

TWENTY-THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

Sunday The Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

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RECONCILIATION AS A WORK OF LOVE

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

“Jesus said to his disciples: If a brother or sister does something wrong, go and have the matter out with the person but alone, between the two of you.” (Mt. 18: 15) One of the most difficult challenges we face is that of reconciliation. We live in a time of tremendous turmoil, even within our Church. It isn't simply that parents and children, brothers and sisters, co-workers and relatives are alienated from each other and in disagreement with one another. It is that this ends up in a loss of trust and willingness to work together. There is tremendous animosity even within the Church, and, perhaps as a result of all the mistrust, it extends to government and among nations. Extremism and terrorism threaten everyone.

If we want to experience the peace we long for, and wish to become able to enter into dialogue with those with whom we disagree, we must find ways to accept one another in spite of the differences. Perhaps we even have to revise our understanding of what unity means, even within our families and our churches.

The ideal we treasured where unity in the Church is concerned seems impossible to attain in our present circumstances. Yet that doesn't absolve us of our responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the Church and of our fellow believers. We are, for instance, still obliged to warn one another of the pitfalls that threaten. We also have to accept ourselves the fact that the “old ways” of avoiding these pitfalls are not accepted in many cases.

In effect, Jesus insists that it is not enough for us to “mind our own business”. Each person is responsible for the well-being of a community. Yet we have to negotiate the ways in which this is to be attained and sustained. The community, after all, can suffer because of the sinful conduct of just one member. So we have to face the task of helping the sinner and those sinned against to reconcile. We have to help them find paths to healing, and sometimes as a precondition for reconciliation.

Notice the steps in the process as this Sunday's Scripture presents them. First we have to confront the offense where it occurred and between the individuals involved. Only if this fails are we to bring in other persons of faith to help find a path to reconciliation. If this fails the offense will become a public matter, at least within the faith community to which we belong, and this can have as many bad as good consequences. But we must trust the Lord to lead us to reconciliation, providing we work with all our might and intelligence to find the way that trust points out. We are not promised it will be easy, or comfortable. But are we ready to believe that our God can enable us to live and labor for the coming of the Kingdom in spite of our differences? We are not told that all differences will cease, even in that Kingdom, but we are told that in it all will love and care for one another as the Lord loves and cares for each of us already. Our love is meant to begin now, and not only on the “Last Day”.

THE WORK OF LOVING ONE ANOTHER

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Bede Rigaux

Chapter 18 of St. Matthew's Gospel is filled with instructions about loving and helping one another. We can approach this teaching through what Jesus says about receiving "little children", remembering that this doesn't always mean the very young.

We do this "in Jesus' name". This means welcoming another as Jesus would. We welcome Jesus as ourselves being little children, and must respond as Jesus does. We must become like "little children" if we hope to be welcomed into God's Kingdom. This applies particularly to those who haven't developed the capacity to deal with all sorts of people, even the hostile and those who despise us. By that standard even our own church community is filled with "little children".

To welcome others as Jesus would is to act toward them with humility. In effect, we are told humility is what it takes to enter the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is populated by the humble. We don't demand that others "rise" to some supposed high level on which we think all believers should operate. We accept all as they are and treat them with loving respect.

We cannot allow ourselves to behave toward others in a way that would create obstacles to the spiritual and human growth and well-being of others. We would not want to do this to a little child in the ordinary sense of that term, and we must not do it to anyone. This is especially true, Jesus says, for those "who have faith in me". We must not create obstacles to the growth and flowering of that faith.

The final counsel is that we not despise anyone who comes looking for Jesus. This leads the instruction back to humility and makes it clear that it is a requisite for healthy community! And it is followed up by instructions on dealing with injuries and working to reconcile people who feel they have been injured. Now we see why the title "little one" can apply to so many of us. If we have learned humility we ourselves have become the sort of little one who is able to enter God's Kingdom. We are prepared to reconcile even seventy times seven times a day! That sounds like our day might be take up with reconciliation.

