

THE TWENTY-FIRST WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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ABANDON YOUR STANDARDS FOR CHRIST'S

A reflection from a Gospel Commentary by St. Cyril of Alexandria

When Jesus asks the Twelve whether they intend to leave him because he demands too much, Peter replies: "*Lord, to whom shall we go?*" Who else can instruct us in the way we must walk? To whom can we go to find anything better? And then he adds: "*You have the words of eternal life!*"

Jesus' words seem as difficult to understand as they are lofty; they lead us to the highest of goals and to a life that is unceasing, endless and that never falls apart and ends. Jesus' words show us most obviously our need to sit at his feet and take him as our one and only teacher.

How shall we go about giving Christ our constant and undivided attention? How are we to make him our guide? We begin by recognizing that he alone knows how to lead us to everlasting life. He knows how to ascend to the divine courts of Heaven and to enter into the assembly of the first born who delight in blessings that surpass all merely human understanding. If we know Christ, then the desire to follow him alone and to be with him always is self-evidently good and saving.

Still we also learn from the Scriptures of Israel. When the Israelites had shaken off Egyptian tyranny and were hurrying toward the promised land, God didn't allow them to go forward in an unordered way. Nor did God's lawgiver allow any one of them to go wherever they might think good. All must have a guide. Without one they would certainly have lost their way completely. All were ordered to follow the cloud that stayed over the Tent of Meeting. They were to move when it did. They were to come to a halt when it did. They were to rest when it did. Staying with this guide was the Israelites' salvation.

God guided Israel using the Tent of Meeting and the cloud that showed itself by day and the fire that shown from within it by night. All Israel was commanded to follow. No one was to undertake the journey they had to make on personal initiative. All were to halt with the cloud and to abide with it. It was by this symbol that they were to understand the message we hear in the words of Christ. "*Whoever serves me must follow me, so as to be with me wherever I am*". Being always in Christ's company means being steadfast in following him. We are to be constant in clinging to Him. Yet to accompany the Savior and to be following him all the time is not at all something we can do simply with our bodies.

What we have to do can be accomplished only by deeds springing from various virtues. It is on this that the wisest disciples fix their minds. They refuse to depart from it no matter what unbelievers say. The Twelve saw that going away would be fatal. Peter's reply says it: We will stay with you always and hold fast to your commands. We will accept your words without finding fault or thinking your teaching makes no sense—as the ignorant think. What shall we think? "*How sweet are your words to my mouth! They are sweeter to me than is honey or a honeycomb!*" These are to be our words at every moment as we follow Christ today and every day.

HOW WE CAN SHOW OTHERS A PATH TO GOD

A reflection from The Confessions by St. Augustine

The day was approaching on which my mother, Monica, would depart this life and it so happened, I believe by your providence Lord, that we were standing together at a window looking at a garden full of flowers. Filled with joy, we spoke about the beauty of the Truth we seek, forgetful of the past and wholly looking forward. We talked about who God is for us and thought of the eternal life the saints live and of what it will be like—that *“which eye has not seen nor ear heard nor has it entered into the human heart”*.

We thirsted for the water of life, the water from your fountain, which is found with you in Heaven and which you are. We prayed together to be sprinkled with that water and to receive it according to our capacity to meditate more deeply on its marvels. And this conversation somehow brought us to a point at which all pleasures from sense and all the brightness of ordinary light seemed not even comparable with the joys of the eternal light. We were lifted up and our love flamed upward towards the One God. We could, so to speak, see all the levels and grades of ordinary reality, but see them as leading to Heaven and You. Our hearts soared even above the moon and the stars that shine on this earth to what is so much higher.

How wonderful it is to think and speak and marvel at your works, Lord. Yes, we were carried beyond ourselves to the endless richness from which you forever feed your Israel with the food that is Truth itself. We glimpsed the life that is the all-creative wisdom that makes both what has been and what will be. It is an uncreated Wisdom which forever is and has been and shall be. It just is, and is eternally. We were helping one another long for this.

