

NEVER ENDING JOY

The Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

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- Sun CELEBRATING MEPKIN ABBEY'S FOUNDING**
Nov. 12 The Meaning of the Monastic Vocation
A Reflection by Abbot Francis Kline
- Mon Feast of All the Saints of the Order**
13 How Monks Arrive at Blessedness
A reflection by Abbot Aelred of Rievaulx
- Tues Tuesday of the Thirty-Second Week in Ordinary Time**
14 The Path of Mercy is the Path to Heaven
A reflection from a sermon of Abbot Isaac of Stella
- Wed Wednesday, Thirty-Second Week in Ordinary Time**
15 Looking Forward to Heaven
A reflection derived from a text of Sr. Dianne Bergant
- Thurs Memorial of St. Gertrude the Great**
16 The Gift of God that Keeps Us Going
A reflection from the Revelations of St. Gertrude
- Fri Friday of the Thirty-Second Week in Ordinary Time**
17 Obeying the Example of Our Forebears
A reflection from a letter by Abba Anthony of Egypt
- Sat Memorial of Our Lady**
18 Contemplative Recollection
A reflection by Carlo Cardinal Martini

THE MEANING OF THE MONASTIC VOCATION

A reflection by Abbot Francis Kline

The Church is the real and living presence the divine and human Christ—the same Christ who took on our flesh, suffered, died, and rose from the dead on this earth. Because of the baptism of its members into Christ all are called to imitate Him. A monk is inserted into a monastic community in answer to the call to imitate Christ. But the monastery is part of the Church, the Body of Christ on our earth, and so the confines of a monk's interest are as universal as is the Church. In the Church contemplation is present to the whole world. The Church allows the monastic-contemplative to serve as a prophet of forgiveness, not just for individuals but for society at large. This, however, is only a beginning of the contemplative's role in the Church.

As the Church is a sign of salvation for the whole human family, the monastic community has a special charism that calls it to be a sign that points to the human heart, where all tensions that disturb us begin. Refusing to place the blame anywhere else the contemplative is a special kind of sign of conversion and reconciliation. The contemplative goes to the deep places in human persons—personally first of all. This is the place where the truth of Christ must be spoken. “Nothing is secret that will not become known”, as Christ tells us. Christ shows us liberation through faith and trust. The life of a monk points to this deep place in our consciences and to the freeing work of Christ.

As God's gifts to the Church are constantly given in new ways so are the gifts given to monastics. The gift of vocation is a journey of many stages. One's life differs vastly from the first years of formation to the time of harvest, and beyond. But what God gives later preserves the first call with its original grace. For instance, a monastic becomes contemplative in a fuller way in experiencing the paradox that self-renunciation leads to self-fulfillment. This is seen in the monastic community itself where humble lives contribute to the good of others and of the community as a whole while transforming the one who gives the gift into the likeness of the loving and forgiving Christ.

HOW MONKS ARRIVE AT BLESSEDNESS

A reflection from a sermon by Abbot Aelred of Rievaulx

Let us have our eyes on that blessedness which the holy monks who went before us have attained by means of the pains of this life. God has already wiped away the tears from their eyes, and already they see their king in his beauty. We are not asked to conquer beasts but our own souls for Christ, to overcome our self-centered desires.

It is far happier to rejoice with Christ in the company of the saints than be tormented in hell with the devil. So, let us follow the example of the holy monks who already have that joy. Let us cleanse our hearts as they did and become peacemakers with them. Let us love nothing in life more than God and our neighbor. Perfect blessedness is the vision of God but it is promised only to the pure of heart.

Whatever we do let us never judge ourselves perfect until we arrive at this purity. The vision of God is beautiful to see, a pleasure to listen to, sweet to the taste and so loveable that to embrace it is final joy.

With Christ is such satisfaction that one endures crucifixion for it. And if such a homeland draws us then the road to it, as hard as it may be, also draws us and we do not turn away from it. Our departed brothers climbed that laborious road and attained the dwelling place above. Nothing could tear them away from this road. They knew the words, “Blessed will you be if all hate you..”.

May true praise for our saints be on our lips, but not simply lip praise. We truly praise them if we trouble ourselves to imitate them. When we do something freely, we prove that we love that reality and however much we might silence our tongues we give praise by our deeds. Let us hasten to enjoy that sweet company to the full and contemplate with them one whose beauty makes the sun and moon seem nothing.

