

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIMES AND THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR HOLY FATHER BENEDICT

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 by Carlo Cardinal Martini

TRUSTING IN GOD'S LOVE HERE & NOW

A reflection from Catechesis by St. Symeon the New Theologian

Many people never stop saying—and I have heard them myself—that if only they had lived in the days of the apostles and been counted worthy to gaze upon Christ as was then possible, they would have become holy. People who say this don't listen to the Gospel of this Sunday and, worse, don't realize that Christ speaks to them, and speaks throughout the entire world, just as he did to those who saw and spoke with Him in the flesh. We believe Christ is God. We believe the Father is always in the Son and the Son is always in the Father, and we believe that God is the same now and always and always speaks the same message and works in the sacraments in the same way. We believe the words Christ spoke through the Spirit: *"My Father is still working and so am I"*.

Do you think that merely hearing Christ's words now and being taught through them about the Kingdom and about Christ himself is not the same as having seen him in the body? But did those who saw him all believe in him? In fact, the situation is the same as it was in Christ's time, except that for us the situation is better. We are more easily led to faith, and to a deeper faith and conviction, than those who saw and heard him in the flesh. Or is your response like that of the people of Nazareth when he visited them in the flesh?

Then Christ appeared to uncomprehending people and appeared to be a person of lowly station. Now he is proclaimed as true God. Then in his body he associated with tax collectors and sinners and ate with them. Now he is seated at the right hand of God and is never in anyway separated from the Father and the Spirit. We are firmly persuaded that it is Christ who feeds the entire world and we declare—if we believe—that without Christ nothing came into being. Then people of the lowliest estate held him in contempt: *"Isn't this the son of Mary and of Joseph the carpenter?"* This is the one kings and rulers now worship as Son of the True God and himself true God. Yes, now in the faith of all, he is glorified and glorifies those who worship him in spirit and in truth, even though he may punish us when we sin. Christ transforms us from, so to speak, clay into iron.

In the flesh he seemed no different from others. Now we believe that the formless and invisible God, without change or alteration, assumed a human form and showed himself to be a normal human being. He ate, he drank, he slept, he sweated, and he grew tired. He did everything other people do except sin. It was very exceptional for anyone to recognize him in that human body as the God who made heaven and earth. *"You, he said to Peter, "are blessed, for flesh and blood has not revealed me to you but my Heavenly Father."*

Yes, all this is always revealed to us! And it is certain that anyone who hears Christ cry out through the Holy Gospels and proclaim the will of the Heavenly Father, and yet doesn't obey him with fear and trembling, is like those who refused to believe in him when he was present in the flesh. There is reason to believe that those who now refuse to obey would regard him in the flesh not as true God but as an enemy of God—as actually happened in more than one instance. How can you fail to be grateful that God has made the path to faith so much easier for you? All you have to do is decide to walk it truly.

BEARING THE BURDEN OF CHRIST'S WAY

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

Do you find the way of faith difficult? Recall Christ's words to his disciples calling them to eat his body and drink his blood, and then recall that many found these words too hard to bear. Christ turned to those who remained and asked: Will you too leave me? Will you respond to the rough and hard things of the life of discipleship as Simon Peter did: "*Lord, you have the words of eternal life! To whom else can we go?*" But if you do respond in this way do you find weariness in Christ's teachings?

O Lord, we pray, that you will grant in abundance to those who hope in you what seems hidden from us! Let us always hope in you, even if we are killed. Grant that I may hope even more if scourged, lashed, burned and killed! Only live in me, Lord!

Blessed is the one who continues in the way of wisdom and with steadfast faith, and who bears trials patiently and with confidence, obedient unto death. Such a person knows that the labors of discipleship will heal the deepest wounds of sin and sorrow. But to achieve this wisdom we mustn't let anything lead us away from the exercises of wisdom. We must never stop praying—whether we pray the divine office or pray privately or pray in "divine reading". We must never turn away from the silence in which we find God no matter how hard such a daily labor may seem. Then one must continue with Scripture. Without perseverance in study how should the Scriptures open themselves to you? Then there is the work of our hands and the many times it seems unrewarding. But don't we realize that the consolation and satisfaction we seek is often reserved to the end of a labor? Recall what Isaiah said: "*In silence and in hope is our strength!*"

Meditate on such things. Wait in silence for the salvation of the Lord. Let the waters of Siloe, as Scripture says, flow silently but inundate the dryness you experience. You will experience this not once but many times, if only your silence is the cultivation of holiness. Meditate and continue in this exercise so that your progress may be revealed to you. The Book of Wisdom says: "*You have desired wisdom, keep holiness and God will give both to you*".

