

THE FIFTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

- Sun. **The Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time**
Feb.4 **World Day for Celebrating Consecrated Life**
 A reflection by Fr. Ansfried Hulsbosch
- Mon **Memorial of St. Agatha**
5 **The Gift of One's Self**
 A reflection from a text by Carlo Cardinal Martini
- Tues **Memorial of Sts. Paul Miki and Companions**
6 **The Harvest of a Witness to Charity**
 A reflection from a text by Carlo Cardinal Martini
- Wed **A Day for Remembrance of the Dead**
7 **The Gift of Hope that our Dead Give Us**
 A reflection developed from texts by St. Pope John Paul II
- Thurs **Thursday of the Fifth Week in Ordinary Time**
8 **Following the Example of Jesus**
 A reflection taken from a homily by St. Peter Chrysologos
- Fri **MONASTIC DESERT DAY**
9 **The Obedience of Giving Yourself to God**
 A reflection from Christ the Ideal of the Monk by
 Bl. Columba Marmion
- Sat **Memorial of St. Scholastica**
10 **Love Always Has Priority**
 A reflection taken from the Dialogues of St. Pope Gregory
 the Great

THE HEALING OF OUR HOPE

A reflection by Fr. Ansfried Hulsbosch

“When he left the synagogue, Jesus together with James and John, when into the house of Simon and Andrew. Simon’s mother-in-law lay ill with a fever, and the first thing they did was tell him about her” (Mk.1:29f). Our health depends on our relation with God and yet our orientation to God depends on our contacts with others like ourselves. Recall what the Gospel says about this: “If anyone who has enough to live on sees another in need and yet closes his heart against that person, how can the love of God be in such a one? Children, we must not make love a matter of mere words or talk. We must have genuine love and show it in our deeds. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another God dwells in us and love is brought to perfection in us. Here is the proof that we dwell in God and God in us. God has given us the Holy Spirit.”

Now there is always an element of suffering in Christians’ love for each other. This love is measured by the extent to which we give ourselves—our persons and our possessions. There is a struggle between such giving and our fallen nature. Dying to self is a full-time job, where our natural tendencies are concerned. This is suffering, and it comes from within. We can be a burden to others, as they can be burdens to us. Think of persecution for one’s faith and the way it tests us as well as our love for those who persecute us. Dying for Christ is the highest form of self-affirmation and makes the greatest demands on our freedom, but also on our ability to continue to love those who harm us.

Trials can also come in the form of illness and misfortune and this demands a martyrdom that is our witness to a hope for eternal life. Our daily existence demands a continual reaffirmation of this hope. When our hope is vivid external things, or even internal trials, can’t control us or harm us. They even become benefits. *“We know that in every way God works for good with those who love.”* If we are genuinely upheld by hope in Christ nothing can threaten us any longer. *“What can separate us from the love of Christ—affliction, or hardship, persecution, hunger, nakedness, or the danger of a violent death? For God’s sake we are being killed all the time and are treated like animals set aside for slaughter. Yet in all this we are more than mere conquerors, through Christ who loves us. I am convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or super-human powers, in the present world or that to come, in the forces of nature or in heights or depths—nothing in all creation, that can separate us from the love of God given us in Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

We can endure every sort of test and trial, and emerge victorious, because Jesus has already done so. He is our hope, and everything can be faced because he is with us. If you need your wounded hope healed, stretch out your hand like Peter’s mother-in-law and take the hand of Jesus. He will raise you up.

THE GIFT OF ONE'S SELF

A reflection developed from a text by Carlo Cardinal Martini

The New Testament illustrates the inexhaustible richness of Jesus' words as they became the sources and guides of life for the first Christians. This witness was, and is, continued in the witness of the martyrs. In both cases what is witnessed is charity, lived out in the gift of self in service of others. The service is more often spiritual than simply material. A marvelous example is found in St. Agatha.

Agatha illustrates the sharing of goods we see in the Jerusalem community as presented in the Book of Acts. She was rich yet she became poor because she shared so much with those who were in need. She helped the Christian community of Catania in Sicily to change things for the poor in a way that prefigured the new society that faith in Christ can and will create. In Acts this sort of giving of self is bound together with prayer and with listening to the Lord's Word in joy. It becomes more than a gift of social change. It is equally a gift of a new hope born of faith in Christ's resurrection as shared by us through our union with Him. We give things but the giving is actually rooted in the gift of self.

