

WHAT ARE YOU AIMING FOR?

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Augustine of Hippo

“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself and take up the cross.” If anyone wants to be a follower of Christ then that person must renounce self and take up a cross and come after Christ. This is the Lord’s command. It may seem hard and heavy. Is it true that everyone who wants to follow Christ has to renounce self? But is that really a hard saying? After all, the command comes from one who helps us live it. The cross involved may seem heavy but the one who lays it on our shoulders helps us to carry it. Jesus said: **“My Yoke is easy and my burden light”**. Besides, whatever seems hard in the Lord’s commands is made easy if done out of love.

We know what great things love can be accomplish, even when it is base and merely sensual. We know what hardships people have endured, what intolerable indignities they have borne to attain the object of their love. What I love indicates the sort of person I am. Making a decision about what kind of person I will be ought to be our one concern in choosing my way of life. Why be surprised if people who set their hearts on Christ and want to follow him are asked to renounce the kind of person they were out of love? If we lose our very self through self-love we ruin our self. We find our new self through renouncing the old self.

Who wouldn’t want to follow Christ to supreme happiness, to perfect peace and to lasting security? We do well if we follow Christ to these realities. But we need to know the way to do this. The Lord Jesus called us to renounce self when he had not yet suffered his passion and risen from the dead. If we look at what he suffered the road seems rough, we want to draw back instead of following Christ—yet they follow him all the same. Christ has leveled the road for us by passing over it himself.

Everyone wants to be exalted and enjoys a high position. Yet self-abasement is the step that leads to it. Are you afraid of taking strides too big for you so that you fall instead of ascending? Recall James and John and their request to have the highest places in his kingdom. They wanted to reach the top without taking the step that leads there—self-abasement. You can’t reach the heights without taking the step of humility. That is the cross.

Taking up the cross means bearing whatever is unpleasant. Some who call themselves Christians may try to dissuade you. If you meet with threats, flattery or opposition that is your cross. Pick it up and carry it. You won’t collapse under it because the Lord carries it with you. What if we have to accept martyrdom or persecution! You can make light of everything if you live love for Christ.

THANK OUR GOD FOR THE GIFT OF WORK

A reflection extracted from a document of the Second Vatican Council

Through the centuries people have labored to better the circumstances of their lives. Considered in itself, this human activity is in accord with God's will. We are created in God's image and have been entrusted with the earth and all that it contains. If man cares for all things well in the name of God then that name will be glorious everywhere. The mandate we have received concerns even the most ordinary activities. By our work we are to contribute to the realization in history of a divine plan.

Far from thinking that the use of human talents and energy are in opposition to God and that we are rivals of our Creator in this regard, Christians are convinced that their triumphs are signs of God's greatness. The greater human power becomes the further extends our responsibility. No one is deterred from building up the world by the Christian message but is rather bound to build it up. Yet while human progress is wonderful it brings with it a temptation, especially when the order of values becomes confused. Individuals and groups then heed solely their own interests and forget those of others. Then the world ceases to be a place of fraternity. The power of humankind may then even threaten to destroy our race itself.

A monumental struggle against the powers of darkness pervades the whole history of humankind. This battle will continue until the Last Day, as the Lord has attested. We are obliged, then, to struggle constantly in order to cling to what is good. We can't secure even our own dignity without much effort and the help of God's grace. This is why Christ's Church, trusting in the Creator's design, acknowledges that human progress serves true happiness but only if it is done according to the light God gives us.

St. Paul warns, "Don't be conformed to this world" and means that we must not give in to the spirit of vanity and malice and selfishness which transforms into so many instruments of sin the human energies and good intending for mutual service and the service of God. So if anyone wants to know how this danger can be overcome Christians will reply that human motivations must be purified and perfected by the power of Christ's cross and resurrection. Thus we can receive and reverence and care for all that is created as flowing constantly from the hand of God.

Let us give thanks to God who gives us the gift of this responsibility to care for all creation and for one another. His is the gift of the freedom to serve and to delight in our service. "All things are yours and you are Christ's and Christ is God's", as St. Paul reminds us (I Cor.3:22f) It is the joy of being children of God living as images of God's love and care.

THE MEANING OF SUFFERING

A reflection developed from a text of Sr. Dianne Bergant

In the Gospels we are all called to follow Jesus. The first disciples were set on fire inwardly by his words and deeds. Yet some of his words scared them. “Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me” frightens many. What the first disciples didn’t understand, and what many today don’t understand, is that the cross—the sufferings we face in following Christ and just living life—are not what makes us or our lives holy but the fidelity we show when we accept every sort of hardship and suffering to follow Jesus. His cross was the price he paid for fidelity to the Heavenly Father and the mission of leading us to all good and the fullness of life.

Nobody wants to suffer for suffering’s sake. Pain, for instance, is a signal that something is wrong with one’s body or mind or relations with others. It calls for us to do what is necessary to set things right. This of what the prophet Jeremiah tells us about himself. He didn’t want suffering. He wanted to stop speaking God’s word calling his contemporaries to follow God’s word and will because it was the only way he could think of to end the pain. But when he tried to stop the message God had given him became, in his words, a kind of fire inside him that he could only quench by proclaiming the message that brought social rejection and physical mistreatment and attempts to kill him. It hurt if he spoke and it hurt if he didn’t speak. It was fidelity to God that brought him both types of suffering and fidelity consecrated the suffering and made it, and him, holy.

