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PREPARING A PLACE FOR THE LORD

A reflection from On the Song of Songs by St. Bernard

“My Father and I will come, and in the holy place will make our home”. This means that the Son of God will seek a holy place in your heart. One of the psalms speaks about God in just this way. Listen, *“You make your dwelling in the holy place, you who are Israel’s praise”*. God dwells in the “heavens”; but we know that these heavens are the hearts of his holy ones. Listen to St. Paul, who says this quite clearly: *“Christ lives in our hearts through faith”*.

We should not be surprised that the Lord Jesus makes a home in such heavens, and does it with joy, for unlike the heavens above he didn’t bring these into being by a simple word of command but descended into the arena that is our world and laid down his life to redeem us and our hearts. Listen to what he said after the battle was over: *“This is my resting place for ever and ever; here I have chosen to dwell”*. Blessed indeed is the person to whom the Lord says, *“Come, my chosen one! I will set up my throne in you!”*

Why, then, are we sorrowful at times? Why are we troubled inwardly? Is it a matter of trying to find a fitting place for the Lord within ourselves? After all, which of us can provide Jesus with a really fitting place—He who is the Lord of Glory? Where is the place that is worthy of his majesty? I would count myself fortunate to be found worthy of worshipping at his footstool and being able to cling to his feet! Maybe I can at least cling to the feet of a saintly person who the Lord has chosen to be his dwelling place!

Yet, the fact is that the Lord only needs to anoint me inwardly with the oil we call his mercy to enable me to cry out: *“I have run the way of your commandments because you have enlarged my heart”*! I may not be about to usher the Lord into a large place in my heart, one wonderfully furnished, and then invite him to refresh himself there together with his disciples. I only hope that I will be able to offer him a place to lay his head!

One has to grow and be enlarged inwardly to become capable of containing God within oneself. The dimensions of a soul, however, are proportioned to its love. This is what St. Paul reminds us of when he calls upon us to *“widen our hearts in love”*. The soul is, of course, spiritual and can’t be measured in a physical sense. But grace makes possible what nature cannot. We expand spiritually as we make progress toward the perfection of our humanity called *“the full stature of Christ”*, as St. Paul notes. That is why we can grow into a temple sacred to the Lord.

Love is the measure of our inward self, of our soul. Souls who love much are large and those that love little are small. The soul that has no love at all is nothing! St. Paul says it: *“Without love I am nothing!”* By Christ’s grace we attain even to the stature, to the wideness and fullness, of the love that sets apart Jesus Christ. Let Christ grace work this wonder in your heart! Then you will have truly prepared a place for the Lord to dwell.

THE SAVING POWER OF PRAYER

A reflection from a Letter of St. Gregory the Great

Gregory, to Eulogius, bishop of Alexandria, greetings. We know that your many good deeds bear fruit in which you rejoice; we too rejoice in them. The knowledge of the good which come to you and your people encourages me to make a kind of return to you for the joy you have shared with me. I want you to rejoice in the news that I can share of good things happening to a people living at the very ends of the world.

I am speaking of the English people. They, in their corner of this world, had long remained without faith, worshipping, as it were, sticks and stones. Learning of their plight I resolved to send to this people a holy monk from my own monastery. In this I felt the support of your prayers and those of many. Relying on God's assistance, I sent this monk with a group of companions to preach to the people of England.

By my license he obtained ordination from the bishops of the Germanies and they also encouraged him and helped to send him on his way. It seemed to him that he was truly going to the ends of the world but nevertheless he found a welcome. Letters have reached me telling me that those who were sent rejoice and are radiant with great joy at the miraculous conversion of many people.

It seems to them that the wonders of the days of the apostles are being repeated in the signs that occur. Indeed, on the Feast of the Lord's Nativity this past year they received into the Church with baptism more than ten thousand Angles.

According to the information we have received these were all baptized by my brother monk who is my brother bishop. This is wonderful news.

I tell you this so that you may know that great wonders are taking place due to your prayers. Not only is great good done through what you do among the people of Alexandria by speaking to them. This is also being accomplished in the very ends of the world, and by prayer's saving power.

Your prayers, and ours, are in that place, though you are not there personally. Your holy deeds bear fruit you can see where you are, but your prayers bear fruit far away where you are present in God's power and grace. Peace be with you and joy in the Lord. Let us never neglect to pray for one another and that all may be converted to Jesus Christ.

THE SOURCE OF OUR HOPE

A reflection from St. Cyril's Commentary on II Corinthians

We have a sure hope, guaranteed by the Spirit. We will rise again; we will lay hold of that which now still lies in the future, and in hope we already possess it. We say to ourselves: Outward appearances will no longer be the standard by which we judge other people or ourselves. Now our lives are directed by the Spirit and are not confined within the bounds of this corruptible world. The light of Christ has transformed us into himself and made us into sources of life for others. Now that the righteousness of Christ has found a place in our hearts, we are freed from our former ways by our new hope.

This means that none of us lives in the flesh any more—at least in so far as that means being subjected to the weaknesses that go with flesh. Once we thought of Christ as being in the flesh but we do this no longer. The Word became flesh and suffered death but only in order to give new life to all. Even though he remains in the flesh, since he rose on the third day, and is now with the Father in heaven, we know that he has passed beyond the life of the flesh as we know it. *“Having died once, he will never die again; death has no power over him any more—his death was a death to sin and his life is a life with God”*. That is what St. Paul teaches us.