Since without Christ we can do nothing, let us ask our Lord that through all the merits of our saints he will hold us to this road and by his compassion lead us to the dwelling place on high and crown us with eternal joy. Let us go forth to be with Jesus, our Christ and our Lord, and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit forever.

THE PATH OF MERCY IS THE PATH TO HEAVEN

A reflection from a sermon by Abbot Isaac of Stella

Happy are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Even a righteous person can't contend safely with the all righteous God. It is silly to go out with ten thousand men to meet one who comes against you with twenty. The sensible thing is to send a messenger and ask for terms—before the other has advanced too far.

This is a way of saying, "Enter not into judgment with your servant, O Lord, for in your sight no living being can be justified". Who is our ambassador of peace? His name is Mercy. Only by showing mercy can we hope to receive it. Without mercy righteousness is cruel and brings no one salvation. Only the merciful will have the joy, on the Last Day, of hearing the Lord say, "Come, you blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food".

It is in as much as we show mercy that we shall attain it on That Day. Happy indeed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy. You remember how David sings of mercy and judgment in the psalms. He speaks of them putting mercy first. We must show it first and then at the judgment seat we will receive it. The one who has shown no mercy will be sentenced without mercy.

There are two kinds of mercy, one consists in giving and the other in forgiving. Give and it shall be given to you, says the Lord. Forgive and you shall be forgiven. This will hold in proportion to what we do ourselves. Forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us. With the measure you use for others mercy will be measured out to you. In the first degree of giving mercy one gives from one's goods. As the Lord said, "Give alms and all things will be pure for you." In the second degree one gives all one's possessions. As the apostles said, "See, we have left everything and followed you."

But there is a third degree of giving in which one gives oneself. That is what St. Paul did. "I will gladly spend and be spent for you", he said to Christ. "No one has greater love than this." This is like the way things stand with mercy. There is a giving kind and we monks have given everything we own and ourselves. We have no more to give. But we can still do more; we can forgive one another, and all.

LOOKING FORWARD TO HEAVEN

A reflection developed from a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

The history of ancient Israel shows how often human treachery and selfishness get in the way of the fulfillment of God's promises to us. Yet not even human sinfulness can frustrate God's plans. So we wait anxiously for the time of their fulfillment. In Scripture this is called waiting for the "end time". We think of it as a time very different from the ordinary but will be filled with wondrous events.

Christians believe that Jesus has inaugurated the time of fulfillment. However, don't we still live in ordinary times? Yes and No! This is part of the challenge we face. We are called to live in an extraordinary way in what seems an ordinary time. We are called to live as in the time of fulfillment because that time is realized by God in and through us.

The Gospels and the Letters of St. Paul use many metaphors to speak of our task. Inaugurated by Jesus the end time seems to stretch into an endless future. Yet we are told to be endlessly prepared and that we have been given enough strength to hold out until the Lord comes. Believing and trusting are principal tasks.

We are given many readings featuring the mysterious figure of Wisdom. It is a guide for thoughtful and courageous living in imitation of Jesus. It comes from God and is called the "perfection of prudence", of knowing what to do to help realize the plans of God. To seek such wisdom is to seek God. But we don't actually have to do all the seeking, since we are told that wisdom seeks us just as God does.

God has called and invited us to a fulfillment banquet. It is a celebration of God's gift of peace, and realizes it in celebrating it. We live in the final times but do not yet see their perfect fulfillment. We have to stay awake, as various parables tell us, and hold ourselves always ready for the surprises that God sends us regularly. Each is an opportunity to welcome Christ more fully. We are not alone in our waiting. We wait together, helping one another stay awake and be prepared for the challenges to trust and faith that will finally bring in the perfection of God's reign among us.

THE GIFT OF GOD THAT KEEPS US GOING

A reflection from the Revelations of St. Gertrude

May my soul bless you, O Lord God my creator. May my soul bless you! From the very core of my being may all your merciful gifts sing your praise. Your generous care for me has been rich in mercy. Indeed, it has been immeasurable. As far as I am able I give you thanks. I praise and glorify your great patience, which bore with me even though from my infancy and childhood and adolescence and early adulthood—until I was nearly twenty-six. I had always been blindly irresponsible. Looking back, I see that but for your protecting hand I would have been quite without conscience in thought and word and deed.

