

THE TWENTY-NINTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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TURNING ORDINARY VALUES UPSIDE DOWN

A reflection by Fr. Alonso de Orozco

Listen to our Lord: *“Whoever wants to be greater among you should be servant to you all, and whoever wants to be first among you should be your slave”* (Mk.10:33f). What a heavenly wisdom! What a marvelous teaching! Would that ecclesiastics, and all people, wrote this deep in their hearts! Does a free person ever long to become a slave? Does anyone strive with all their might to become one? Yet there are people who strive to be over others and don’t stop to think of what the Lord has commanded.

I recall that St. Paul said, *“Whoever wants to be a bishop wants something good”*. But those who want it don’t notice that the episcopate is a burden and not an honor. Both St. Augustine and St. Thomas explain this and St. John Chrysostom, followed by St. Basil, tell us that it is good to want a good work but is pure emptiness to seek to occupy the first place. Isn’t this implicit in the fact that the Pope gives himself the title *“servant of the servants of God”*?

So that his disciples might learn this serious lesson even better, Jesus offers himself as a wonderful example. Listen to him: *“The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many”*. This is like the clearest of all possible mirrors in which to see yourself. Those who have a pastoral office in the Church ought to keep this always and everywhere before their eyes. Then they can be humble and poor in spirit. Jesus knew well how tyrannical the ambitious can become and what great damage this can cause—not only to human beings but to angels. Jesus came humbly from heaven in order to tear down the tower of Babel by the strength of humility.

“Though the Son was in the form of God, he didn’t think that equality with God was something to be clung to, but he emptied himself and took the form of a slave.” He did this in order to bring us from earth to a heavenly state. That is why I plead with you to contemplate the humiliating death of Christ with the entire power of your mind. Follow in his steps. Don’t long for a first place in this life, as the two apostles did. Like the wild grass it withers quickly and is gone. Isaiah warns us of this.

What we should do is drink the Lord’s cup and freely carry the cross. We need to cry out with David: *“What return am I to make to the Lord for all he has given me? I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his holy ones.”* What does it mean to drink the cup of the Lord? St. Jerome tells us that it means dying to our personal longings and wants, and to this world’s, and leading an innocent life with Christ and like Christ.

Listen to Christ’s promise. *“To the one who overcomes as I have overcome I will give a place on my throne just as I have a place on my Father’s throne”*. To God and to his Christ be glory and honor though endless ages. Following Christ and giving God glory is our task. That is how we turn the world upside down so all can be the Kingdom of God.

LITTLE THINGS THAT ARE IMPORTANT

A reflection taken from talks by St. Pope John Paul II

God keeps especially in mind those who are in need and those who suffer. The Son of God was born poor and lived among the poor in order by his poverty to make us rich spiritually. This is how God's plan of redemption works. We are not, then, merely God's servants; we are God's children. Can we doubt that our Heavenly Father gives good things to his children? God's greatest gift is Christ. Christ is always there for us; Christ relieves and refreshes us when we are weary and burdened and suffer. Yes, with all his strength Christ calls upon those who have the means to help others and who believe in Him to work for greater justice and to share with those who are in want and need. No one needs to lack food, clothing, housing, work or the goods of culture. All can share in that which gives dignity to the human person.

Sharing with others freely, in imitation of God and Christ, is part of what gives us dignity. This sharing shouldn't be simply physical but spiritual as well. Christ's is a pressing appeal to spend our lives in putting ourselves at the service of those in need of physical and spiritual help. It is a charity which is generous and does not sympathize with injustice. It seeks truth. More, it doesn't fear spiritual poverty but reaches out to it.

The divine economy of salvation, as revealed by Christ, isn't manifested in the freeing of human persons immediately from all that is evil. It begins as an interior transformation of what is spiritually evil into something good; it is accomplished by imitating Jesus. We are called to become new persons, like Christ. What is good builds people up in the image of Christ. Did any of those with Christ at Gethsemane suffer? Were they scourged and crowned with thorns? Did they walk the way to the Cross and die on it? Christ drained the cup of human suffering to show how it can be transformed individually and interiorly.

