



# **IMITATING JESUS**

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

The first reading today confronts us with the Christ Hymn, as it is called. We are told we need to allow the grace of God to reshape us so that we too are ready to let go of whatever special dignity or status we may have and let ourselves be for others only what we are for our God. This is a picture of humility given us by the one who was divine but never asked: “Don’t you know who I am?” All Jesus is concerned for is helping others draw close to God. He begins by showing us practically how loving and caring God really is. So the first challenge posed is that of becoming humble like our Lord. “He humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death”.

Jesus is showing us how to be “truly” human; i.e., human as our God understand this. Further, he shows us that no matter what that may require of us, God will give us more than we could ever lose by following Christ. That is why St. Paul can say, “Do nothing out of selfishness or out of an effort to gain “empty” glory”. In Paul’s day, as in ours, status seemed supremely important. That is why humility seems so extreme a demand, because it ignores this. The second challenge we face is that of really stepping away from social rankings, even in our family or our community of faith.

Now think of the parable of the two sons. One simply refuses to do as he is asked and so publicly insults his father—none of this would have been done in private, you see. The second one says, “Yes sir!” but doesn’t do anything. This is hypocrisy! The one who insults his father isn’t a hypocrite, and actually ends up repenting and doing what he was asked. Which state is better? I think Jesus makes it clear that hypocrisy is worse—yet is there one of us who has accepted the call to do God’s will and then not done it? So we lie if you refuse to face the fact that we too have been, and maybe still are, living out hypocrisy. The most important challenge today’s reading pose is that of repenting practically. You can’t stop playing the hypocrite only in your intention! Isn’t that what we have often enough done? The only way to face this situation is by living humility.

# **THE PRACTICALITIES OF LOVING GOD**

A reflection by Fr. Ives de Montcheuil

Listen once more to Jesus words at the end of Sunday's Gospel: "What is your opinion?" The question was posed about which of the two sons ended up doing his father's will, and by implication it asks us to look at ourselves. We might recall another saying of Jesus, "It isn't those who say to me "Lord! Lord!" who will enter the Kingdom of Heaven but those who do the will of the Heavenly Father." There is only one genuine sign of belonging to the Kingdom and it is faithfulness to the will of God. So which of the two sons was faithful? The one who at first refused, repented, and then actually did what his father told him to do. Wouldn't you rather be like that than like the other?

It is easy to say to ourselves that this parable was only a way of condemning unbelieving Jews as compared with believing Gentiles. But that missed the fact it is intended for us! If you hear the parable you are confessing that you know something of God's will for you. But have you done it yet? Those don't belong to the Kingdom of God who just put their names down as Christian on some census list. We need to be always watching for where Jesus is leading us, because he leads people only to do the Heavenly Father's will.

The Kingdom opens for each of us when we make a practical and personal response to God's leadings. We mustn't confuse loving God with an intention; love of God has to be practical love shown by loving our neighbor. We never know beforehand exactly where Jesus will lead us and we have to keep asking what Jesus wants of us today. The beginning of love for God is this kind of daily dedication to discovering God's will for "me". Note that Fr. Montcheuil was killed by the Nazis as chaplain of a resistance group. Are we ready to make difficult decisions about what following Jesus requires of us practically, no matter what the cost of doing this may turn out to be?

# **PLACING ALL ONE'S HOPE IN GOD**

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Bernard

One who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, says a psalm, says to the Lord: *"You are my protector and my refuge, my God, in you I shall hope"*. This is said with thanksgiving, praising God's mercy. While we are "in the body" we have to flee sometimes from our enemy, and this holds even if we fail at times to flee quickly enough. At times people may come out and pelt us with evil words or worse, and we can be thrown down by this—if we don't learn how to take refuge in the Lord! Even if there is something within us that wants to trust in self or look for help in others rather than the Lord we have to be strong enough even to flee from this. Who will free me from my self and all my weakness? Ever and again we are faced with the need to seek our help in the Lord; there is no other source of sure and ever present hope and refuge in times of distress.

It may be that everyone falls at some time. It seems that the only difference between people is that some call out to the Lord even while still on the ground so that they may be helped up. The "righteous", as we call them, fall even into the Lord's hands. In some marvelous way even their sin works for their justification and justice. We know that absolutely everything works for the good of those who love God. If a fall humbles you doesn't that very fall turn out to be for our good? Doesn't the Lord protect those who are humble? But humility has to be a way of putting oneself into God's loving hands.

It is with all this in mind that the faithful one can say to the Lord, "You are my protector"! Why is this cry in the singular? Because though God is the God of all in creation, in redemption, and in other such benefits yet it is temptations and falls that the chosen ones turn toward God rather than fleeing. So we should look to God as our very own protector. Who could ever become careless if one were looking always to God? This is the practical meaning of our cry, "My God, in you I hope!"

