

TWENTY-SECOND WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

- Sun. **The Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time**
Sept. 2 **THE REAL HEART OF THE MATTER**
 A reflection inspired by a retreat conference of Fr. R. Knox
- Mon. **LABOR DAY**
3 **Memorial of St. Pope Gregory the Great**
 FOCUSING OUR LABOR ON GOD'S KINGDOM
 A reflection based on sermons of St. Pope John XXIII
- Tues. **Tuesday of the 22nd Week in Ordinary Time**
4 **CORRECTLY USING GOD'S LAW**
 A reflection from Against Heresies by St. Irenaeus
- Wed. **Wednesday of the 22nd Week in Ordinary Time**
5 **WHAT DO WE TRULY LONG FOR?**
 A reflection from Prayers for All Times by Pierre Charles
- Thurs. **Thursday of the 22nd Week in Ordinary Time**
6 **HOW CAN I LOVE MY PARENTS IN TRUTH?**
 A reflection from a letter to his father by Emmanuel Mounier
- Fri. **DESERT DAY**
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 THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION TO JOY
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- Sat. **Feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary**
8 **THE JOY OF HAVING A MOTHER**
 From Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

THE REAL HEART OF THE MATTER

A reflection inspired by a retreat conference of Fr. Ronald Knox

Why did the Lord want to come to earth as a Jew, and then spend so much time and effort criticizing the observance of the customs that most perceived as proper signs of being Jewish? It was, I think, because he saw one primary failing as characteristic of the “lost of the House of Israel” to whom he had been primarily sent. They were lost because the way they observed the prescriptions of the Law treated them as values in themselves. Usually we interpret this as critiquing all religious practice done for the sake of appearances. Yet the actual failing is common to the whole human race. How much of your life is dominated by a feeling that you have to keep up appearances and need to do what people expect? Are we better than the Pharisees Jesus took to task or just like them?

Put yourself for a moment in Jesus’ place when the Pharisees criticize him for letting his disciples ignore some of Israel’s many purity regulations. Today we still hear concern about washing one’s hands before eating. How would you reply? In effect, Jesus reminds his critics that purity is important only as it keeps one’s heart fixed on God and entrusts all one’s mind and heart and life to God. Yes, but isn’t that what one does in observing purity regulations? God gave them to us through our ancestors and sages and we do them, whether or not we see a deeper meaning in them, simply to obey God in every way and time and place!

But, Jesus adds, you are forgetting things like justice; i.e., like treating others as you want people to treat you—respecting and caring for them and treating them fairly. Are you praying to cover up the fact you are robbing widows of the little they have to live on? You see, actually you often treat religious customs as though they were more important than justice. God has not only called you to love him with all your mind and heart and life but also to love your neighbors, and love them as God loves them. Unless your religious customs help you do this in deed and not just in thought you are not loving God but pretending to love God while you spend your time and energy on trying to build up yourself and make yourself more important socially. Do you want others to honor you or do you seek your honor from God? You seem to use a pretended honoring of God as a means to get honor from other people.

We are as God sees us. What’s wrong about seeking “human respect” is that it gets us into the habit of asking, “What will others think?” and forgetting to ask, “What will God think?” We are commanded to help one another. That means helping one another put God first and showing love for one another in ways that helps them too put God first. As you observe customs of courtesy and mutual respect do you do this in ways that help all concerned recall God’s love for us and our need to love God by loving each other so that we all go steadily toward God and God’s Kingdom?

FOCUSING OUR LABORS ON GOD'S KINGDOM

A reflection based on sermons by St. Pope John XXIII

Today we celebrate both Labor Day. The labors of St. Pope Gregory the Great are examples for us. Pope Gregory worked incessantly for both human well-being and the salvation of the people of his diocese, clergy and monks and ordinary folks. He didn't see his labors for these different purposes as somehow in opposition to one another. Think, for instance, of the Lord's reminder that "a laborer deserves his food" (Matt.10:10) Jesus is reminding us that our work is sacred. It is the work of a person who directs every effort to the good of others but does this precisely as "child of God".

