

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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DO YOU LONG TO BE TRANSFORMED?

A reflection taken from a sermon by Bishop Maximus of Turin

The Son of God went to a wedding. He went so that his presence would sanctify the institution of marriage which He had founded. It was a wedding done according to the “old order” of things but he went to begin a New Order. He had come into the world in order to take as a bride the Church, drawn into one from all nations. He didn’t go to the wedding to enjoy the banquet or to drink wine but he went to show by the miracle of transforming water into wine what being one with him means. He no doubt enjoyed the wedding supper and the wine but he came to give a New Wine because the old wine was giving out.

So it was that, when the feast was well underway, the most blessed Mary came and said to him, “*They have no wine*”. Jesus answered as though he were displeased. “*Mam*”, he said, “*how is that my concern, or yours?*” However, the displeasure was only that his mother was thinking of earthly things and he was thinking of transformative grace. So, he replied: “*My hour has not yet come.*” He foresaw the glorious hour of his passion and then his resurrection, from which was to spring the grace of our redemption—the redemption of all. Why worry about ordinary wine when he was soon to give all the opportunity to drink the New Wine that would bring everlasting life and eternal redemption?

Holy Mary, however, since she was truly Mother of God, in her spirit realized what her son and Lord was thinking and knew he could give us both that *spiritual* wine and ordinary wine. She advised the servants, as she advises us, to do whatever Jesus might command. He showed immediately that he wasn’t really angry and said: “*Fill the jars with water*”. The servants obeyed immediately and suddenly a marvel began to take place. Water began to acquire a new color, a new fragrance, a new flavor—all at once it was completely transformed.

Of course, this transformation witnessed to the powerful presence of the Creator. Only he who had made water out of nothing could make it something new. No doubt, God thickens water so that it becomes snow, and hardens it so it become ice, and cause a rock in the wilderness to produce it, and turned it into blood in Egypt. But this sign was not about God’s power over water but God’s power to transform us.

Scripture says that this sign at Cana in Galilee was the first that Jesus performed, and so manifested his glory. More important yet, his disciples began to believe in Him. It was not what they saw happening to the water that they believed but that an ordinary human being was the Son of the Most High. Let’s believe this too, and believe it wholeheartedly.

He whom we confess to be the Son of Man is also Son of God. We believe not only that he shared our nature but that he had a divine nature. If such is our faith then we should believe as well that his is the power to transform us as completely and wonderfully as he did the water into wine. But we mustn’t only believe. We must act out the transformation. This means living divine-human loving, just as Jesus loved. That is the point of the transformation. It requires too that we share Jesus’ cross, however. Are you longing for this transformation, and will welcome it no matter what the cost?

THE TRANSFORMATION THAT MAKES A MARTYR

A reflection by the ancient Christian poet, Prudentius

St. Agnes was a brave young woman and a glorious martyr. They say that as a girl she was on fire with love for Christ, and because of this, bravely and stubbornly refused marriage, as well as refusing to worship idols. This determination was attacked by threats of torture. The judge spoke to her kindly and persuasively, and when she wouldn't listen threatened her with torture. But she declared herself ready to die. So, the judge resorted to threatening what he had found she really valued. "If it is easy for you to overcome the pains and bear the suffering, and even though you scorn these things and consider them of little worth, I am resolved to condemn you to the public house of prostitution unless you lay your head on the altar and ask pardon of the virgin Minerva whom you persist in slighting! All the young men will hurry to use you for their recreation."

Agnes had an answer: "No, Christ is not so forgetful of his own so as to let our precious chastity be lost; he doesn't abandon us. He stands by the chaste and doesn't allow the gift of holy purity to be defiled. You may be able to stain your sword with my blood, if you wish, but you will not pollute my body with lust." The judge ordered her, on the way to the brothel, to be placed naked at one of the corners of the public square, where all could see her. But while she stood there the crowd avoided her in sadness and turned their faces away so as not to look at her in a way that would shame her modesty. Only one, who chanced to be passing by, looked at her rudely and lustfully. But something like a thunderbolt of fire came flying at him and struck his eyes, leaving him blind and half-dead. His friends picked him up and prepared to carry him away.

Agnes began to sing to God in triumph, praising God the Father and to the Lord Christ. When this unholy danger befell her, virginity won the day. For her even the brothel was chaste and pure. Indeed, some of the injured young man's friends asked her to pray for him and when she poured out prayers to Christ his sight and health were restored. All this turned to frenzied hatred in her judge. "I am losing the contest", he complained. He ordered a soldier, "Go and draw your sword and give effect to the sovereign command of the Emperor!"