You gave me a natural delight in what is good. You provided me with necessary correction from those with whom I lived. Otherwise I should now have to admit to doing my own will, whenever the opportunity offered itself, living like a pagan in a pagan society and never understanding that you, my God, reward good deeds and punish evil. You chose me to be specially trained to serve you.

To make amends for the way I previously lived, I offer you, most loving Father, all the sufferings of your beloved Son, from that first infant cry as he lay on the hay in the manger, until the final moment when he bowed his head and with a mighty voice gave us his spirit. I think, as I make this offering, of all he underwent, his needs as a baby and his dependence as a child, the hardships of youth and the trials of early manhood. To atone for all my neglect I offer, most loving Father, all that your only begotten Son did in thought, word or deed.

As an act of thanksgiving I praise and worship you in deepest humility for your most loving kindness and mercy. Though I was hurrying toward eternal loss your thoughts were of me and were thoughts of peace. You lifted me up with great favors and added the inestimable gift of your friendship. You drew me to yourself by your faithful promises of the good things you would give me from the hour of my death. Even had you given me nothing else my heart would sigh for you always, filled with life-giving hope.

OBEYING THE EXAMPLE OF OUR FORBEARS

A reflection from a Letter by Abba Anthony of Egypt

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. Purity of heart leads to perfection. Two things are contained within the heart—a goodness that is natural to it and an evil which is unnatural. It is the second that gives rise to such things as murmuring, envy, detraction and all the rest. Goodness, on the other hand, promotes knowledge of God and rids the soul of all destructive passions.

If a person honestly tries to root out vice and avoid evil, if one repents with tears and sighs, if one devotes oneself to a life of prayer, fasting, and keeping vigils the Lord in his goodness will come to that person's aid and bring freedom from all sinful inclinations.

Many who have lived a monastic life, even for a long time, have failed to learn what purity of heart is. Instead of studying the teachings of the Elders they have followed their own wayward desires. So evil spirits have prevailed against them, hurling invisible darts by day and night, and preventing them in this way from finding rest of heart. Rather these evil ones fill their hearts with pride, vanity, jealousy, criticism, rage and anger, strife, and any number of such passions. We have to honor and obey those who already have walked the way we walk with success.

People who do not in this way honor our noble dead are to be reckoned among the five foolish virgins who sent the night foolishly and were unprepared when the Lord came. They didn't control their tongues or cleanse their eyes and bodies from concupiscence or purge their hearts of defilements. The Elders we honor teach us how to do these things.

My only reason for writing you is my hope for your salvation. I want you to be free and faithful for the Lord. Let us keep awake while we are still in this body. We must beware of trying to enter by the wide gate or taking the easy path. Those who enter the narrow way seem to be few but they have the joy of receiving the reward the Lord has promised.

I beg you by the grace of God to obey the living examples of the great Elders who have already departed for the Heavenly Kingdom. May we, like them, obey the Lord. One who longs for life obeys.

COMTEMPATIVE RECOLLECTION

A reflection by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Mary was invited to a wedding at Can. So, Jesus with his disciples were invited too. Because of her special relationship with the families of the groom and bride Mary wasn't just enjoying herself but paying special attention to how things were going. I am reminded of an anecdote told by St. Therese of Lisieux. *"I was a cheerful character but I didn't enjoy entering into children's games. Often I would sit under a tree and contemplate whatever my eye happened to notice."* This is perhaps how Mary was at the wedding. She saw the whole picture. She had a gift of synthesis, and so she immediately saw a problem and turned to Jesus: *"They have no more wine!"*

There are many gifts in the Church—of administrating and governing, but also of contemplating and synthesizing. It is Mary's gift and without it the Church would be a sad place. She watches everything with care for needs and lacks. She doesn't try to meet the need she sees by herself but refers everything to Jesus.

Notice that she got involved and identified with the couple who were celebrating their marriage. She wanted Jesus to take care of their problem and almost got rebuked—or whatever Jesus' words intended. Besides, more wine wasn't essential. When people have drunk up everything there is they go home feeling they have had a good time. But Mary wants to go beyond the simply necessary.