Perhaps with all this in mind we can understand what St. Paul says, “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice”. Neither Jeremiah nor Paul nor Jesus calls us to suffer for suffering’s sake. But sacrifice may be required of those who respond faithfully to their call to be disciples. Paul identifies the cause of our crosses: “Don’t conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your inner selves.” He admonished the early Christians to turn away from the social practices that were opposed to Gospel values and to live lives disciplined by Gospel values. He knew from his own experience both the anger this could engender in others and the inner struggle that came from efforts at personal reform and change. Struggling on to live “according to God” is the way one offers one’s self, and so one’s body, as a living sacrifice.

We all know that suffering is often the price we have to pay for fidelity to our vocation. We know that our vocation is to service for the sake of others. Are we ready to sacrifice ourselves as good parents do for their children or are we ready to eliminate those who bring such suffering upon us, as bad parents sometimes kill their children? A commitment to Christ can make tremendous demands. And it can be a desire that burns us from within if we don’t live it out. But the inner transformation Paul spoke of, in his words, lets us “discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect”. Doing that is what counts and makes us and all we suffer holy.

THE BLESSING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

A reflection extracted from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

O Blessed Jesus, how wondrous is the joy with which you comfort those who turn their backs on all that is deceitful and deceiving and the vain joys that brings. How much is your steadfast love better even than life! A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere! Your poor are more blessed in their poverty than the affluent of this passing world. Worldly riches come quickly but those who cling to them are quickly lost with them.

Today the Spirit, like a rushing wind, fills the house where we are sitting in prayer. In this way Divine Truth fulfills the promise made through the Prophet: "Behold, I shall bring upon you a river of peace and an overflowing torrent of glory". What riches stream forth from those whose innermost being contain the waters of life? Not only does the goodness of charity overflow from their hearts, but from their lips pours forth a torrent of eloquence that even enemies can't either resist or contradict. It is to joys of this kind, brethren, that your Consoler invites you. "If anyone thirsts, let that one come to me and drink." O the most abounding generosity of God! O the unfailing bounty of the divine goodness! God offers the Spirit to all.

God is no respecter of persons, takes no cognizance of rank and doesn't enquire about merits. God only wants those who thirst to come so he can fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. Will you disdain this gift given us today? Will you recall what used to be and covet the false security such thoughts bring? Why is this sort of plague so widespread within the sheepfolds of Christ? How has it come about that the green pastures where they have been gathered together seem to so many a kind of howling waste and wilderness? In rich pastures where the grass is most lush why miserably wither away in the sloth that is disdain?

And haven't they tasted the heavenly gift and become partakers of the Holy Spirit? Haven't they tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the world to come? Haven't their hearts often overflowed with words about goodness and their lips poured fourth hymns of praise to God? Now they seem to doze through prayer and give themselves to idle and pernicious thoughts. They want to change from one pasture to another and yet they loathe the new as much as they yawned in the old. They began with the Spirit, so how is it that they are ending with the flesh? They feasted on dainties and now perish with hunger.

I beseech all of you to beware the enemy's seed sown among the good seed of the Good Master. We must not speak against brothers and even if we don't spread malicious gossip do we freely listen to detractors? In speaking like this I don't mean to cast any aspersions on your innocence, brethren. Your salvation is the sole reason for my words. May the grace of the Holy Spirit, so easily cast aside through negligence, take good care to preserve in us all due diligence for the praise and glory of Our Lord Jesus Christ, today and always.

BEARING THE CROSSES OF TODAY

A reflection developed from a meditation by Chiara Lubich

“Jesus began to make it clear to his disciples that he was destined to go to Jerusalem and suffer grievously at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, to be put to death and to be raised up on the third day.” (Mt. 16:21ff) *“Let him take up the cross...”* These are strange and unique words, which like all words said by Jesus, have something in them of a light which this world does not know. They are so luminous that they dazzle and blind the blank and sleep-ridden eyes of many, including apathetic Christians.

We hear about the cross during Lent and even sing hymns about it on Good Friday. Sometimes we hang a cross in a room at home. It is the sign with which we place a kind of seal on many of our activities. Yet we don't understand. And perhaps the problem lies in the fact that love is not understood, not in our “world”. Love is the most beautiful of words, but it is also the most misused and even debased. It refers to the essence of God and the very life of God's children and the life-breath of a Christian. Yet this word has been taken over by the “world”. It is on the lips of people who have no right to it, or at least to its reality.

But that love which is not understood is Love Itself. It is found in God and God's making of us. It is found in that God who come on earth as one among brethren and lived with us and allowed himself to be nailed to a cross in order to save us—even from ourselves. This love is too high and beautiful, too divine and too far above our human loves, too blood-stained and painful, for us to understand it.