The Church community, and not just Peter, if we take the Gospel wording literally, determines whether offenses are or are not effectively forgiven and all are thus reconciled to one another. If many in our community can't reconcile with those who hold certain views we commit the sin of disunity, which means practical inability to love one another as Jesus loves us. If another has "wronged" you, at least in your eyes, or has, as you see things, wronged the community, you must be prepared to forgive and go on working together and caring for one another no matter how many times you have to accept and go on after disagreements. Following Jesus requires that we learn to pay this price. Perhaps it is our cross, and we must take it up daily and follow our Lord in humility.

FOLLOWING CHRIST IN HUMILITY

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Cyprian of Carthage

A Christian is one who imitates Christ in everything. God's will is what Christ did and taught. It means humility in behavior, steadfastness in faith, restraint in words, justice in deeds and mercy in all things. We must be incapable of doing injury to anyone but able to bear the injuries done to us. Loving our neighbor as ourselves is a matter of rejoicing at the prosperity of a neighbor as if were ourselves who were prospering, and thinking of another's loss as our own. This is to love all, even friends, for God's sake and not for any worldly reason; this is loving even our enemies and doing to another nothing you would not want done to you. It means helping others in time of need, not only according to your means but even beyond your means. It means keeping peace with brothers and sisters, and even with those who do ill to you.

All who love in the name of the Lord will share in the Lord's glory. In effect, we need to learn to rejoice now in the lot God has given us so that we can be happy with it forever. Those who say they believe in the Lord Jesus must live in the same way that he lived. Christ, though Son of God, didn't come to reign or to rule but to serve. So let us imitate Christ.

Christian is a name that stands for justice, for kindness, for integrity and for humility. There is no place in the heart of a Christian for malice but only for goodness and devotion. A Christian is one who follows the lifestyle of Christ, who is merciful to all and doesn't know how to do injustice. A Christian is one who forbids disparagement of the poor and who helps the unfortunate, mourns with those who mourn, feels another's pain as if it were his own, and whose house is open to all.

No one should ever be shut out of a Christian's heart or home. The poor should always be especially welcome. Everyone should know that Christians are really good and that no one is left with any sense of injustice. This is particularly difficult because when Christians are mistreated or slandered they are left, humanly speaking, feeling that they have been treated unjustly.

Why must humility always deeply mark a Christian? If being all that a Christian must were taken in a worldly way it would make us haughty and touchy whenever our excellence seemed slighted. Humility gives us the gift of being concerned not with ourselves but with love of God and service of others. We are given the gift of being people who serve God diligently, night and day, and who are sincere and pure of conscience, because we are filled with love for others rather than self. What we love is not merely earthly and so what we genuinely treasure is not merely of this earth. Where our heart is there our treasure is too. Is our heart with Christ, all day and every day? Pray for this gift.

ACCEPTING ONE ANOTHER IN CHRIST

A reflection taken from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

St. Paul advises us: “*Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.*” You will be doing everything for the glory of God if, when you leave the church, you make yourself responsible for saving a brother or sister, not just by giving correction but by encouraging and pointing to a good path that leads out of harms way. It is easy to point out the harm done by certain kinds of worldly behavior and entertainments. It is less easy to discover how to advise and help others in a way that clearly leads to a beneficial result.

If you busy your mind in finding such ways to help brothers and sisters you will earn a double reward. You are furthering not only another’s salvation but your own. You will have worked to heal a fellow member of Christ’s body but will have contributed to your own inner healing as well. It is a Christian’s pride, so to speak, to follow the Savior’s command not to be concerned only about one’s own welfare but the neighbor’s.

Think, then, of the high honor to which you raise yourself when you regard someone else’s salvation as a matter of extreme importance. As far as is humanly possible you imitate God. Listen to what God says through Isaiah: “*Whoever leads another from wrong to right will be as my own mouth*”. In other words, “Whoever tries to save those that are negligent and to snatch them from the jaws of the devil is imitating me as far as a human being can.” What other work could equal this? Of all good deeds this is the greatest; of all virtues this is the summit.