What do we need to do to follow just not just well but "perfectly"? So she points us to Jesus and tells us to do whatever he tells us to do. What he tells us will take us beyond the minimum to perfection. Mary herself was going beyond minimums and wants us to do it too. She is sure Jesus will show us what we should do. She wants to help us have the same confidence. Even if what he tells us seem foolish or irrelevant doing it will bring us to perfection. We aren't to get bogged down in our inadequacies or lacks but look to Jesus to point out the right path. Mary always ignores her "nothingness", as she put it. In Jesus we find all that is needed, not just personally but for the joy and fullness of life of our community.

Addressing the people and his disciples Jesus said: “The scribes and the Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses. You must therefore do what they tell you and listen to what they say; but do not be guided by what they do, since they don’t practice what they preach.” Christ is our only true teacher. Unless we listen to his voice speaking within us, no teacher or preacher will be able to lead us to the truth.

To understand this we need to be deeply impressed by the following Christian truth: Besides the sound that strikes the ear there is a secret voice that speaks within and this is the real. Without it all that human words can say is a vain echo of truth. The Son of God doesn’t allow us to assume the title of master, for there is only one master and teacher. None but God can really teach us. Neither humans nor angels can do more than point toward the truth but only God can teach in a way that enables us to distinguish truth from falsehood.

If the sun isn’t shining it’s useless to point to a painting in a dark church and talk about delicate lines and rich colors. We are unable to see anything without sun. There are many ideas that claim our attention and without God’s light we can distinguish the true from the false among them.

The light that enlightens all who are born into this world must help us. Only in Christ’s light can we differentiate correctly. It is our love for Jesus that enables us to savor what is really of God. Jesus is the one who opens our hearts and speaks inwardly. Are we listening for his voice?

DEPENDING ON GOD

A reflection by Abbot Paschal Radbert

Christ is called master and teacher by right of nature rather than by courtesy. Through his incarnation and life on earth we are taught the way to eternal life. The key is humility. Having told his disciples not to allow themselves to be called masters or to love seats of honor he set an example of humility. Look at me, he says, “The Son of Man didn’t come to be served by to serve, and to give his life for the many.”

This was said not only for the instruction of disciples but for all who teach in the Church. None must seek positions of honor but whoever wishes to be great must become the servant of all, as Christ himself did! If anyone wants a high office let him want the labor it entails. Let a person long to serve and minister to everyone.

After reserving the office of teaching to himself, Christ gave the rule that whoever seeks greatness must become servant of all. Learn from me, he said, for I am meek and humble of heart. So anyone who wants to be Christ’s disciple has to hurry and learn the lesson Christ teaches. A perfect disciple is like the Master. If one refuses to learn the Master’s lesson one is not even a disciple. We all learn, and we all teach others, by example. The first lesson Christ teaches is humility and the second is service. This is the example Christ calls us to give.

LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

A reflection developed by a text by Sr. Dianne Bergant

The Bible speaks very often about abuses of position. Because of human weakness the same abuses exist in the Church as in society and politics. Israel's prophets often charged priests with abusing their position to get personal gain or glory rather than to teach and lead others to God. It seems that even legitimate authority figures can be untrustworthy, whether or not they are priests. Jesus says that the Pharisees are abusing their leadership for personal gain.

Notice that Jesus accuses such people of not practicing what they preach in a way that leads others into God's reign, God's Kingdom. They preach loving God with one's entire heart and loving one's neighbor as one's self but don't actually lift a finger to help others do either of these things. Jesus tells us to live the truths they teach even though they themselves don't live them. Isn't that relevant today?

It might seem that such a message is meant more for those who lead the Church and for priests than it is for us. Yet the fact is that we teach. Parents teach their children more by their example than in any other way. They teach them what is important, and too often it has little relation to what Christ tells us is important. Yet such teaching shapes a child's entire subsequent life. Who do we teach? You can answer this question by asking who watches you and uses your example in deciding how to act. Maybe what we are showing others is a way of avoiding loving neighbors or helping those in need. Jesus lesson is for everyone, including you and me.

CELEBRATING CHURCH

A reflection from a homily by Bishop Thomas of Villanova

We all want to live faithful and holy lives. We are told we should do this by listening carefully to the messages we hear in church and to learn to treat all we deal with as holy to God, including our churches and their altars and things we use in worship. But notice that we are the ones who make churches, and all other things holy, because God lives and works, and consecrates every-thing to service and love, in us. “The temple of God is holy and you are that temple.” So when we celebrate a special church we celebrate ourselves as the temples who make it holy by our holy lives.