We were helping one another find words to speak of such Wisdom, and helping each other long for and even pant after it. We were sighing together and seeming to taste the first fruits of what you have in store for us. We were fixed on it and in it. We heard the sound of our own voices and the words we spoke as they began and ended yet our thoughts were all on your Word, O Lord. Your Word abides forever. It seems to grow old in us even while it makes everything new. You know, Lord, that on that day while we talked of these matters the world with all its delights seemed cheap and nothing in comparison with what we were speaking about. That was the gift we gave one another by your gift.

I remember vividly what my mother said. *“Son, for my part I don’t find any joy in the things of this world! What am I doing here? Why am I here? I no longer know because I no longer hope for anything in this world. The one thing I longed for here was to see you a Catholic Christian before I died. God has given me this, and more superabundantly than I had imagined. Now I see you as God’s servant so completely as to think nothing of worldly happiness. What, then, am I doing here?”* I don’t clearly remember my response to her reflections. But they struck me powerfully! It was some five days later that she fell into a fever and on its ninth day died. She was fifty-six and I was thirty-three. An immeasurable sorrow flowed into my heart, for see what a gift I had lost, and she had gained.

THE CALL TO SHARE LONGING FOR GOD

A reflection developed from a homily by St. Augustine

We have been promised we shall be like Christ and shall see Him as He is. This promise, moreover, is a call. We are called to share with one another the deep longing that leads us to God, and simultaneously makes us like Christ. How can such a thing be possible? It is a matter of sharing what is in your heart. It is in the heart that longing comes to birth. If we obey the call of Scripture we never cease to reflect on this experience.

The crucial fact is that we have received an anointing by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit, we are told, teaches us inwardly and teaches us more than words can say. If I am to share this with you my heart must speak to yours. The work of the Spirit is our longing for God! The entire life of a dedicated Christian is such longing. The very act of longing prepares us to accept all the Lord has to give us, so that when we see him as he is we will become what he is and be utterly satisfied.

In saying this I am trying to help you become aware of the Spirit's action within you. Your Christian life is to be just this sort of effort, but acted out in a way special to each. The effort itself makes our longing more intense and that works an inner transformation.

Suppose you wanted to fill a container with honey and knew you were going to receive a great deal of it. You would begin to wonder if your container would prove large enough. Now each of us is a container. How are we to become larger so as to receive all God wants to give us? You become larger as your longing becomes more intense and fills you more completely. God wants to give you all He is, as he gave all to Jesus. You need to stretch yourself as much as possible to contain that gift!

Just by making us wait, God intensifies our longing and so enlarges our capacity. What we need to do above all is to go on longing harder and harder. Listen to St. Paul's words: *"It isn't that I've already obtained what I seek or am perfect; I don't think that what I have already is what I seek."* That is our situation too. Now listen to St. Paul again: *"This is my one preoccupation; I forget what is past and stretch toward the future, pressing on toward the prize to which I am called"*. He knew he needed stretching to receive *"what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor any human heart imagined"*. God was preparing him for it, as he is preparing us.

We intensify our longing to the extent we free ourselves from other desires. God wants to fill us with a vast good and we have to rid ourselves of what is lesser. God would fill you with honey and you are full of vinegar, so we have to empty ourselves and cleanse ourselves inwardly. But if the reality we are to accept is God that one word describes our heart's desire, and desire is the means of helping others do likewise. We need such help. Then Christ can fill all and we shall be like him when we see him as he is. Christ contains all the fullness of the Godhead and he works to make us like himself. He calls us to share this work with him in helping others long to be like Him and like God.

THE SUFFERING OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

A reflection developed from a homily by Guerric of Igny

“Jesus began to ask the crowds about John: What did you go out to see in the desert?” They didn’t go out to see a reed trembling in the wind, but to see a palm tree able to stand firm in any storm—in particular the storms of Herod’s and of Herodias’ anger. Let them be angry! Let Herodias lay traps! Let the tempest seethe within them and bring malice forth from their hearts. John had born witness to the truth about Herod’s incestuous marriage, just as he had born witness to the Pharisees when they came to ask him what role he played in God’s plan of salvation. The storms didn’t shake John, but ruined Herod and Herodias.