When Agnes saw this grim looking man with a naked sword she said: "I rejoice that there comes a man like this, savage and cruel, rather than soft and listless young men who want to destroy my honor. This man is the right kind of lover, and I confess this pleases me. I shall meet him eagerly and welcome the thrust of his whole blade into the depths of my breast. As Christ's bride I shall leap from the world of darkness and rise higher than the ether. O eternal ruler, open the gates of Heaven once barred against the children of earth and call me, one who follows you as a virgin and a sacrifice to the Father!" She bowed her head in prayer and humbly worshipped Christ.

Thus, she bowed her neck, the more readily to suffering the coming blow. At one stroke the executioner's hand cut off her head and swift death forestalled even the pain. May God make us the kind of person who will follow Our Lord as faithfully and with as much love.

GOD CALLS ALL TO BE PROTECTORS OF LIFE

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Quodvultdeus.

A great king is born a little child. Christ was born as a little child and has drawn all the world to him. People are drawn because in Christ they meet God the creator of life and the one who calls each person into life. It is a life that will last forever. In God's Providence no one is ever lost. We have nothing to fear. We with all the living are in the loving hands of God.

Some find it incredible that God could make innocent babes saints. Yet this is what we have celebrated recently. Again, when John was but six months old, God reached into his mother's womb and stirred him with a special grace that bound him to Christ. Is God's care limited to people who are at least six months old? It would be foolish to say that. We know that God calls people into life in the womb and begins to form them for the vocation they will live out. But what if they die before birth? God still holds them in his loving hands.

When we contemplate the fear and rage of King Herod who had the Holy Innocents slaughtered, we wonder at his fear. What was he afraid he would lose? The same question arises for those aborted or dying from violence. But besides life God is the source of grace? God the Almighty put on human nature and lived nine months in his mother's womb by grace. All are given life in the same way and all those to whom life is entrusted are given the grace of the command to protect and care for the gift of life. It doesn't matter whether that life has been born as we were or not; it is cared for by God and we must care for it as best we can with a love like that of our God.

Without realizing it the Holy Innocents died for Christ. Without realizing it those who die before birth die in God's love. All are witnesses to God's love and loving Providence. Life is a gift. Grace is a gift. Life on this earth is God's gift. Life in Heaven is God's gift. We don't know how God creates life or how God cares for it, even when human beings don't care for it or try to destroy it. But we needn't worry because of what they can or can't do. After all, it is God's gift. Those God has called into life have it forever and God cares for them and loves them forever. No one loses this opportunity to love God.

As life itself is a gift so is life's joy. We cannot make our lives what we want them to be nor prevent God from making them what he chooses. We must give them freely into God's hands, now and at the hour of death. We die into God's hands. Preparing for death is first of all preparing to entrust ourselves to God. When those we love die, we have to entrust them to God as well. It can seem very difficult but it is the fulfillment of the trust God's grace plants within and causes to grow a little bit at a time. Isn't learning to do God's will the heart of life? To answer that call is to care for and cultivate life. Let us never forget that all life is always in God's hands—even if human beings think they can destroy it when they wish. Into your hands I commend my spirit, and all spirits. We have been invited to pray those words a multitude of times. They make up a banner of trust. Take it up and bear it proudly as you love and protect life with our God.

HOW UNITY WITH CHRIST TRANSFORMS US

A reflection from a sermon by Bishop Faustus of Riez

“On the third day there was a wedding”. What does the wedding symbolize, and why is it linked to the number three? The first part of the answer is that Christ is God’s pledge of salvation and this will be as joy filled as any wedding feast. The second part is the fact that this joy is lived on the third day by our profession of faith in the Trinity and in the mystery of resurrection.

Recall the Gospel passage which describes the singing and dancing and the wedding garments used to greet the returning prodigal son. There is more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over a horde of people who don’t need to repent. We have turned back from making our own way—deciding for ourselves what is good or bad—and have come again to be guided by our Heavenly Father.

Another Scripture passage tells us that Christ has come ***“like a bridegroom coming from his tent”***. The Lord has come down for his own wedding with us, gathered to God from among many nations. He gives us both a ring and a beautiful gift, both of which have a sacramental meaning. The ring tells us our union with divinity will never end. The gift is life in the world to come, promised by one who never breaks a promise.