God is to be worshiped in physical things. Yet is any physical thing so wonderful as the universe? And is it as wonderful as God’s image in us? When Solomon dedicated the temple in Jerusalem he prayed: “The heaven of heavens can’t contain you, so how much less this house that I have built?” But every person is a worthier temple than was Solomon’s, or even the universe is! St. Paul exclaims: “Don’t you know you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”

As God walks in the temple you are, you want nothing to be unworthy of God’s love. God says, “Be holy because I, the Lord, your God, am holy!” Let your heart be holy, let your speech be holy, let your living be holy. Let there be no envy or worldliness or impurity or disordered act be found in God’s temple that you are. Isn’t it true that you have already consecrated yourselves to God? You only need to act out this truth!

CELEBRATING THE LATERAN BASILICA

From The Splendor of the Church by Fr. Henri de Lubac

The mystery of the Church is our own mystery. It is in the church that we encounter God and that he looks upon us in love and are made blessed. The Church is the continual miracle that announces to God's people the Savior's coming. St. Clement of Alexandria said, "Just as the will of God is an act called the world so the intention of God is the salvation of all peoples and is called the Church". For the elect, salvation consists in being welcomed into the heart of the Church, the nuptials of the Lamb, as Scripture calls them.

Holy Church has two lives, one in time and the other in eternity. We must always keep a firm hold on the continuity of the One Church through the diversity of her states. Prior to the incarnation she had become a bride and that remains true to a certain extent until the end of time. God's mystical marriage with us needs the final Parousia for its fulfillment.

When we celebrate the consecration of the Lateran Basilica we view the papal office in the light of the reality that is the earthy-heavenly Church and all the ups and downs that befall it due to human weakness as well as human strength. We are reminded that the strength which truly counts is divine and that before the Church becomes identical with the heavenly Jerusalem much more dross will have to be skimmed off and much transmutation of base metal into precious will be necessary. Much is transitory but God makes of it a providential instrument and promise of the communion that is to come. That is true for each of us as well.

CAST YOUR CARES UPON THE LORD

A reflection taken from a homily by St. Pope Leo

St. Paul urges us to put off our old self with its actions and be renewed daily through a holy way of life. We are a Temple of God and need to be watchful that our hearts aren't unworthy. People are quick to repair their homes when they are damaged by wind or rain since they don't serve us well if we fail to take care of them. God works steadily to renew us but insists on our cooperation. It is a kind of disobedience to grace if we separate ourselves from the one without whom we cannot live well.

A believer hasn't any doubt that divine providence is at work always and everywhere. We know the outcome of human affairs depends on God's power and love. We know everything is ordered toward merciful judgment by our God. None the less, things don't always work out as we hope and sometimes the cause of the wicked seems to triumph. It is only too likely that even generous believers get disturbed and utter false complaints about God's care. Few have the solid strength needed to avoid being shaken by shifts of circumstance. And prosperity as well as adversity may lead a believer astray.

We have to keep on our toes to deal rightly with the wounds we receive because of our human weakness. It calls for unshakable faith and trust in our God's love. Who can have such a faith or trust without help. Where can we turn when we are shaken? What did you do when this happened to you? You trusted God & experienced God's help. God was with you. Never forget that.

LEARNING FROM THE FAITH OF OTHERS

A reflection from a letter of St. Pope John XXIII

St. Martin was a bishop and a zealous pastor. He can well be imitated in the practice of charity. He was also, and first of all, a monk. One might say that the only reason he was such a marvelous doer of charitable deeds was that he was first of all a person of prayer. From this point of view, he has another great lesson to give Christians today.

Martin was eager for solitude and union with God. He never turned his mind from prayer, as his first biographer tells us. When elected bishop he refused to give up the way of life proper to a monk. Note that his principle means of evangelizing was by founding churches and monasteries where there were as yet no Christians. The monks brought immense benefit to the country people, clearing land and make it good farm land. Monastic life shows people what they can do to help one another and do it out of love.

One of the beauties of monastic life is its way of drawing others to mutual help and love. The method of St. Martin has been confirmed by many centuries of experience. He showed what wonders a monastery can work both spiritually and practically, and show how Christian faith can transform a society's life and ways. St. Martin was a model bishop, and a model monk and a model pastor, and he instilled in the society within which he lived a new spirit, both for serving God and for helping one another in love. We are called to do the same service to our society and time and place.