Jesus says to each of us: Come, follow me! It is an invitation to take part in this process of transformation. In my flesh, says St. Paul, I complete what is still lacking in Christ's sufferings—those of Christ's Body. This is itself a transformation of what caused his sufferings. We can each and all make these words our own. Then, again like St. Paul, we can share this with others by showing them how even suffering can be made good for the one who suffers. We can show it because we have experienced it.

The suffering need not be great or prolonged. It need not be physical, for suffering as such is primarily spiritual. But suffering is transformed. We become different persons spiritually, more capable of helping and sharing. Jesus wants love and its solidarity to grow from sufferings and around them, however small they may be. This is a good possible only for human persons. It is a good which never passes away. We do little things but doing them is no little thing! Are you ready to accept this gift today in whatever it may be, little or great, that may cause you suffering and distress? Mary our spiritual mother did many wonderful little things like this. Now she shows us how. She does little things with a love that makes them tremendously important and wants us to do the same.

THE FRIENDS WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US

Developed from Aelred of Rievaulx's On Spiritual Friendship

Who is a greater friend than Our Lord and Savior? What's more he has given us the formula for genuine friendship: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*". We all love ourselves but we learn to love by being loved and besides our Lord and our parents we learn to love from friends. A monastic community must be and community of friends who love one another as Christ loves each of us. But we love ourselves best if we love God. Who taught you how to love God even more than you love yourself? Those who have taught us the monastic way of life did this. Today we remember them as teachers and friends who have gone before us and now beckon us to follow them into the fullness of God's love.

If you have become a person worthy of being chosen for friendship with God, you love God above all else. If you are such a person do you think you should be rewarded for loving God or yourself? From the very nature of things each creature loves itself "gratuitously". You transfer this same affection to the other that you love as friends, loving them gratuitously. Unless you do this, you can't appreciate what true friendship is. Do you, then, love God less than yourself or your friends? Of course not.

The one whom you love is another self. God has loved us in a way that makes us another self, another Jesus. As St. Ambrose said, returning this love isn't a tax payment but a free gift full of beauty and full of grace and not acquired by purchase but by generosity. That's how we share love of God with our human friends, as Christ has shared with us as his friends. That's how our departed brothers shared love of God and Christ with us. It was the greatest gift a friend can give a friend.

The intention of those chosen as "friends" has to be tested in a subtle way so that both know they are joined in friendship gratuitously and not in the hope of gaining some advantage or possession. That is to think of friendship in a mercenary way and not in terms of gratuity. The extraordinary thing we await from God is that he will enact and share with us, as creatures who have been uplifted, the capacity to love one another as God himself loves us. God does this among the degrees and orders distinguished by divine decree, and among the individuals who have been chosen so they know charity and friendship. In this way, just as each rejoices in what is its own so will it rejoice in the good of others. The happiness of each one taken individually will be the happiness of all and the totality of the happiness of all will be the possession of each individual.

Here we test ourselves and one other. No such testing is needed once we have entered God's Kingdom; divine perfection beatifies all. This is the norm by which we now measure friendship and so we see how truly friends are those who have taught us this way to God. Reflect today on the divine example of love so we may pass it on in our turn. Let us pray to our departed to help us today and every day to share this gift with those who come after us and look to us to teach them what our predecessors taught us.

THE KINGDOM'S RULES FOR GETTING AHEAD

Developed from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

When James and John tried to get the Lord to give them the highest places in the Kingdom they let loose many sordid and tangled emotions, not only in themselves but among the other members of The Twelve. Jesus was aware of what was happening to all of his disciples and he set out to show them all how to deal with their disorderly passions. He didn't tell them not to have the passions they had; Christ told them to redirect their passions in a way that would prepare them for God's Kingdom. Listen to what he says, and listen carefully.

"He called them to him and said: Gentile rulers lord it over their subjects; holders of high office make their authority felt. This must not happen among you! On the contrary, whoever wants to be first among you must become last of all!" Jesus first reminded them, and us, of the way people ordinarily use high place and authority. What they do is cause others to show them special signs of respect and reverence. Then he told them that high positions and authority in God's Kingdom can't be used in this way. The important people in the Kingdom don't get special treatment but they give special attention to others and devote themselves to helping them, and in very humble ways. The rule for advancement in the Kingdom is that you begin by showing yourself ready to do whatever will draw people closer to God and help them love others in service.