Without faith in God it is impossible to achieve this or even have an enduring success in this world. Faith in God calls us to faith in ourselves. We have wonderful powers which we need to use to develop ourselves in ways that will enable us to better support one another. God created us in the divine image and likeness and placed us on earth to cultivate and watch over it. Our dignity is reflected in the way we carry out this vocation. It means we have to avoid the dead end that is selfish individualism and that isolates us from the common effort to build up one another and human society. To refuse this is more an expression of cowardice than worldly wisdom. We can only become images and likenesses of our God in active solidarity and mutual assistance.

Jesus is God come into the world to save us. Not to save us from the world but from becoming a false self. Jesus spent most of the years of his life as an ordinary skilled worker, a manual laborer. We see that work is a noble thing. The better our work is done, all things considered, the nobler it is. It is even more noble if we do it in a way that others can see as pointing toward God and living the love God has shown us in Jesus. Yes, some are contemplatives, some are apostles, some are great writers or artists in various types of labor, but everyone's work can be done in a way that directs minds and hearts to the higher community to which God calls all. Working in this way makes it an expression of mutual love and service, no matter what the product of the work may be.

The Scriptures tell us a story about the Joseph who was sold into slavery by his own brothers so they wouldn't have to compete with him for their father's attention and concern. The Scriptures also tell us a story of Joseph the husband of Mary, who saw everything he did as a way of carrying out God's call to him to both love God and others, starting with his own family. We are called to spend ourselves like these Josephs in practicing care for others and promoting justice. We must make prayer the breath and sustenance of our lives. Remember Benedict of Norcia and his motto: Pray and work. All activity, whether or not we call it "work", stretches out toward the city of God. There all do receive their just reward and do find the fulfillment of their identity as children of God, created in the image of love. For God is love. That is what we are too.

CORRECTLY USING GOD'S LAW

A reflection from Against Heresies by St. Irenaeus

Why do you transgress God's commandment for the sake of your own tradition? This question was posed to a group of Pharisees by the Lord Jesus himself, and he poses it to us as well. The Pharisees, for example, claimed that the traditions of their ancestors safeguarded the Law of God given them through Moses. But they hadn't looked carefully enough at the actual effect of some of these traditions. Isaiah had already pointed this out parabolically: "Your merchants mix water with the wine"; i.e., they presented as pure what was really adulterated and they did this to secure their own advantage without caring that it might also wrong others.

What is this transgression? It is the sin of interpreting God's law in a way that makes it serve merely human purposes. The net effect was to suppress some of God's commands or add new commandments that claimed to be God's but were not. But most people weren't able to tell the difference between what actually came from God and what came from merely human sources. The Pharisees had the training that could have enabled them to distinguish what comes from God and what doesn't, but they didn't use it carefully. Once they had enunciated a tradition they blindly defended it without considering whether or not it supported or offended the laws coming from God.

Christ healed on the Sabbath and was criticized for it. Some were so offended they wanted to kill him because he did this. The Lord pointed out that the entirety of the Law, as well as the prophet's interpretations of it, was designed to secure the well-being of people and lead them to put God first in their living. The Sabbath was given to help promote these ends. If what he did on the Sabbath led others to love God with their whole heart and their neighbors as themselves then it fulfilled the Law and didn't offend it. No commandment, he emphasized, is more important than the command to love God and love one's "neighbor".

We find St. Paul teaching the same thing when he affirms that "love is the fulfillment of the law". If all other gifts of God fail among us, faith and hope and love will never fail. The greatest of these is love. To call it "greatest" is to say that faith and hope aren't great themselves apart from love. Without love they can't fulfill their purpose. Thus, St. Paul goes on to point out that knowledge is useless apart from love of God and neighbor. The understanding of prophecies or mysteries or faith—apart from love—doesn't build anyone up. It is love that perfects and builds people up. One who loves God with the whole heart and mind and all the activities of life is perfect in this world and in the next.

We must never cease to love God. The more we fix our gaze on God the more our love for God will grow. But eternal life consists in loving God wholly. So, when we help others turn their attention to God and think of God and pray to God and put nothing before God and God's love, then we are fitting ourselves and them more and more for the life God calls us to share forever. That is the purpose of God's Law.

WHAT DO WE TRULY LONG FOR?

A reflection from Prayers for All Times by Pierre Charles

Where are people who rejoice only when Jesus Christ comes into their lives? Where are those whose greatest joy is to think they are bringing the hour of Jesus return a bit closer? Who longs most to introduce Jesus to people who don't yet know him, or the Heavenly Father? Isn't it true that the "propagation", the spreading, of our faith is to be our perpetual preoccupation?