In Agatha's case this was a consecration of her life and self through the preservation of her virginity as a way of saying that she was married to Jesus and wholly his. For Agatha this led to martyrdom and her steadfastness in the face of every sort of torment was her way of showing that nothing at all can destroy our hope in God, as given us in Jesus' death and resurrection. Notice that this is a free gift, perhaps even more deliberately free than the sharing of all the things she possessed.

Recall the story in Acts of Annas and Saphira, who sold property and pretended to give all to God and their community but actually kept half for themselves. They were making themselves hypocrites and this destroyed them. Agatha refused to pretend in any way. There is a multitude of stories about how she overcame every sort of test and torture. This makes her life a witness to the supreme value of genuineness in our self-giving to God. It makes the point that living hope, no matter what happens, can be a tremendous gift to our fellow Christians. Agatha never stopped hoping or putting all her trust, and so her very self, into God's hands. She witnessed to God's never-ending love for us.

Charity and the concrete ways of sharing and sharing oneself are bound together. Charity is broader than any particular act. It is the best obedience to the Lord. It is a celebration of the resurrection and of the hope we are given in the Lord's resurrection. Charity is joy at Jesus' eternal presence amid his own. But it does aim for concrete action. It searches for ways to do everything that is possible in showing the new life that is proper to believers, socially as well as personally. Every sharing is a free manifestation of the richness of charity, just as our charity is a gift that witnesses to God's never-ending love for us.

THE HARVEST OF A WITNESS TO CHARITY

A reflection developed from a text by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Quite frequently St. Paul's letters speak of Christian charity using the language of worship, calling it an "offering" and a "sacrifice". In Romans he says, "*Think of God's mercy and worship him in a way that is worthy of a thinking being by offering your living bodies as a holy sacrifice*" (Rm.12:1f). He says the same to the Ephesians. It means, first, that worship is one's entire life-work, one's every day gift of self to God. Second, it presents concrete acts of spiritual and material charity as worship. He calls this the best way to come to know the will of God!

The Japanese martyrs provide marvelous examples, especially Fr. Paul Miki. He and his companions, Jesuits and Franciscans and lay Christians, were marched through the countryside to demonstrate what comes of disobeying the emperor. Actually, it showed the hope of Christians for something far beyond any imperial gift or favor. Paul made this clear in a sermon given as he hung on the cross waiting for the executioner to pierce his heart with a lance. From his heart flowed charity more than blood, and it created a Christian community that lived for centuries without church organization or even clergy. These believers had faith and hope, and these kept them faithful to Christ during centuries of being outlawed and persecuted.

The Christian vision of the life of charity is embodied in the famous hymn found in First Corinthians. It distinguishes a Christian's inward love from that of deeds done in conventional service of another, and connects them with tongues, prophesy, and miracles. It denies that even giving oneself to be killed can be important unless motivated by Christian charity. That doesn't make such charity a mystery but links it with acceptance of God and others without conditions, with pardon, with patience and kindness and understanding not based on ordinary reasoning or social training. Most of all it links it with hope.

Hope provides an inner orientation that permits a person to choose the right direction. Love puts us in the presence of God even while it is the supreme discovery of who we are as human beings. It shows us our brothers and sisters in a new light. It is the fruit of our total abandonment into the loving arms of our God. The Spirit speaks to us about this love in the history, as we may call it, of Christian sainthood. Because the saints allowed themselves to be guided by the Spirit they were made holy. They didn't seek to glorify self or any earthly reality, even the Church, but humbly entrusted their lives to God. The Spirit gave them strength and insight to appreciate the world's needs and do something about them. What they did was give themselves to love and to hoping in God. The martyrs, for example, are not our heroes because of the pains they bore for God. The Japanese martyrs were tied up on a cross and then a soldier thrust a lance into their hearts to kill them. It was a simple death without a great deal of suffering. We offer what we are, and God brings much fruit from it.

THE GIFT OF HOPE THAT OUR DEAD GIVE US

A reflection developed from a text by St. Pope John Paul II

The devotion to the memory of the dead, who have gone before us with the sign of faith, is particularly worthy of honor. It is above all a meditation on eternal truths, enabling us to perceive what it is that passes away and what it is that is destined to survive. Today we have come to pay our respects to the memory of the dead with a tribute of prayers to the Lord for their souls, and the hope that mercy has received them into the glory of heaven. But the memory of those who have gone before us, to whom we are linked by bonds of fidelity and gratitude, must also accompany us in every act of our daily life.