The people who witnessed the transformation of water into wine saw a miracle. But if we look closer, we see a truth about baptism and the life we live when we come forth from its waters. We see one thing become something new and wonderful. We are being transformed day by day, we see a lower reality becoming a higher one. This is the effect of our Second Birth.

Just as water became wine so a law-governed life becomes a grace-lead life. We see that flesh is fulfilled by the Spirit and an ancient covenant fulfilled by a new one. ***“Former things have passed away; see everything is made new!”***

The water in the jars wasn’t lessened in quality but began a new way of existing. Christ doesn’t destroy what existed before Him but raises it up and brings it to fulfillment. ***“You have heard it said, you shall love your friends and hate your enemies”***. But that is replaced.

A new wine replaces the old, even though the old was good. This good wine is the new commandment of love. It transforms everything and makes it delightful, refreshing, joy-giving and God-praising. ***“I say to you, love your enemies and do good to those who hate you!”*** That is new. We must be new just like this.

THE PATH TO FERVENT LOVE OF GOD

A reflection taken from a letter by St. Francis de Sales

You want to know how to love God fervently and so come to peace of mind. Reflect that love of God is a virtue, an inclination to do willingly whatever is pleasing to God. It is an enlargement of heart opening one to God. The good walk in this way and the fervent run in it, and swiftly.

The first step is to obey God's general commandments and then those that go with our state in life. To fail in this is to live in sin. As a bishop I am obliged to visit the people I shepherd; if I spent the whole week praying and fasting while neglecting this duty I would be lost! A married person can't refuse his/her spouse intercourse or neglect care for their children; refusing to do these things is worse than unfaithfulness! These two sorts of commandments, faithfully observed, are the foundation of fervent love for God if one does them promptly and willingly.

How does one acquire promptness and willingness? First by remembering that it is God we serve. Our purpose for existing is to do God's will so we should be anxious to do it. We ask daily that God's will be done so why does it seem so hard to do it?

After all, one remembers that God's commandments are gracious, gentle and sweet. What makes them hard is self-will. You want to do what you want, period! From among all sorts of fruit our First Parents chose the one forbidden fruit; they wanted it to be good and thought they could make it so. Saul was ordered to destroy everything pertaining to Amalek but he destroyed only what he thought not precious enough to be offered in sacrifice and a feast for his soldiers. God wants obedience and not sacrifice! The contemplative life is good, but not if that gets in the way of obedience. If God wants us to serve in one way, we mustn't try to serve in another.

Third we have to face the fact that every state in life has its irksome side; there is always something that seem bitter and unpleasant. That leads people to think they want to change their state in life. Bishops would rather not be what they are and married people want to be single and single people want to get married and so on. We want to get rid of what irks us and we have a general restlessness, not to mention a kind of rebellion against all sorts of constraints. We like to think everyone else is better off than we are and don't want to accept the truth. What we have to learn is to resign ourselves to God's will and do it willingly. Sick people are never comfortable and tend to toss and turn and complain. A person who is not sick with the fever of self-will can put up graciously with everything. What we ought to aim at is having no real personal preference but seeking only God's will as such.

Finally, we need to learn to do God's will cheerfully. I am a bishop and am obliged to do the hard things involved. What's more, I must do them joyfully! I must find my pleasure and happiness in doing these things. This means denying self and your own will, according to our Lord's wish. To think I would do better at something else or be happier is just a temptation. Our Lord knows what he is doing. Let us do his will out of joyful love!

FINDING GOD IS FINDING ONE'S TRUE SELF

A reflection from St. Paul Apostle of the Nations by H. Daniel-Rops

What Saul had done to the Nazarenes in Jerusalem—tracking them down, denouncing them, having them arrested and beaten, forcing apostasy—was not enough. Groups had formed outside Palestine and he would strike them down! He would start with Damascus. Suddenly a light shone around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice: “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” Stammering, he replied: “*Lord, who are you?*” “*I am Jesus!*” Stunned and trembling, the Pharisee murmured: “*Lord, what do you want me to do?*” “*Get up and go into the city and you will be told what to do. I have appeared to you to appoint you a minister and a witness.*” It was a portentous event, incalculably important; apart from it the future of Christianity would have been changed.