"Whoever wants to be first among you must become the servant of all." Not only is the path of advancement very different, but what it leads to is becoming so dedicated to the well-being of those you serve that you end up serving them like a slave would. Whatever they need to have done for them you do it, if God gives you the ability. If you wish to have precedence and to have the highest honors, you aim for whatever is lowest and worst. You try to be the most insignificant and humble of all and of less account than anyone else. Put yourself after others rather than ahead.

This is an amazing reversal of values and involves a complete redirecting of all ambition. In the Kingdom no one seeks glory and honor. If we act this way we put ourselves in the way of gaining innumerable blessings. The fact is that before the incarnation, and that means the self-abasement of Christ, the entire world was in a state of ruin and decay. To change that Christ humbled himself. By doing this he showed the world the way it could be lifted up. Christ annulled the curse upon Adam and Eve, and the attitudes behind their sin which Cain had made evident in killing his brother, Abel. In these ways Christ destroyed sin, flung wide the gates of heaven, and led the first fruits of our race into God's Kingdom.

Christ drove out mistaken ideas about what makes one great and gives honor. By teaching this truth about what to strive for he showed us that seeking what sin attains is a mere deception and leads to emptiness. Before Jesus humbled himself, he was known to very few, either on earth or in heaven. But after he accepted the Cross and died to do the Heavenly Father's will, the whole human race began to recognize him. He showed us all a new way to live. Through humility and self-sacrifice, he lifts everyone up.

WHAT SHALL I GIVE TO THE LORD?

An excerpt from a homily by St. Fulgentius of Ruspe

All of us await the divine judgment and most of us await it in great fear and trembling. Why are we afraid? Because we know that before this tribunal we will not only have to give an account of our deeds and words but even of our thoughts. Pondering on this, many holy men and women have asked how to prepare for judgment. As one of them put it, *“What shall I give to the Lord—what am I expected to give—in return for all my God has given me?”*

One of those who pondered in this way was the holy prophet Micah. He knew that the almighty God who created the universe and made everything from nothing didn't act because he felt the pinch of poverty. God acted from an overflowing abundance of goodness. That is one reason why God doesn't ask for things from us but for our deeds. What he finally saw was that the gifts most acceptable and pleasing to God are holy lives and good works. That is why he said, What can I offer to Lord that is worthy? And why the answer was that he could give God the most excellent creature God had made! And of all the creatures God had made upon the earth none can be better than the one created in God's own image. That is what a human being is.

So those who want to offer God a worthy gift should begin by offering themselves. Since God made us in the divine image and likeness God is most delighted to be offered that image. God commands us to present it to him pure and innocent. But this last makes us afraid for we are all sinners. Yet we still are in God's image. When enemies were testing Jesus by asking him whether it was lawful to pay taxes to the earthly Caesar, what did he say? *“Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's!”* In other words, just as you give Caesar his image as imprinted on a coin so you are to give God his image as imprinted in yourself.

But it remains true that when you give your creator the divine image that is in yourself that image should be righteous and humble, not evil and not proud and not debased by greed or deformed by rapacity and oppressive attitudes toward your neighbor. Many things can happen to debase a coin. It can be reduced by carving away metal, as we can diminish ourselves by merely earthly affections. Or it can be undiminished because of our prudent care for ourselves, our perseverance in faith and in good habits. Is this very difficult?

The holy prophet told us that it was not that difficult. Listen to him: *“I will show you what is good and what the Lord requires of you. It is to act justly and righteously, it is to love mercy and to walk mindfully with your God.”* See how easy it is to please God. We are surrounded by friends and neighbors in faith and we need only love them as we love ourselves. We need not do great things. We need only to show mercy, to love tenderly and to seek always to imitate our Lord and God, Jesus Christ.

HOW DOES ONE WAIT FOR THE LORD?

A reflection taken from a homily by St. Macarius of Egypt

We have heard very often that those who wish to be found worthy of eternal life must become a dwelling place for Christ and be filled with the Holy Spirit. We are told that such people must produce the fruits of the Spirit and keep the commandments of Christ purely and blamelessly. But one begins all this by first believing steadfastly in the Lord and by devoting oneself as entirely as possible to obeying the commandments and to renouncing worldly interests; i.e., one must free the mind from immersion in secular affairs.