The cross is the necessary instrument whereby the divine penetrates into what is human, and whereby humanity participates more fully in God's life, and so enters into the kingdom of heaven, but already does that on this earth. But to enter in we really have to take up our cross. We have to get up in the morning expecting it, and knowing that only by means of it can we receive those gifts which this world doesn't have—peace and joy, and knowledge of the things of Heaven. These are unknown to most people.

The cross is such a common thing. It never fails to come, day by day. Taking up this cross as it comes would be enough to make us saints. The cross is the emblem of the Christian. The world doesn't want it because it believes that it will avoid suffering by fleeing from the cross. People don't know that the cross opens wide the soul of the person who has understood it as the key to the kingdom of light and love—that love the world is always seeking but can't possess because it is walking away from the door that opens on the way to genuine love.

THE BIRTH OF A NEW HEART

A reflection from Journeying With the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

To be in Christ is to have a “new heart”. What is this “new heart”? The biblical texts can help us answer this question in a concrete way. In St. Luke’s Gospel we are told that “Mary kept all these things pondering them in her heart”. What did this do to her heart—not the physical organ but the symbolic center of her life with God?

First, note that the heart is not only the center of feelings and sentiments but is that profound place where our personhood becomes conscious of itself. It is the place where we reflect on happenings, meditate on our sense of reality, and assume responsible attitudes toward the so-called “facts” of our life in relation to the mystery of God.

Secondly, the heart is decisive for salvation. St. Paul told us: “When the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as children.” The divine salvific action in human history became realistically effective only through a woman whose heart was wholly open to God’s call and the Holy Spirit. She had been given a new heart, filled with love towards God, and this opened her life so she could be God’s own mother. Luke’s Gospel makes it clear that the mere presence of Jesus among humankind doesn’t bring about salvation. There were, and are, so many who reject Jesus. Jesus’ presence becomes a source of salvation when he contacts a heart open to new life. That was what he touched when He came to Mary.

When we celebrate the birth of Mary we symbolically rejoice in the gift of a heart always open to God and the parents through whom that gift was given and nurtured during all the years that prepared her for the angel’s words of invitation.

What did they teach her that prepared her to say “Yes!” to God’s summons? They taught her to hope and they taught her expectation. We need to learn those virtues too and there is no one to teach us as well as Mary can—she teaches by example, as we must if our teaching is to be heard and believed.

Those who have a new heart in Jesus have new hopes and expectations. But that tells us that when Mary accepted God’s call to her vocation she was, like us, given a new heart. She was open to that gift through the faith she received from her parents—as is true for most of us. It is through accepting this gift that we were given the many other gifts which have made us the Christians, the believers, we are.

One of the most beautiful of those gifts is that of helping others open their lives to God, and to Christ, and to all the hopes and expectations that light up our days. We have received the same gift that Mary’s parents did, and that Mary did. She has helped countless people open themselves to the gift of a new heart in Jesus. She wants us to open ourselves to receive the gift of helping just as she helps. It flows from the new heart we have already received from Jesus.

GOD'S CARE FOR EACH INDIVIDUAL

A reflection taken from a sermon by Cardinal Newman

When Hagar fled from Sarah and was lost and alone in the wilderness she was visited by an angel. Together with a reproof for her impatience she was given a promise to encourage her. In the mixture of humbling and cheering words Hagar recognized the presence of her Maker and Lord, and that God always comes to those who seek him that shows both holiness and mercy. She had not expected this and so in her mind the Lord became the "God who sees me".

Before the coming of Christ there was little recognition of the fact that the Maker sees and is concerned for each individual human being. But now the gift of knowing God's care for us individually is given to everyone, though only we who are his people may be fully aware of it.

St. Peter Claver was one of the few who recognize the full implications of this fact. He knew that God cared for each and everyone of the many slaves that survived the Atlantic crossing and was sold in South America to Spanish masters. He knew that because God cares for each we in whom God lives are sent to care for each and every person in need of special care. The God who sees each does the seeing through my eyes and yours.

God beholds you individually, whoever you are. God calls you by your name. God sees you and understands you, just as God made you. God knows what is in you, all your own peculiar feelings and thoughts, your dispositions and likings, your strength and your weakness. The fact that you may feel you lack the abilities or resources to help others doesn't matter, and in any case it is false. Peter Claver lacked almost every sort of resource for helping newly landed slaves, many of whom were ill or suffering from exposure. Even his fellows in religion wouldn't help him and thought him crazy for doing what he did. In many instances all he had to give was love and concern and an effort to provide a blanket or some food or fruit.

You are one of those for whom Christ offered up his last prayer. You are one of those for whom Christ gave his life, sealing his love with his blood. You may have nothing to give but a good word or a prayer but you can give it with genuine concern. God sees whether we reach out to others in their need, in whatever kind of need they have. God sees what you have and if it is no more than Christ had would you dare to claim that it wasn't enough. Though he had so little, Peter Claver brought love and concern to tens of thousands. Does that count for nothing? God knows what you can do, and God waits for you to do it. Who knows how God may come to the aid of others when what you can do really isn't enough. Trust in the power of God, and in God living in you.