who spoke words of fire to move the lazy and unfeeling of heart. He prepared the way of the Lord. May the same Voice he heard now resound in us—Jesus Christ, our Savior, who lives for ever and ever.

# **LOOKING FOR THE EASY WAY**

A reflection developed from a sermon by Cardinal Newman

When we were children our parents often forbade us to do certain things, telling us we must wait until we had grown up. All too often we turned the prohibition into the self-deceiving thought that if we could only do or have the forbidden thing we would suddenly be the marvelous being we imagined an adult to be. We had a kind of foolish curiosity that imagined some marvelous delight or state could be ours if we disobeyed. We did actually derive a special pleasure from doing what was forbidden.

Now such delusions arise from Satan's craft, that of the father of lies, who knows well that if he can get us to sin and think we like the experience then he can get us to sin again, and again, and again until we are taken captive. Our greatest security against such lies is being shocked at the notion of disobeying or doing what is wrong. Eve reflected and gazed at the forbidden fruit when she should have fled. The serpent who seduced Eve had what is called the power of fascinating his victim until that person couldn't see the poisonous bite coming, because all attention was caught by the prospect of some imagined good.

What a dreadful image this is of the power of sin and of the devil over the human heart! At first our ill-formed conscience will tell us plainly and straightforwardly what is right or wrong. But we trifle with the warning until we persuade ourselves that what seemed wrong is really, if not right, good. We tell ourselves a good thing is more important than a right one.

Sinners often think that in the devil's service there are secrets which hold the prospect of great goods. Yes, there are secrets, and ones which it is shameful even to speak of; and, yes, we don't have these things and haven't done those deeds. Yet the promised good things turn out to be but ashes when we try to lay hold of them by turning from God's guidance. Yes, the Lord also has "secrets", in a sense. Scripture tells us, however, that "*the secret of the Lord is with those who fear God*".

Yes, those who obey God and follow Christ have secret gains, so great that to think them like those which sinners learn from their evil master is like thinking that hell is heaven. We must not let ourselves be seduced by the tempter and his false promises. Satan can't give us any good. Satan has no good to give. We must rather listen to the gracious words of our maker and of our Redeemer. "*Call to me and I will answer you, and show you great and mighty things, which you do not know.*" Good will be ours if we only believe and trust. You know already the hollowness of evil. Walk the way of good and you will find real substance. The way of Satan turns out to be much harder than the way of God and all the devil's shortcuts leave us wandering in a void. God would like to share all with us. First we must become like God first. Then all really will truly be easy.

# **THE BRIDGE TO GOD THAT IS JESUS**

**A message of God from the Dialogue of St. Catherine of Siena**

**God is speaking: “By Adam’s sinful disobedience the road was so broken up that no one could reach everlasting life. Since they had no share in the good for which I created them, they did not give me the return of glory they owed me, and so my truth was not fulfilled. What is this truth? That I had created them in my image and likeness so that they might have eternal tenderness and goodness. But because of their sin they never reached this good, for sin closed heaven and the door of my mercy.**

**As soon as they rebelled against me they became rebels against themselves. They became like filthy beasts. All created things rebelled against them, while had they been submissive all would have been as I had established in the beginning. With sin there came troubles from themselves as well as from the devil and the world. You were all drowning because not one of you, for all your efforts at righteousness, could reach eternal life.**

**But I wanted to undo these great troubles of yours. So I gave you a bridge, my Son, so that you could cross over the river, the stormy sea of this darksome life, without being drowned.**

**I want you to look at the bridge that is my only-begotten Son, and notice its greatness. Look! It stretches from heaven to earth, joining the earth of your humanity with the greatness of the Godhead. This is what I mean when I say it stretches from heaven to earth. This was necessary if I wanted to remake the road that had been broken up, so that you might pass over the bitterness of the world and reach life.**

**Using earth alone, your humanity alone, I could never have made it great enough to cross the river and bring you to eternal life. The earth of human nature by itself, as I have told you, was incapable of atoning for sin and draining off the pus from Adam’s sin, for that stinking pus had infected the whole human race. Your nature had to be joined with the height of humanity so it could endure the suffering that joined humanity to the divine nature. Then you could accept my Son’s sacrifice on your behalf to release you from death and give you life.**

**So the highest stooped down to the earth of your humanity, bridging the chasm between us and rebuilding the roadway. Why should he have made himself a roadway? It was so that you might in truth come to the same joy as the angels. But my son’s having made himself a bridge for you cannot bring you to life unless you make your way along it.”**

**In response to God, let us ask each other: God has called. Will you follow the call and walk with Jesus?**

# **LOVING GOD WITH ALL OUR HEART**

**A reflection developed from a text by Jean Cardinal Danielou**

The book of Genesis presents us with stories of what are holy pagans; e.g., Abel, Noah, Job and Melchizedek. They show us that offering sacrifice is one of the spontaneous human ways of expressing our relation to God. We are not made merely to have mastery over the world but to point the world back to God by sacrifice. This is perhaps a message the world needs. Being so wholly engrossed in efforts to control things by science based techniques; we have lost that half of ourselves that expresses itself in sacrifice.