Think of what this cry means. It is not a confession of what was the case or will be the case but of what is right now the case. We must persevere in this hope and not despair or think we hope in vain. If this were not true then we would forever be hypocrites, by our Christian profession and even more so by our monastic profession. We can't always make ourselves do as God would have us do but we can always actually cast ourselves upon God's mercy and ask that strength from on high sustain us in every difficult circumstance.

Well, you say, what about our reward? What about the fruit we should bear if we are good trees in the garden of the Lord? The fruit we should bear is trust in the Lord, always and in every circumstance. We can never fall so far that we are no longer within the Lord's reach. Even if we think we are drowning due to our own foolishness and to trusting in our own strength, when we have sunk like that, we can't even get up by ourselves. We have to cry out. When we do the Lord will save us.

# **CLOSELY FOLLOWING JESUS**

**A reflection taken from a letter by St. Francis**

**The Lord Jesus wants all to be saved through him and to receive him with a pure heart and a sinless body. How happy and blessed are those who love the Lord and do what he says in the Gospel. “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart and your whole soul and your neighbor as yourself.” So let us love God and adore him with a pure heart and soul, since he says that he is especially seeking authentic worshippers who will worship the Father in spirit and truth. Let us sing praises and pray day and night, because we must pray always, and without losing heart.**

**We must love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. We are to observe the commandments and counsels of our Lord Jesus Christ. We must also deny ourselves and submit our bodies to the yoke of service and holy obedience, just as each one promised the Lord. We are not to be wise and prudent “according to the flesh” but rather simple and humble and pure.**

**We must never lord it over others but must rather seek to be servants and subject to every human being for God’s sake. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon all who have done this and persevered till the end. The Spirit will make a dwelling place in such ones, and they shall be children of their Father in Heaven, whose works they do. They are the spouses, brothers and mothers of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

**We must also fast and abstain from vices and sins and from excess in food and drink and be members of Christ’s Church. We must visit churches frequently and show reverence to clerics because of the office they hold and because of the ministry of the Most Holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, which they offer on the altar and which they receive and administer to others. Let us all firmly believe that no one can be saved except through the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Lord’s holy word. Religious, moreover, who have renounced the world, are obliged to do more and greater things while not neglecting these.**

**I, friar Francis, your least servant, by the love that is in God, beg and implore you all to whom this letter may reach to receive these perfumed words of our Lord Jesus Christ with humility and love, and to fulfill them in love and observe them to the letter. May the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit bless all who accept them with love and understand them and persevere to the end in putting them into practice. Amen.**

# **DON'T GET TRAPPED BY LITTLE THINGS**

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

When I contemplate the works the Lord made when in creating the world I find much joy in the majesty of the sun and moon and the beauty of the stars, the depth and width of the sea and the fruitfulness of the earth. I exclaim along with the prophet, "How magnificent are your works, O Lord, you have made all things in wisdom". I can see something of God and God's wisdom but I long for yet more. Then I turn my eyes to the works of God's mercy and contemplate the ineffable grace God shows the wretched this moves the very marrow and guts of my soul. I exclaim, "What return shall I make to the Lord for all the mercies shown me"? This ought to be exceeding sweet to all of us. Why, because the very Son of God has come in our mortal substance. This is grace and a very great grace indeed!

This grace has appeared and is offered to all, and yet not all receive it. What of us? This is the grace that teaches us to reject godless ways and worldly desires that we might live soberly, justly and devoutly in this world. This is the rule that the grace of God teaches us, that we should first turn away from evil and do good. The foundation of every good is that we cast away unfaithfulness and sincerely trust and hope in God. "Without faith", as the Letter to the Hebrews says, "it is impossible to please God." But those who put their hope in worldly things and desires turn away from living this faith.

My most beloved, please take note that we too may have worldly desires and in effect rest our hopes on small and insignificant things. We may desire meaningless trappings by trying to make our clothing appear better and attend to details of length and size and fit. If we do this we have not fully let go of worldly desires. This holds even if we listen to empty words, if we listen willingly to rumors and even repeat them. It holds if we complain about food or sleep or disparage another who doesn't worry about such matters; then we show we have not overcome the world. Do you still have an appetite for honors or for jobs with prestige or if you make much of achievements and envy others who have achieved more by worldly standards, then you show you haven't let go of "worldly desires".

But we are invited to await a blessed hope that is not perishable or transitory but remains for ever, as God does. We await the coming of God in great glory! Whoever receives the Lord in small things and insignificant people will find a great reward. Whoever is not ungrateful for graces that seem small actually has a heart opened to the greatest grace of all, Jesus Christ. Let us pray that the small anxieties that lead us to take our eyes off Christ and let them be fixed on small and worldly things be taken away. Let us pray that we may be confirmed in good works and want nothing more than the great coming of our God and Lord Jesus Christ in glory.