One supposes it impressed those of Saul's age as much as us. The New Testament retells it four times in narratives that are identical apart from details. The facts are incontestable just by reason of Paul's two accounts. On the road to Damascus, in the midday sun, he found himself face to face with Jesus and addressed by name. This is how the so-called conversion of St. Paul was accomplished.

If there were in him secret openings to grace—unknown even to him, or if discernable elements contributed to the staggering psychological shock on the road to Damascus, this is of secondary importance. The narrative made clear that Paul continued to believe he was through and through Jewish in conviction. Yet he was caught up in an overwhelming event that changed him radically and completely. What he hated one day, he adored the next. The cause he had fought against so violently, he would serve with the same violence. In a single second God had transformed him and bound him for ever to Jesus.

This man whom the light struck down upon that road was conquered, but in this defeat his heart's most profound desires were fulfilled. How can we avoid a certain envy? Saul of Tarsus, more sinful than any of us, an executioner whose hands were stained by the blood of faithful Christians, had the inconceivable good fortune to meet Christ personally and to be called by name by Christ's voice. Why was this? Why was this one person singled out?

We are in the midst of what Paul thought of as the mystery of grace. There, in the secret designs of Providence, all is obscure. Yet everything still leads to one goal and that is what the Light decides. Paul has become the person God had chosen for him to be from before his conception. It was to be the fact that Paul would ever after move toward the goal set by this divine choice. The Christ who overcame him would, in his words, parade him on the highways of the world as his own captive and even slave. Saul made Paul would always find the hours of his life too few to adequately give witness to his love for the One who had loved him so much as to strike him to the heart and make him Paul. God grant that we should have such a blessing and always live in it.

THE JOY & CROSS OF FOLLOWING ST. BENEDICT

A reflection from the Great Exordium of Conrad of Eberbach

“Hugh, archbishop of Lyon and legate of the Apostolic See, to Robert, abbot of Molesme and to those brothers who desire with him to serve God according to the Rule of St. Benedict. ... You want to observe more strictly and perfectly the Rule of St. Benedict, which you have professed and which is kept somewhat tepidly and imperfectly in that monastery. Because many obstacles prevent you from doing this at the aforesaid place, we give you leave to go to another.”

Relying on this authorization, Abbot Robert and his brothers returned to Molesme and chose as associates brothers who rejected the enticements of a lax life, those who burned with eager minds to keep the Holy Rule purely and simply. There were 21 who set out in the desire of keeping to the straight and narrow way of the more perfect living of the Rule of the Holy Father Benedict.

Lord Odo, Duke of Burgundy, was delighted by the fervor and devotion of the brothers and at his own cost completely furnished the wooden monastery they built and supported them abundantly with lands and livestock. But not long after, the monks of Molesme complained to the Pope and legate that Robert’s absence was damaging their community. As a result, Abbot Robert was asked to return. Deprived of their spiritual father, the newly founded church of Citeaux quickly put forward as abbot a much-respected monk named Alberic. He was a learned man, assiduous in divine and human affairs, a lover of the Rule and of the brothers. He had been prior at Molesme, and shared in the founding of Citeaux. He endured much blame from false brethren, as well as blows and imprisonment. When, after considerable resistance, he agreed to accept the pastoral charge he sent two monks to the Apostolic See and obtained the protection of the Pope as guarantee of the abbey’s peace and liberty. In the second year after the foundation of the monastery they brought back the written privilege.

Following this, the abbot and his brothers began to arrange their new way of life in the manner prescribed in the Rule. They observed the Rule’s traditions about the manner and order of divine services, rejected supplementary psalms, prayers and litanies, because they were being performed tepidly and negligently. The Blessed Benedict declared a monk should make himself a stranger to all worldly affairs, and so the new community eliminated all that contributed only to comfort and spurned all tithes that would lead to conflict with secular clergy. They decided to receive lay brothers to help them support themselves by manual labor. The choir monks would remain within the cloister. In the tenth year of his abbacy, the blessed Alberic deserved eternal life.

By the grace of the Holy Spirit the monks elected as abbot a man named Stephen, a person of outstanding holiness and virtue, a lover of the wilderness and very zealous for holy poverty. Since the Order was newly established and its statues still needed work, he called the brothers together and consulted them. They forbade secular authorities from holding court at the monastery and forbade any non-necessary accouterments in the liturgy. The ideal of poverty guided these decisions. Abbot Stephen and his brothers advanced day by day in virtue and witnessed to the wise bargain they had made in choosing this way of life.