This, after all, is the memorial that they deserve. This redounds to their honor; this is the spirit of Christian prayer for the dead. It is inseparable from Christian hope and practice and life. We sing “Deliver me, O Lord” and this invites us to raise our eyes from the grave and to look elsewhere for those who were and are so dear and familiar to us. All who have benefited from the companionship and company of people consecrated to God recall the image of the persons they are and all the spiritual goodness they share, and have shared, with us.

We don't come simply to show respect or say a brief prayer once a month. We feel a deep spiritual communion, and attentive reexamination of the precious examples and lessons we received from those who are now with God. They continue to praise and bless God and to obtain God's blessings for us. It is a blessing that is intended for our spiritual progress. We know that the faithful exult in God's glory and sing for joy never-endingly. It is through such links as those with our dead that the Lord's light passes. Their examples are given us to imitate, and help us thus draw nearer to that Christian perfection which the Lord holds in store for all who turn to him from the depths of their hearts.

The smile of the babe at Bethlehem was the same smile that lights up the faces of all the children of men when they first appear on earth. We know that with it comes the last gasp, and perhaps sob, that we saw on the Cross. It gathers our lives, and all our sufferings, together to hallow them and wipe away all our sins. We know how Christ lived in this our earthly life, and we know how Mary stood beside him, and prays for us, both now and at the hour of our death. In this mystery we see foreshadowed the mystery of the life and salvation of all, and especially of our beloved dead.

With these thoughts our heart reaches out to all, in a kind of sign of heartfelt love and even reparation. It is the longing to reach past the ends of the earth into the heart of Heaven, to Jesus and to our Heavenly Father. That is where, through the blood of Christ, we find our dead. They wait for us and, by their lives and the memories they have left us, they strengthen our hope to enter into God's promise of eternal life with them. Today we celebrate holy hope and the strength it offers all people.

FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Peter Chrysologus

Those who listen attentively to the Gospel story about Jesus' ministry in Capernaum recall that when Jesus ceased his Sabbath morning teaching in the synagogue he went to the home of Andrew and Peter. But you may not have realized that what he was seeking wasn't just to sit down and rest a while. As soon as he came in he was told about the fever Peter's mother-in-law was suffering from and he knew that they told him this with the hope that he would reach out to her and help her. No, he hadn't entered that house hoping for a respite from the labor of ministering to other. He showed this by his reaction to what he heard.

No sooner did he cross the threshold than there was Peter's mother-in-law lying ill in bed and burning with fever. He immediately saw that God had led him to that house so that he might help her. His attention wasn't directed to those who were waiting to greet and receive him, nor to their words of congratulations and appreciation for the words he had spoken in the synagogue. All he had eyes for was the spectacle of a sick woman, lying there consumed by a fever. At once he stretched out his hand to perform the divine work of healing. He would not sit down or eat a bite before he had made it possible for that woman to rise from her bed and join the family in their sabbath meal. "So he took her by the hand and the fever left her." Here you see how every ill loosens its grip on a person whose hand is held by Christ's. No sickness, no ill of any kind, can stand its ground in the face of the very source of health and life. Where the Lord of life has entered, there is no room for death or anything like it.

We have been called to be the face of Christ for one another. Our hands are meant to reach out to those who need to feel the healing touch of the Lord. Do you hesitate because you know you are but human? Don't you believe that Christ himself has sent you to prepare the way for his personal coming, just as he did with his first disciples? Don't you believe that it is Christ's will that you drive out evils and ills, not only physical ones but the spiritual as well? Do you dare to say: Jesus bids you get well and have new life in and with Him? The Gospel tells us that those who follow Jesus' commissioning word to bring light and faith to the world will also heal others. We don't know how he will do this but we ought not to doubt that he will. Keep your eyes open and your hearts attentive to what you are told about the ills from which others suffer. Respond in faith and in trust. Don't act from doubt with your eyes focused only on your own frailties. It is not you who heals but Jesus. Let him use you to do his work.