What is horrible thoughts rush in upon you? Fear God and examine carefully whatever thoughts want to enter your heart. You can only do this in the fear of God. Fear of the Lord runs away from evil, both in deed and in thought. It is ever aware of God eternal eye—to whom the entire wheel of time as well as its moving finger is always present. One who at first is restrained by fear is afterwards upheld by love and meditates on holiness and so finds rest and delight in the embrace of wisdom. The outpouring of love casts out weariness and distress with an inpouring of gladness. God wishes to make us partakers of all these things, and even of his own nature. Look to the wisdom of God, to Jesus Christ who lives and reigns in love for ever and ever.

WHERE ST. BENEDICT WOULD LEAD US

A reflection by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

When Moses went to Pharaoh to seek freedom for Israel he asked for permission to go three days journey into the desert in order to worship God. St. Benedict has lead us into the desert to worship God and he leads us by three stages so to speak. He has taught us to make a spiritual three-days journey and has show us how to complete it. The first day's journey is completed the way which is the fear of the Lord, the second by the way of mortification, and the third by the way of obedience.

Listen to Blessed Benedict as he shows us the way. He says, "the first degree of humility is fear of the Lord". This means contempt for riches and the honors of this present world and the first indication of this is humility. Indeed, each of us can see this in oneself. How could you have put aside wealth and possessions, how could you have made this particular journey, unless the fear of the Lord had urged you on? When you were still in and of this world didn't you acquire what you could? If you have given up this sort of cupidity you have indeed completed a journey.

The pathway that still lay ahead of us was one of the mortification of the flesh. St. Benedict says, "the second step in humility is that one not love what one individually wants nor delight in satisfying the desires of the flesh". We mortify the desires of the flesh by vigils and fasts and labors. St. Paul tells us that he was in hunger and thirst and toil and hardship because he saw the members of his body as though fighting the law in his spirit. Benedict lived for some years on bread and water and yet was barely able to escape the temptation of lust. One who wants to complete the second stage of our spiritual journey must cease to delight in satisfying the desires of his flesh.

So he says of the third stage of our journey that "the third step in humility is that one, for love of God, subject self to a senior in all obedience". One wholly gives oneself over to God in all obedience by subjecting self to another so that one can't eat as one likes or fast or work when one chooses but does so when that other commands.

A person who has completed these three days of journey into the desert offers God a sacrifice of penance, of sorrow and distress, of voluntary poverty and casting off concern for self-esteem. One mourns and weeps for one's sins so that they may be carried off by tears of repentance. Then we will have truly gone forth from Egypt and will offer God a pleasing sacrifice. After Benedict has taught us these three things he adds "the fourth degree of humility is to follow patiently and with a quiet mind in the way of obedience, even in hard and contrary things and in the face of injuries". Love to be insignificant for Christ, to be paupers for Christ, to be rejected for Christ. This is what our Blessed Father Benedict teaches us. He leads us to the pastures of eternal happiness, the inheritance of those who are children of God.

WHAT SANCTIFIES A PERSON

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

“God sanctified him through faith and meekness” says the Book of Wisdom. The actual subject of this verse was Moses but it is fitting to apply our Holy Father because he too was a teacher and guide to salvation. Both are our teachers because they could never have lived otherwise than they taught only by having these two virtues.

What could be more notable than the faith that scorned wealth and power, even as a youth? It preferred to suffer the hardships of the world for the sake of God rather than for personal gain or pleasure. What could be holier than meekness. Benedict refused to be provoked even with those who tried to kill him with poisoned wine. And Moses is said to be the meekest of all on earth. I remember reading that Benedict’s gentleness held even for those who spoke against him or tried to do him harm. This doesn’t mean that both didn’t burn with zeal against sinners, since otherwise they would sink into tepidity. They realized that the meekness of peacefulness must be sprinkled with the salt of zeal for justice. We must seek meekness but one that burns with faith.