What keeps you from sleeping? What if you are expecting the arrival of a friend or of one who you love more than any other, do you then find yourself unable to sleep because of your feeling of anticipation? In such circumstances, do you find you can only stand at a window and wait longingly?

The redeemer is descending by our earthly roads looking for the sheep of his fold who have gone astray or who don't yet know him. But perhaps we have made for ourselves in a rather comfortable life so that what seem to be delays in Christ's coming could be even longer without causing any inconvenience, let alone any great distress. If you were told that in place of a heavenly home yet to come you might make a permanent nest here on earth, would you be quite content?

The coming of Christ is vitally important only to those who are "pure of heart—those who have fixed all their love and hope for joy on God. But the longer my life lasts the more I see that I am covered with splotches and scars and that I usually live the life of an indolent person richer in dreams than in accomplished worth, and ready to content myself with wishes instead of actions. Do I rest in self-esteem as my basic value? It is falsehoods like this that keep us from Christ and prevent our longing ardently for his coming. When we are told we will soon go to Him does that fill us with exultation?

Our first forebears in faith watched for you, O Lord, as we watch for dawn of a longed-for achievement or recognition. You will come at the end of time and that means you will come in your own hour. But what are you still waiting to put into my hands, and what task for you and others do you still want me to do? I ask your pardon for all I have not done, or even realized I should do. I want to remain on my knees in our invisible sanctuary until I know I have been forgiven all this. Please grant me forgiveness and the gift of perseverance!

You seem to hide yourself, like a supremely precious pearl, amid bitterness and suffering and even the shadow of death. Yet I need to prepare for the life of those you have chosen to be yours forever. I need to live in blessed expectation with my heart raised aloft to you. O my God, cut down or cut out in me all that hinders your coming—into me and into my world. Break whatever serves as a screen to hide you.

Come, now and in your hour, as a friend so long desired and so hoped for that no other hope can even compete with my hope for your coming. That is what I pray for today. That is what life is truly for. That is how we can use our time correctly and in holiness.

HOW CAN I LOVE MY PARENTS IN TRUTH?

From a letter to his father by Emmanuel Mounier

For some years when I have heard the commandment, “honor your father and your mother”, it has meant: Watch them grow old, knowing that you live a life out of touch with theirs, because they gave you the chance to build your own life and this took you to a world different from theirs.

The opportunities for communication lessen more due to divergence in ways of life than by reason of physical distance. I have a fund of experience of which they can't have even a memory. How can we communicate and care for one another?

One can go on as if nothing had happened and not admit that the intimate communication we once had is now dead. Should we allow that to turn into indifference and let that indifference become permanent? But to be indifferent to someone is to treat that person like an inanimate object. We don't want to do that to one another.

Do honor your father and your mother! Don't dishonor them with neglect of the sort I just described. Don't hide your real self and allow them to see nothing but a false and artificial picture of yourself. We want a real relationship with one another.

A living relationship can only be born of new experiences, and the problems that go with them. If we build such a relationship we will be unable to avoid hurting one another. That goes with deciding to go on and face up to the disagreements that divide us without trying to make them go away. But the pain that results seems necessary for the rebirth of our mutual affection. It is a hundred times more respectful and loving than the disrespect we would show by ignoring these realities.

Let's, then, stop trying to keep alive artificially the kind of affection we had in the past. It has had its time; it was beautiful in its time; but it is mere hypocrisy if we try to continue it now. Let's establish something better and stronger, the affection of an adult man and woman for an adult man who is the product of their care and returns to them with his own care.

Honor your parents, that is, help them to succeed in achieving this kind of transformation. It is easier for me than for my parents. After all, I am carried along by the very demands of the struggle I am involved in every day. My parents can't even visualize my present life. Parents see one through the eyes of memory so that to them one is still a child. Does this seem to unfairly put the burden of building a new relationship on them?

Of course, they had to do this kind of building after they married. Honor your parents means, then, to help them by your youth to conquer their old age. But they can decide how much they want me to help them do this. For all of us it means starting anew to build a kind of relationship we never had before. Will the past we share be enough to motivate us to do this, with all the risks for pain and failure it involves? Perhaps the commandment God gives us makes this one of our jobs and just because God joined us together.

THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION TO JOY

A reflection by G. K. Chesterton

It has sometimes been claimed that Paganism is a religion of joy and Christianity one of sorrow. That is pure nonsense! Everything human has in it both joy and sorrow; the only topic of interest here is the way joy and sorrow get balanced or divided by different beliefs. What is most interesting is that pagans take special delight in the earth but grow more and more sad as they draw nearer to the next world. What's more, their joy is about mere facts of life and not due to its origin or goal. To pagans the small things are sweet, as we see in ancient poetry, but the broad things are bitter. Paganism is darkened with an incurable despair because all ends.

The majority of human beings have been forced to find their joy in little things and be sad about the big ones. Nevertheless, and I offer this as my contribution to dogma, it is not native to human beings to feel this way. We humans are more ourselves when joy is the fundamental thing and grief is the superficial one. Thanksgiving seems to be the permanent pulsation of the human spirit, while pessimism is at best an emotional half-holiday. Joy is an uproarious labor by which all things live fully. Yet, according to the appearances grasped by pagan and agnostics, this primal need of human nature can never be fulfilled. Joy ought to be expansive; but for the agnostic it must be contractive because it can cling only to one aspect, one corner, of the world. Grief ought to be for a moment; yet for the agnostic its desolation is spread through an unthinkable eternity.

This view of agnosticism presents what I call being born and living upside down. To the modern person the heavens are actually below the earth; the explanation is simple; the skeptic is standing on his or her head—a weak pedestal to try and stand on. On the other hand, Christianity satisfied suddenly and perfectly the ancestral human instinct to stand right side up, so its creed of joy born of hope becomes something gigantic and sadness something special and small.

The vault of heaven above us is not deaf because the universe is an idiot; the silence is not the heartless silence of an endless and aimless world. Rather, the silence around us is a small and pitiful stillness like the stillness of a sickroom. We are permitted tragedy because the energy of divine things would knock us down as in a drunken farce. Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian. Open the small book which shows us how Christianity came to be. The tremendous figure of Christ towers above all others. His pathos was almost casual; he never concealed his tears; and yet he did conceal something. It wasn't his anger. He flung furniture (money changers tables) down the steps of the Temple. He asked people how they expected to avoid damnation.

There was still something he hid when he went up a mountain to pray. I have sometimes fancied that it was his mirth. He saw our hopes realized.

THE JOY OF HAVING A MOTHER

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

No authentic text of Sacred Scripture tells us directly of Mary's birth. This very ancient feast is born of the Church childlike love for its mother. It marks the beginning of the liturgical year in the Eastern Church and in parts of the west the beginning of the pastoral year. Thus, the entire Church lovingly celebrates this feast as children do their mother's birthday, even though we have no exact idea of the circumstances of her birth. One might say we are drawing attention to the fact that there is a mother and there is this mother, through whom the divine design became real for us. The Church exults with joy at the thought that it has a mother and that it has this mother!

Mary is the one who makes Jesus part of a people. From Abraham through David and through the long genealogy of Jesus' ancestors, she made him part of a people, of a tribe and in the context of a real place in Israel, Bethlehem. She placed him in a specific set of surroundings. She made God human and incarnated God in time.

The divine design, which according to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, is expressed in five great stages—awareness, predestination, call, justification and glorification—which cover everyone destined to share in that design becomes a detailed and precise reality, assumes a local color and geography. It becomes part of a certain culture and expressed within precise historical limits. We might say that through Mary the divine design passes from the abstract to the concrete.

The Messiah and our salvation come from a great story—glorious as well as wretched, painful and humiliating, as the genealogy shows—as well as from a simple and humble story. How does this help us grasp the meaning of the Birth of Mary?

Ask: What are we celebrating? What is Mary's personal and free gesture? We are considering her being-generated, her birth in the love of God and of her parents and doing this with the simplicity which has nothing and receives everything.

The birth of Mary is totally gratuitous. It is a pure and radical act of receiving. This infant, this little girl called Mary, doesn't accomplish anything in her birth. She is simply given the destiny of being the object of God's working. From this point on her actions will be personal, courageous, and definitive commitments. Her birth prefigures the approach Mary will consciously cultivate. She is dependent on God's actions, on God's initiative and God's love. Her birth is the triumph of God's free initiative of tenderness, of compassion and of love. God bends down to us and in pure love calls us to a mysterious alliance. Our task is to be alert today to the challenges due to today's history.