John was sent to bear witness to God’s truth. That meant he was sent to help others see the truth. That is part of our vocation too. Without such help many won’t see the truth. In John’s day some refused such help. Some still do. But offering such help remains our vocation, as it was John’s. We are to imitate John not only in pointing to Jesus Christ as God’s savior and only-begotten Son, but in helping each other recognize our need to turn more completely to God because we sin. And doing this can bring suffering to us from people who want to muzzle anyone who declares the truth about how to live.

What do we celebrate when we recall John the Baptist’s passion. What do we come to this church to see? Is it a priest wearing fine, soft garments? Isn’t it, rather, a community which is determined to imitate John in constancy, in loyalty to God, and in contempt for all that doesn’t help people draw nearer to God.

There are two stages by which our human lowliness climbs to things spiritual and divine. The first is immovable perseverance in the face of temptations and threats. The second is bodily mortification out of desire for the good things of the spirit. Even when temptations have been overcome we must persevere in the practices of penance through which final victory is gained for our spirit so we may thrive as God’s children. As Truth himself said, it behooves us to enter the Kingdom of God through many tribulations.

People who seek the pleasures of the flesh enroll themselves in the Kingdom of this world rather than the Kingdom of God. Has the fire of such seeking gone out entirely in us? Will the winds of wanton words and excessive laughter find no ember to fan into flame in us? It’s no business of mine to pass judgment on others’ consciences. Many live temperately and modestly in the midst of earthly possession and businesses. Yet many behave evilly, even if their clothes are rough and their food sparing. Each must help others as they need it. Each must pay the price for offering that help. If you cannot imitate John in rough garments or a desert diet strive to imitate him by refusing to be a reed trembling in the wind and stay steadfast in the way of the Lord. This is what John did and why he suffered. He spoke words of fire to move the lazy and unfeeling of heart. He prepared the way of the Lord. Let that same sort of voice be in us. And may our actions also mirror our words.

WHAT LEADS US TO OR AWAY FROM CHRIST

A reflection developed from a homily by Fr. J. Hoffmeister

This past Sunday we heard Jesus say: *“There are some of you who do not believe!”* What don’t they believe? They don’t believe that Christ is the Son of God and has come from Heaven to earth. They don’t believe that Christ is both spirit and flesh; i.e., that Christ is truly divine and truly human. They don’t believe that the words of Christ Jesus our Savior are spirit and life; i.e., they don’t believe that Christ can do everything by his word alone. Such persons are far from the centurion who said: *Only say the word and my slave shall be healed.*

Those who don’t believe all these truths also refuse to believe that Christ’s flesh can be given to us as food and his blood as drink. Christ doesn’t say to such, “You don’t understand”. No, he says, “You don’t believe”! Faith is needed. One must shift from what is visible to what is invisible. Christ proceeds to reveal the hidden thoughts of those to whom he speaks, and so reveals he is God, the “Searcher of Hearts”, but they don’t believe. The Lord knew who already believed in him, and the one who was to betray him, and those who would not believe.

We are told: *“After this, many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him”*. Many still find wise sayings hard to accept. Weak souls feel a kind of aversion to more perfect discipline of body and of mind and heart. Those, however, who failed to understand what Christ said also failed to ask for a fuller explanation. They simply went off contemptuously and thought to themselves that he had been talking like a drunkard. Why did they do this? Was it perhaps because they took offense at the lowliness of the Christ who was constantly right there before them? They constantly heard his words and watched his deeds, but simply dismissed him and them as ordinary and went off on their own.

Now look at Christ’s true disciples. They didn’t go away. Indeed, Christ asks them if they will go away and Simon Peter answers for them all. *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe, to know, that you are the Christ, the Son of God”*.

Now everything becomes clear. Those who went away judged Christ to be no more than a carpenter’s son, while those who stayed believed him to be the Son of God and believed that he could definitely give eternal life. Those who didn’t believe Jesus divine as well as human couldn’t believe that he could make them like God by giving them himself as their food and drink.

When we fail to believe in Jesus we also fail to believe in God’s plan for us. To accept what he gives us involves accepting what he will make of us, and failing to believe in ourselves as chosen by God to be made God’s own children. This is a failure to believe what God has in store for us. But if we won’t believe this we won’t accept what he commands. We cannot love others as Jesus does if we won’t believe who Jesus is, and then believe in the power he has to re-make us in his own image.