We too will be sanctified through faith and meekness. But meekness remains unblemished only if faith precedes it. Faith must be true and unblemished and it is only if it is living and vigorous. These two men weren’t afraid even of kings. The reason is that they considered ordinary things as nothing in comparison to the things of God. Faith does two things especially. It speaks penetratingly of the future and gives a keen perception of present things. It does the first through hope and the second by reason of faith in God’s providence. It sees what is not yet present and what for now is invisible. Faith lays hold of the good things to come as if they were already present. It makes them exist in any heart that is filled with faith. For instance, it discloses the presence of God in all things and places. This is what Scripture means when it says, “The just one lives by faith”. And let us be mindful that this is that “faith which is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things that are not apparent”.

If we push God behind our backs as if we had no faith and so put aside fear of God, we are left to fix our attention on empty things. But then how terrible will be the Last Day! But living faith stands before God anxious to behold God’s will. It will stand at Judgment with serenity and behold God’s glory. Let us be watchful and stand firm in faith. The person whom faith arouses through fear isn’t able to slumber through negligence. The one who faith establishes in hope can’t falter through lack of confidence. But all must be done in love. Then indeed will it be said that faith and meekness sanctified us, as it did our Father Benedict. We will be with him in the presence of the Lord forever!

GROWING TOGETHER IN THE LORD

A reflection adapted and developed from a sermon by St. Bernard

We have come together to hear a saving word. That word has been given us in St. Benedict. In him we see the renunciation of the world and the dedication to monastic discipline that we would imitate. Yet there are monks and there are monks, and, looking at myself, I must confess that there are abbots, and then there are abbots. Not everyone is a saving word for others, even when one is called to do precisely that. Here too we can learn from Benedict.

St. Benedict was a tall and fruitful tree, one planted near running waters. He bore his fruit in due season. For three years he remained unknown, helped and nourished by a monk who saw that he could not grow in God all by himself. The time for bearing fruit had not yet come for he was weighed down by great temptations and almost gave up his monastic life and discipline. He did bear fruit—that of sanctity, that of piety and that of righteousness. His miracles witness his sanctity, his teachings witness his piety and his life demonstrates his righteousness. We don't strive for miracles but for righteousness first and then for piety, whether in life or in our words. When the time came this tree bore fruit and bears it even for us and in our day. We can become like our Father Benedict if we let him show us the way.

A tree must be planted by sowing a seed. That seed is both one of example and of word. Who has given these gifts to us? The Lord has planted us. The holy angels have planted us, as we see though Holy Scripture. St. Benedict has planted us and many believers and holy people have planted us. Benedict needed the monk, Romanus, and even as toward the end of his life he needed to word and example of his sister Scholastica, so we need other holy people. What they have sown must grow in you so that you will bear much fruit in and for the Lord. "Those who go forth weeping, bearing their seed, shall come home in joy carrying their sheaves." That is what Scripture tells us.

We must always walk with those who have planted us near streams of the ever-flowing water of grace. We must not be like those who walk with Jesus until it is time to share in his sufferings, and then turn back. We must abide in God's word and in it find our delight. They offer us not only life but the promise of life eternal. This is the hope of the righteous and it is the source of gladness. But we must always walk with Jesus, as have those who helped to plant and water us. We, like any fruitful tree, need pruning and much care. The Lord has given us those who will care for us and walk with us and encourage us and give us the best example their graces permit. We are describing some of the gifts that our Lord showers upon us. We need only abide with Jesus and near the streams of living water. We need only walk together, as Jesus' disciples did with the one we all love more than ourselves. Never lose hope! Never turn back! Let God bring you, in your proper time, to maturity and fruit and the joy of the harvest.

PRAYING FOR HELP TO LIVE AS A MONK SHOULD

A prayer composed by St. Anslem of Canterbury

Holy and blessed Benedict, the grace of Heaven has made you rich with a full blessing of goodness, not just to raise you to glory but that many others be drawn to that same blessedness. Wondering at your life, stirred by your counsels, instructed by your gentle teaching, I call to you, blessed of God, for help. For I profess to lead a life of continually turning to God, as I promised by taking the name and habit of a monk. But my conscience convicts me as a liar to God, O Holy Father Benedict! I beg you not to be scandalized by my many faults but to have pity more than I deserve.