But when we hear this, even we monks tremble for we know we are sinners and that all of the things we have listed are beyond our unaided human powers. But then we recall, by God's gift, that none of this depends simply upon us. It is all a gift of God. But how, then, are we to know we have received this gift?

Do you find you persevere in prayer and do so as ceaselessly as you can? Are you always waiting in expectant faith for the Lord to visit and assist you? Do you keep this goal constantly in view? But we know that sin is within us and that all our efforts don't seem to be sufficient. But this very thought is a beginning. For example, we are to make every effort to do good and do it by showing humility. Isn't our sense of our sin an expression of humility? Of course, we are not to seek honors or praise or special distinctions or special treatment from anyone—just as the Gospel teaches. But if we present ourselves as sinners how can we fall into any of these faults?

What is the most important thing? It is to have the Lord always before our eyes. It is to wish above all to please God. Is God not pleased in a special way by humility? Have you not felt humbled continuously by the failure that follows every effort to depend simply on yourself? Jesus said, "*Learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart, and then you will find your rest*". We need not seek to do all the things we have mentioned as though we had the strength for that. We do not. What makes us more humble than this reflection?

The Lord has taught us to be on the lookout for opportunities to be merciful, to be kind, to be compassionate. These are the good works that make us good according to the Lord's teaching. "*If you love me enter through the narrow gate.*" What is this gate if not the small and humble deeds of mercy and kindness and compassion. We don't have to wait for opportunities to show these virtues in great and extraordinary ways.

We should never forget how humble the Lord ways in the way he lived and in the gentle things he did to help others. Take this as a pattern for yourself. If you help others pray you are helping yourself pray and becoming like the Lord. And this happens in many other ways as well. One day the things you now have to force yourself to do, and that you do with a reluctant heart, you will find yourself doing willingly. You will have made a habit of invariably doing what is humble and merciful and kind and so of doing what is right. You will have become ever-mindful of the Lord and are a person who is always waiting for him by doing what he commands you.

LEARNING TO TRUST IN GOD'S MERCY

A reflection taken from a talk by St. Pope John Paul II

O Mary, Mother of Mercy, watch over all people that the cross of Christ may not be emptied of its power, that our race may not stray from the path of good or become blind to its sin but may put all hope ever more firmly in God who is so rich in mercy. May God carry out the good works prepared from of old so that all may live wholly for God's praise and glory.

Mary is the one who has the deepest knowledge of the mystery of God's mercy. She knows the price that has been paid because her son paid it. She knows her son's compassionate love. We call her our Lady of Mercy and Mother of Divine Mercy. Each title expresses the special gifts given to her for the sake of her vocation, not only in bringing Jesus to birth but as mother of us all. God prepared her entire personality for these roles and so she became able to perceive though the complex of events that were her life, the grace of God to Israel and to every individual human person from generation to generation.

I want to proclaim to you a joy announced by the prophet Isaiah and lived by Mary. It is the joy of God's salvific gift which comes to you through a personal vocation as the unrepeatable expression of God's confidence in you and love for you. Remember that the power of Christ's Paschal Mystery supplies for your weakness and fills your hearts with empowering love.

When we come to communion we come to a renewed commitment. "*Come, follow me!*" is what Christ says to each of us. These words came to Mary through the Angel Gabriel. God enabled Mary to accept his call with all her heart. As one who had obtained mercy in this marvelous way she becomes the model of mercy given to us though Jesus Christ.

Mercy accompanied her throughout her life, and most especially at the foot of the cross. In that cross Jesus reveals God's mercy to Mary as she shared in that cross in a special way. Thus, she can bring to us a deeper appreciation of that mercy. Each of us, in each deed done, is an instrument of Divine Mercy shown in love. If that thought accompanies you then grace accompanies you. You too can be filled with grace. Walking in that grace is one of the ways Mary shows forth God's mercy. She shows us how to be bearers of that mercy, day by day and throughout each day until we enter the never-ending day of God's eternity.

Remember that the power of Christ's Paschal Mystery supplies for your weakness and fills your hearts with empowering love. "*Come, follow me!*" says the Lord just as he said it to Mary. Through the grace which filled her, God enabled Mary to accept his call with all her heart. As one who had obtained mercy in a marvelous way she becomes the model and mother of divine mercy extended to us though her Son, Jesus Christ.