How could a more lofty revelation take hold of a person or world so wholly unspiritual, with the very sense of the mystical and the sacred seeming dead in it? How can one talk about a new creation to people who no longer recognize that they are creatures, or speak of the incarnation to those who no longer see any action of God in the world, or who know nothing of contemplation but think only of practical utility?

What has to be restored to the world is the primary, original, universal basis of religion in the human soul, and this is what the saints of paganism stand for, together with the problems they had to meet. Granted there is a “cosmic” liturgy, it is proper that it should have its saints, just as the liturgy of Israel and the Christian liturgy have theirs. The veneration paid to Saint Abel, Saint Job, Saint Lot, duly accords with the calendar of this cosmic liturgy which persists beneath the successive liturgies that have superseded it.

Sanctity consists in a heroic love of God, and this existed in the “cosmic” religion which preceded the revealed ones. In saying this we are here touching on a grand theme, one well known since Augustine—that, namely, of the virtues of the pagans, and it is one which still remains a great mystery.

Sacrifice is the characteristic note of humanity in the religious sphere, as is the tool in the secular sphere. By the first humans affirm that they are not masters of the world, and then by the second that God is the master of humankind’s making. The time for the tool is the period of six days and the time for sacrifice is that of the seventh day. The seven day week liturgy is the first sign of the covenant between God and the human race that integrates the two.

We are sent to help our race renew this covenant and so find itself by recovering its right relationship to God. That is why we are in the world, though not merely of it. We are of God for the world. Let us rejoice and be glad! By loving God with all our heart, and loving our fellows as we love ourselves in God, we bring balance and order to our world and to those we love and serve. In showing God’s love for the world that God created “in the beginning” we will redeem that world wholly “in the end”.

# **THE DAILY IMPACT OF THE INCARNATION**

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

What is the daily meaning of the incarnation? It seems to me that by it an attitude is both recommended and formed in us, especially if we contemplate it as Mary did. We begin by adopting her stance, that of one who is receiving a gift. The gift is Jesus. No greater gift has ever been given us, and in receiving Jesus we receive the ultimate and unsurpassable gift that is God's very self.

What we think of as faith is, in part, the ability to accept this gift for what it really is. God gives it to us and in this way gives himself. The gift is not a fruit of our work, in any sense of that word, but it is the initiative of the God of love. Love puts this gift into our hands—and more importantly into our hearts.

If you imagine yourself in the Holy Land at Jesus' time you imagine your self entering into a civilization and culture different in many ways from those you are used to. Even now, when the presence of Western culture is pervasive, you can perceive vestiges of a very different culture than our own in the Holy Land. Western civilization is totally bent on what comes from human efforts, and on what human beings are capable of by way of planning and execution in the present and for the future. We look at what we do or might do.

As followers of Christ, however, we have been told again and again to remember that our doings and accomplishments only make sense in relation to unseen realities that are quite beyond our abilities to realize. The meaning of our lives is not wholly, or perhaps primarily, dependent on what we do. Indeed, even what we produce is not basically our own; it is no more than the product of talents and gifts which we have received.

So at the root of every meaning that enriches or impoverishes life, there is a gift, and The Gift. The perfect and supreme gift is Jesus Christ. Whenever we contemplate the incarnation we contemplate this Gift as God's great and all-sufficient Gift to our race. We receive Jesus in our arms even as Mary did. Jesus is, and has been, growing within us for a long time and wants to come to birth—for us and for many others. Whenever we contemplate this fact we are called to renew our acceptance of this Gift and of the fact that we are gift-receivers in all we are and do. Having received so much are we prepared to pledge ourselves to the One who gives, and to giving the One who is given us through Mary? In this we become like Mary.

What is important is preserving in our hearts the experience that God first loved us. God took the initiative and always does. Mary, and Jesus, are the exemplars of everything we are and can be, both as individuals and as a Church. Jesus is God made a gift for others. That is what we are too. That is the incarnation, and Mary the Mother, ever reminds us of it daily.