I pledged to serve under your leadership, however feeble a soldier I might be. You have accepted my pledge and placed me under your tutorship, however slow a pupil I might prove. I vowed to live according to your Rule, however carnal a monk I might prove. My perverse heart is as dry and cold as a stone when it comes to deploring the sins I have committed. But when it comes to resisting the occasions of sin I am pliant. My mind is swift to study what is useless and slow even to think of what is good. How slow I am to recall the virtues and with what difficulty do I try to practice them. How long it would take to tell the whole story of my gluttony, laziness, inconstancy, impatience, vainglory, detraction and disobedience. Sometimes my sins drag me hither and thither mocking at me, and at other times they come in a mob and trample me underfoot in triumph.

O blessed Benedict, see indeed how bravely this soldier fights and what marvelous progress is made in your school of the Lord's service! What a marvelous monk I am! Yes, you see a false monk, lost to virtue and burdened with sin. Where shall I turn?

Jesus, my good Lord! Look at my afflictions and my trouble and forgive all my sins! Hear, O Lord, don't cast me off or forsake me. Lead me and help me to do your will. Let my life at least attest what my heart and mouth confess so freely but don't live. Hear the voice of my prayer, my Lord and my God. By the merits and intercession of Holy Benedict, your dear friend, my master and leader, help me.

And you, my good leader and gentle master and dear father, Blessed Benedict, I pray by the mercy that God has shown to you and the mercy you have shown to so many others, that you have compassion on me. Lift up one who is cast down! Strengthen one who wavers! Lead and protect me in the battle against sin. Bring me to the victory and lead me to the heavenly crown. Do it by that charity which you are so anxious for us to take as our rule of life. Make it your care that we may be truly willing, and effectively able, to do all that we ought. We long to glory before the face of God, who lives and reigns forever. Help and lead us and teach us to love the Father and one another as Jesus has loved us.

WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN HAS TO SHARE

Adapted from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

What does it mean to be a “witness”? It means you don’t express your own opinion or communicate your own beliefs but that you share what you have experienced of Another. If that Other is Jesus or God they you share what you have experienced as explaining why you are wholly dedicated to that Other. A witness to Jesus is one who has encountered Jesus personally and testifies to that fact and what it has meant practically. That is the way Kateri Tekakwitha witnessed to Jesus.

Though Kateri wasn’t officially a catechist she had the qualifications. She had opened her heart to Christian faith and had encountered Jesus personally. The missionaries who taught her had said nothing about how women might live a life wholly consecrated to serving God and their people. Kateri, because of her experience of Jesus’ love, and because of the love she gave him in response, created a form of consecrated life for the women of her people. She even moved to a totally Christian village where she could live such a way of life completely and fully.

A person who meets Jesus superficially, by tradition or family-based habit, has no really exact and practical idea of Him. Such a person doesn’t know Jesus as a power of salvation who transforms every aspect of one’s life. Such a person needs to know Jesus as the reply to life’s practical questions, as a genuine “bread of life” and a medicine healing wounds and giving new meaning to suffering. Jesus, genuinely and personally experienced, is the fulfillment of our longings and dreams. He transforms our longings and dreams!

Christian witness, then, is an intense and lived relationship with Jesus as this is shared with others. This should encourage us. Jesus offers such a relationship to each of us. It isn’t something given in an “official” way by an official of the Christian Church: it is a gift from Jesus to each person. We don’t become agents of the Church but witnesses to Jesus and to what he does to humanity and human history, starting with “you”. That is what brought Kateri Tekakwitha to holiness, and one day to official recognition as a saint. She listened to Jesus, she loved Jesus, she sought Jesus—e.g., through a private vow of virginity for the sake of the Kingdom—and she loved him with all her heart and all her life.

Kateri’s Mohawk culture and society had not been Christianized, as we say. But she used it to love Jesus with all her heart and soul and strength, and that was what mattered most. She made of her way of living a witness to this and a way of sharing her faith with others. She sought to help others understand, as best she could, what the Christian message is and to help it open their hearts to the mystery of God’s love for all human persons. She shows that we can all do that no matter what our cultural or social contexts may be, and how open or closed these may be in respect to Jesus and his message. That is our way to holiness and to sanctity too. We only have to say “Yes” to Jesus’ offer of his love and friendship and then respond with our own offer to Him.