All this is perfectly reasonable. Christ shed his own blood for our salvation. Paul, speaking of those who give scandal and wound the consciences of others, cried out: “*Because of your knowledge a weak brother or sister is destroyed—someone for whom Christ died!*” So if your Lord shed his blood for that person, surely it is right for you to offer at least some words of encouragement and to extend a helping hand to those who through laxity have fallen into a snare of the devil.

I am quite certain that you will give this kind of help out of the tender love you bear for one who is actually one of your own members, since you are both members of Christ’s one body. You will make every effort to bring a neighbor closer to our common mother—that same Body of Christ. I know that through the grace of God you will find ways to speak healing words, and so words of genuine wisdom, to any who need such help. Pray to receive this gift!

SEE WHAT GOD CALLS GOOD

A reflection developed from a homily by Andrew of Crete

The Cross of Christ is being raised up before all the world. Malice always tries to hide it, but God's love reveals it to more and more people every-where. What is God doing? God is reversing mankind's fundamental sin—that of calling 'good' what God calls 'bad' and of calling 'bad' what God calls 'good'. Look at the cross and ask yourself whether dying on a cross can possibly be good. Beware how you respond, because God said to Jesus, "It is good for you to die on a cross".

How are we saved? We are saved by accepting God's declarations and not that of our own fears and anxieties. What Scripture tells us Eve and Adam did has been annulled by Christ's doing what they refused to do—he has trusted God's love for us and followed the Heavenly Father's command to see even the cross as good.

It is not surprising, then, that the Church rejoices in the cross of Christ and does it by putting on festal robes and singing joyful hymns. She sees what it means to be God's bride and she draws a great throng of peoples from every nation on earth to declare that Christ's obedience is even the greatest of great goods. We are gathered together to join our voices to that of Christ whose obedience renews all things. The cross is held up before our eyes so that we may be raised up to the Heavenly Father with Jesus, and enter with Him the very divine bridal chamber. We declare that we will follow the Word of our God wherever that Word leads us. We declare that we will no longer try to act as though we were God and could decide what will prove truly good or bad for us. What God says we will accept and our lives will be guided by that Divine Word.

The cross is now everywhere adored. That is what brings us joy today! This feast manifests the mystery of God's love and shows us that what many call love doesn't merit that name and that much which we call great and good is not that at all. The Cross is great and good because our loving God has said to it, Be henceforth good because you are to be the ladder leading from earth to heaven. All those who climb it know the good beyond what any earthly mind can grasp. The cross has become a lamp set on the highest of lamp stands and the great and everlasting city set on the highest of mountains.

We who worship Christ, and Christ on the cross, must try to grasp the greatness of what we behold. Through the cross all Peoples have been caught in the fishnet of divine love and through it a seed of faith has been sown throughout the world. It is like a plough which makes the earth fertile, not only as it was originally meant to be but so fertile as to bear fruit a hundred times a hundred fold. To embrace the cross is to declare ourselves faithful to God and ready to act out love and service to God and one another with all our hearts. Listen to Christ's voice: "*Any who would come after me must deny their very selves and take up their cross and follow me!*" Take it up today, right now!

THE CROSS JESUS SHOWS US

A reflection developed from sermon by St. Bernard

When the Virgin Mother brought Jesus to the Temple she expected nothing extraordinary. Yet she was told that because of her beloved child a sword would pierce her heart. Because of her child she had to change her way of looking at her son and at herself. At times we pray, "Humans and animals you will save, O Lord, when you multiply your mercies". But they are multiplied, we find, in the measure we share in Christ's cross and learn to see ourselves as bearers with Christ of a cross. All human creatures are to be made righteous and obedient and filled with godly love and to receive a new heart and a renewed mind. How is this accomplished? It is done through sharing in the cross, as the Lord invites all disciples to do.