WHAT LEADS US TO LOVE GOD?

A reflection from *The Confessions* by St. Augustine

There is no doubt in my mind, Lord, that I love you. I feel it with certainty. You struck my heart with your word, and I loved you. But, see, heaven and earth and all that is in them are telling me on every side to love you, and they never stop saying it to everyone, that all may be without excuse. But more deeply yet, you will to have mercy on all you choose to show your mercy, and you have compassion on whomever you decide to show it to. Without such grace heaven and earth would praise you to ears that are deaf.

What do I love when I love you? It isn't the beauty of bodily things, or the glory that fills time, or the brightness of the light that shines on us, or even the sweet melodies of song or the fragrance of flowers or honey's sweetness, or even the embraces of spouses. It isn't these things that I love when I love my God.

And yet I do love them. I love a kind of light, melodies, fragrances, food, embraces. Indeed, God is the light, the melody, the fragrance, the food and the embrace—especially that of my inner self. Deep in me is a brilliance that no space can contain, a sound that time can't carry away, a perfume that no breeze can disperse, a taste never diminished by eating, a clinging together that no satiety will end. This too is what I love when I love my God.

Who is this God? I asked the earth and it answered: "I am not God", and I asked all things that are on earth and they confessed the same thing. I asked the sea and the deeps and the creeping things with living souls, and they all replied: "We are not your God!" "Look above us", they said. I asked the winds of earth's atmosphere and they all answered: "Anaxagoras was wrong; I am not God". I asked the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, and, "No", they said, "we aren't the God for whom you have been looking".

I said to all those things which stand near the gates that are my senses: "Tell me about my God, you who are not God. Tell me something about my God." And they all cried out in a loud voice: "He made us!"

My questions came out of my contemplation of all creation. The answer creatures gave me was proclaimed by their beauty. It is all from God. In loving it I am drawn to God.

CHRIST'S INCARNATION IN MARY & IN US

A reflection based on a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

St. Paul knew full well that the flesh of itself won't get us anywhere apart from the Spirit. It is what gives life. So St. Paul refuses to know Christ simply according to the flesh. Why? He wants to give himself wholly and with the greatest zeal to the life-giving Spirit.

It seems that Mary also had a deep understanding of all this. She longs for all to love the beloved Fruit of her womb. Jesus is the object of her love and prayers. But she doesn't speak of him simply according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. It is as though she were saying, "*Even though I have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now I know him in that way no longer*". Mary longs to see her only begotten son formed in all the children God has given her through Jesus.

All are begotten and brought forth through the Word of Truth. Nevertheless, Mary also brings them forth daily in her loving and devoted care. She longs for them to attain the perfect maturity we see in Christ. This is the full measure of the richness of that Son of hers whom she once bore and goes on bearing in all his incarnations in us. It was the fruit of eternal joy whom she brought forth.

In Ecclesiastes wisdom, speaking as Mary, says: "*I am the mother of fair love and of fear and of knowledge and of holy hope*". Who is your son, O virgin of virgins? Is this son your beloved, O fairest of women? Yes, this is my beloved, this is my son, O Daughters of Jerusalem. My beloved Son is fair love itself. He is fear, and hope and knowledge in the persons who are born of him. He is not only the object of our love, our fear, our knowledge and our hope, more He is the One who works all these things in us.

We thus become like so many members of a single body. Through the virtues as though through many members of a single body, Jesus takes form within us. Christ will be perfectly formed in you—to the extent that it is possible in this life—as his Truth finds full expression in and through your thoughts, words & deeds.

First, you must recognize that He has and is the Truth. Having recognized this truth, we must glorify him through our reverential fear and hope. And lest this hope be disappointed the charity of God must be poured out into our hearts. Then only is Christ fully formed in you.

This is what Mary has always longed for. This is a fulfillment of her vocation. It is only through our formation in love that Christ is fully formed within us all. That is what we are to pray for daily, with Mary and with all God's saints.