THE OBEDIENCE OF GIVING YOURSELF TO GOD

A reflection from Christ the Ideal of the Monk by Bl. Columba Marmion

St. Benedict recalls to our minds the psalmist's words, "You have placed authority over our heads". These words may mean nothing to us unless we recall that we have chosen to walk the way of obedience. Moreover, St. Benedict would have us understand that obedience can be very difficult. In the Fourth Degree of Humility he speaks of the hard and contrary things, even injuries, that may befall one in the course of obedience. He warns that obedience is a narrow way. But he adds, that it leads to life. If we obey with faith we may be assured that each act, even if done under difficult circumstances but with trust, will prove to be for our good. We will be acquiring the virtue of obedience and God triumphs precisely in using our frailty and errors for the good of all who trust in God.

Our Holy Father Benedict's words should be before our eyes constantly. The more we see Christ in others, and especially in those set over us, the more fully we enter into the life of faith. Then those who ask us to do difficult and hard things can become for us causes of eternal salvation and Christian perfection.

One who yields up oneself in obedience toward God can be compared to a select arrow shot by the hand of a mighty archer. The one who possesses the supernatural suppleness of obedience is capable of great things. That is because you can count on God, and God can count on you, if you are willing to be such an arrow. Very often God has used people who were willing to trust for work which will bring special help to others and so special glory to God. God uses our obedience to perfect us in the humility that trusts because it never relies on itself.

We all believe in principle that no matter how lofty a goal may be, it is not out of God's reach. God "reaches up" through the entirely inadequate hands of ordinary believers who trust with their whole heart and so aren't afraid to reach out to those who need healing. The more one relies on God the more one is at the disposition of the very power of God. When a woman who had hemorrhaged for fifteen years touched the Lord's clothes he felt power go out of him. That was God's power and it didn't need Jesus to will it for it to heal that woman. Faith was the switch that released it. Can't God do this through us?

We shouldn't be surprised at the prodigies performed by persons who forgot themselves, and so their inadequacies, stripped themselves of all awareness of their power, and obeyed the Lord's commands. Recall the incident when Maur ran to save the boy, Placid, who had fallen into a lake. In self-forgetfulness he walked on water! It is this sort of faith-filled self-forgetfulness that assures us of security in doing God's will. If Christ calls us we can, like Peter, walk on water—only we mustn't doubt. But how can you avoid doubting? Take your eyes off yourself and fix them on our Master and obedience to his commands.

LOVE ALWAYS HAS PRIORITY

A reflection from the Dialogues of St. Pope Gregory the Great

St. Benedict had a twin sister, Scholastica, who was consecrated to God from early childhood, lived in a monastery a few miles from her brother's monastery at Monte Cassino. The two used to get together once a year at a house a short distance from Benedict's monastery. He brought two other monks with him and all of them spent the day singing God's praises and talking about the spiritual life. They ate together in the evening and continued sharing until quite late. On one occasion—indeed it was the last time they were to meet before Scholastica's death—she asked him to stay the entire night and talk about the joys of heaven. But he wouldn't hear of it, because in his Rule it was forbidden ordinarily to stay away from the monastery at night.

It was a clear night but when Benedict refused her request Scholastica folded her hand, put her head on the table top and prayed. St. Gregory tell us that, all of a sudden, there was a flash of lightening, a roll of thunder, and torrential rain! *“By shedding a flood of tears while she prayed, this holy woman had darkened the cloudless sky and brought on a heavy rain!”* The storm's coming, and the end of her prayer, coincided so perfectly that the thunder sounded as she raised her head from the table. Gregory adds: *“Realizing that he couldn't return to the monastery in this storm, Benedict complained bitterly: God forgive you, sister, what have you done?”* But he was complaining to the wrong party. *“When I asked you, you wouldn't listen, so I turned to my God and he heard my prayer! So go ahead, leave and go back to your monastery!”*

Benedict was concerned about giving an example of obedience to the Rule to his monks. But God wills love, and especially love of God, and will that it shall always have first priority in the life of his faithful. So Benedict had no real choice and did stay the night, talking with Scholastica about their love of God and God's love for them. St. Gregory says that both of them derived great profit from their sharing and the holy thoughts they exchanged about the interior life.

“We shouldn't be surprised that Scholastica proved mightier than her brother. Do we not read in St. John that God is love. It is no more than right that the one who loved more should be mightier.” Did God do this for Scholastica because he was preparing her for entry into the Kingdom? It was only three days later that, in prayer, Benedict saw Scholastica entering into heaven. They had been one in this life in many ways, and had even arranged to be buried in the same tomb. Yet it is more important that they were one in God's love, and will be forever.