Mary shows us what this means. We call her the Mother of Sorrows because she shows it through crosses. To be faithful to her motherly task she suffered the anxiety of all mothers who think they have lost their child and that of learning she must find Jesus in God's Temple. He is our peace, the one who dwells in our hearts through faith, and therein we find God's Temple even if this seems hard. One who is ignorant of Jesus has no guide for life's journey. So many have no knowledge of God, Paul says.

The light came into the world but so many loved darkness more than light. Perhaps they loved darkness because the light comes from the cross and one who seeks the light must embrace the cross. But by seeking Jesus in the Father's House, where he is always found, we receive God's mercy through the cross. Christ was made a little lower than the angels, the first way in which he stripped himself of glory and showed us how to let go of all that is not God. For he makes peace through his blood.

Mary received knowledge of God's mercy as the mercy of the Incarnate Son, and by embracing her own cross out of faithful love for the Heavenly Father. Eve lost all by treating as wisdom what was utter foolishness, and she did it by refusing to believe that what God forbade her was indeed bad. It was in the Temple that Mary heard the first hint of the cross she must bear to be a new Eve and mother to our entire race. She embraced Christ, and with him the cross. She embraced it because God had become for her in Christ a new wisdom and this time it did come from God.

We too have to embrace this wisdom revealed first to Mary. We find it in God's Temple too and we long never to leave that Temple—but then we long to bear a cross. What is it? It is the vocation to which we are called and which we must never desert. This is why I beseech all of my brethren, "let us not walk according to the flesh; let us not be friends of the world first and God second; let us walk freely in the Spirit and live our way of life from our hearts". Christ dwells in our hearts, as he did in Mary's heart even more truly than in her womb. In our heart's love for Christ we see the cross but don't fear. With Mary let us embrace that cross, even unto death.

THE GIFT OF WAITING FOR GOD

A reflection developed from The Virtue of Patience by St. Cyprian

Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, said that he had come to earth to do the Heavenly Father's will. Among the virtues that best revealed his divine majesty was that of waiting upon the Father's will. We call it "patience" or "endurance". We human beings have to wait patiently for the times and circumstances which the Heavenly Father has appointed to come, though we find it hard not to have him grant our petitions immediately. The Eternal Son became human and bore with these as well as all the other frustrating and difficult aspects of being human.

Think of how Christ bore reviling and reproach, insult and mockery and even crucifixion and the shedding of his blood, and all for offenses he was not guilty of committing. Tormentors spit in his face and scourged him and denied the truth of almost all he had taught. He, the innocent one, the just one, was treated as an evil-doer, was slandered, and treated as of no worth because he would not defend himself immediately, as would most humans if they could. In short, he acted as though he were powerless and helpless because that is what human beings are like.

Every act that Jesus performed, from the moment of his appearing among us, bore the stamp of human endurance and patience, as though he were not capable of putting to confusion and defeat those who wronged him. He did not disdain the human condition but showed all human beings that it is possible to please and trust God utterly no matter what may happen to one or those one loves. He saved us by doing what the Heavenly Father asks all of us to do. It is, after all, an especially wonderful way to show one's utter dependence upon God. It is a particularly marvelous way of entrusting oneself and one's future to the loving providence of God.

Jesus fasted for forty days precisely to show that we live primarily by the Word of God and have it most richly when it seems humanly to be wholly absent. He went to John the Baptist to show us all how to turn wholly to God and how to renounce everything which doesn't turn us to God from the depths of our hearts. When he had to contend with the devil he did it with mere words, as we humans have to do. And in all these things he conquered. Thus, most of all, he showed us the path to victory in all things.

Christ didn't treat his disciples as masters treat their slaves but was kind and gentle, and even declared us his friends. He showed how we should deal with both peers and those of lesser station. He bore with people like Judas, even though he knew Judas would betray him, and with a kiss. He gave us wonderful example of how to wait upon the times determined by our God and to do it with love. We have only to follow his example.