# **CONTEMPLATION & OUR JOURNEY'S END**

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

As presented in the Gospel of John the end of a Christian's journey is found in contemplation. It is a contemplation in charity. For instance, one develops a mature community conscience through efforts, and even the mistakes, we make in dealing with human needs. We have to become increasingly sensitive to them. John shows us the love of God manifest in Christ and urges us to love everyone and to let this become the visible, concrete and nourishing foundation of our Christian community. This is possible as a community embraces a global contemplative vision of life in which all is seen in the light of God-Father, God-Love-Incarnate and God-Gift of Blessing.

The contemplation of divine love gives us a transparent attitude toward all situations so as to live them with the same charity that is summed up and given abiding expression in the Eucharist. It is the apex of the God-Love evangelization, urging us to give ourselves especially to those in need. St. Paul said, "Think of God's mercy and worship Him in a way that is worthy of thinking beings by offering your living bodies as a holy sacrifice truly pleasing to God". That is done through charity.

St. Augustine explained sacrifice as "any work whatsoever that is done to enter into filial and loving communion with God". What is important for Augustine is not the action but its scope. The grace of the Holy Spirit stirs up this spirit of charity-sacrifice in redeemed persons and this is founded in faith. Sacrifice can be described as an action moved by love that leads one to pass from attention to many things to the single hearted attention to God in love. This is also contemplation.

St. Bruno whose feast is today was a priest who taught theology and understood it so truly and practically that it led him to embrace a life of contemplation. He invited others to enter into this life by founding the Carthusian form of monastic life. It is a wondrous way of entering into Christ's sacrifice contemplatively.

It is a properly Christian way because it leads one to lived reflection on the sacrifice of Christ but taken precisely as the summit of the charity that united him to the Heavenly Father and to all those he helped through healings and teachings and example. How does such sacrifice enter into our daily life? Through the right orientation of our heart. This sums up Christian asceticism. Today we might call it a fundamental option for charity. This option is renewed in prayer and in the Eucharist and is a kind of living flame giving vigor and form to all we do. It makes everything truly Christian.

# **OBEYING THE ODOR OF GOD'S LOVE-GIFT**

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

“Like a vine I have brought forth a pleasant odor”, as we read in the Wisdom of Ben Sirach. In their context these words apply to the Person of Wisdom, that is the Son of God. But we know that this doesn't mean they can't be applied to Mary too. It is as if she were telling us, “My childbearing is unique among women, but it has its like among many natural things. Do you want to know how virginity gave birth to the Savior? If ever you find a flower that has been corrupted through giving off a sweet odor you may hold that my virginity was ended when I gave birth to my Savior.”

Mary was overjoyed because she brought forth so fragrant a fruit. From him not only flowed the blood of the passion but day by day she gives to us a joy and love flowing from the sacrifice of her Son, a wine that delights the hearts of all of us. Of course, it is faith that experiences the odor as well as the delight. Jesus, her son, has to implant this in us at the beginning if we are to be drawn to him by that fragrance.

This too discloses multiple meanings. Mary makes it, for instance, fully clear that her flowers are honor and integrity and it is by their fragrance that we are drawn. The fruit, Jesus, is the odor that attracts and the integrity that sanctifies as well as the honor that glorifies. The odor brings us to the path, the integrity leads us along it, and it is honor to which we are led in the end. After all, how could the supreme dignity and glory of heaven exist unless integrity of life and conduct prepared a throne for itself in the lives of those who imitate Mary's example.

Such is my beloved, says Mary, and he is my son, the blessed fruit of my womb, the fruit of the flowers. She was wholly beautiful within and without and was bedecked with a perfect fullness in the loveliness of virginity. In her too chastity reaches perfection. There will be no petulant or wandering gazes but a demeanor radiant with modesty. Speech pleasant and diffident and seasoned with wisdom. It will be in perfect accord with a religious life. As her whole person was alive with the grace of holy living, so we too will be able to say, as we look forward to the bridegroom's entry into our inner chamber, “See, our bed is strewn with flowers!”

All the just are like this. Even when their roots are in earth they grow to the fragrance of resurrection. That is the reward of the just. They become like flowers, like the Virgin and her virgin-born Son, who is crown and Spouse of the virginal. She helps us become brides as she is by leading us to prayer and contemplation, ever pondering the mighty works of God done in our lives and for those our charity can touch and attract to her and so to her Son. She lives in the heart of the Rose that is God's Kingdom and which is filled with flowers of every kind. That statement is an invitation. We are invited to follow her and so come to Jesus, growing within us and to lead many to obedience in the footsteps of Mary and Jesus.