Christ has in this way become the source of life for us. As we follow in his footsteps, we mustn't think of ourselves as living in the flesh as we formerly did. We have passed beyond that. When people are in Christ, they are made wholly different. Their old life is over and a new life has begun. Therefore, we have been justified by our faith in Christ and the power of the curse that fell upon our first parents after their sin has been ended.

Christ's coming to life again for our sake has put an end to the sovereignty of death. We have come to know the True God and to worship him in spirit and in truth. We have come to this state through the Son, the mediator, who sends down upon us the Spirit. He brings down upon the world the Father's blessings.

St Paul shows us how to understand this. *“This is all God's doing; it is God who has reconciled us through Christ”*. It is done by the mystery of Christ's incarnation and the renewal it accomplished, and all this is done by the Father's will. As Christ himself says, no one comes to the Father except through him. We have gained access to the Father through Christ. This is all God's doing.

God has not only reconciled us through Christ but has given us too the ministry of reconciliation. We are to lead all to place their hope in God through Jesus Christ. Indeed, that is how we are ministers of reconciliation. This means people find a new hope because we show it to them. What God has given us we are to share with others. The hope they can see in us is offered to them as well.

Become a minister of reconciling hope. Our first parents put their hope in evil advice and were led away from God. We are to do the opposite by showing all where true and certain hope lies.

THE GOD-GIVEN UNITY THAT COMES OF LOVE

From a homily on the First Letter of John by St. Augustine

Do you keep God's commandments? This is the test by which we can be sure that we know God, as St. John says. That is, the answer to the above question is, "*in the one who keeps God's word, divine love has reached perfection*". We can infer from this that God's actual commandment is to love. You have only to look in the Gospels to find this confirmed. "*I give you a new commandment, to love one another*". Jesus says that Scripture adds: "*We can know we are abiding in God if we have been made perfect in him*"—i.e., perfect in love.

The perfection of love is to love even enemies, seeking to transform them into brothers and sisters. Our love mustn't be merely natural affection. We must love enemies and with the kind of love that wants to welcome them to our community. This was the love shown by the Lord as he hung on the cross.

Jesus prayed, "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing*". By his prayer filled with compassion and by his mighty power, Christ was saving them from everlasting death. Many among them believed and received forgiveness for their part in shedding their Messiah's blood.

When the Lord told us, "*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect*", he was calling us to the perfection which consist in loving even enemies. We also love one another. "*One who loves a brother or sister dwells in light and gives no reason for anyone to stumble*". People who stumble or cause others to stumble are those who are scandalized by Christ and by the Church. If you hold fast to charity you will find no stumbling block in either and you won't abandon them! If one doesn't want to be in Christ's Church one doesn't want to be part of his Body.

Perhaps someone is feeling hurt. Perhaps that person feels like someone being cauterized. Such a one cries out, "I can't bear it! I won't put up with it!" Then that person walks out.

Those who are scandalized and can't put up with certain things in the Church, and so no longer profess themselves Christians. They truly stumble. Remember how scandalized those were who couldn't bear Christ's words about eating the flesh of the Son of Man. About seventy disciples found this an intolerable teaching. They withdrew from Jesus' company. Were they doing Jesus a favor?

Remember what Peter said in behalf of all the twelve. "*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life!*" To leave Christ is the worst imaginable thing.

How are we to overcome occasions of stumbling? We are to show love. There is no occasion for stumbling in a person who loves. Such a person endures all things for the sake of unity. Our love for one another consists in our being united in charity.

How can we overcome stumbling except by bearing with one another patiently? St. Paul speaks to us in the Letter to the Galatians: "*Bear one another's burdens and you will be fulfilling the law of Christ*". Again, he says, "*spare no effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*". This is what we are called to do when we are called to Christ. We must never give up.

THE CALL TO CHRISTIAN MATURITY

From a homily on the First Letter of John by St. Augustine

“Children, it is the last hour”. In saying this St. John is exhorting us to grow up. Bodily age is not determined by will power for no one can grow physically just by wanting to, any more than one can choose the hour of one’s birth. But once life has been received, one is called to choose to grow or to decline. What does this mean? To grow means to go forward and to decline means to go backwards.

If anyone feels that the call to grow isn’t urgent, then that person needs to heed the warning that it is the last hour. This hour may turn out to be a long one but it is still the last! This is John’s way of talking about the period during which Jesus Christ will return.

Suppose you ask, “How can these be the last days or the last hour, mustn’t the Anti-Christ come before the Day of Judgment?” John foresaw the objection and responds, **“You have heard that Anti-Christ is to come but already many Anti-Christes have appeared.”** To whom is he referring? He describes them as people who went out from our own ranks. They left us but **“they never truly belonged to us; if they had really belonged, they would have remained with us”**.

That means that many who are really not of our company join us in receiving the sacraments. Together with us they receive baptism and what all the faithful know we receive—blessing, the Eucharist and all that is contained in the sacred mysteries. How can they communicate together with us at the altar and not belong to us?

The fact is verified by what happens at times of persecution. When the test comes, many are scattered abroad like chaff before the wind. And they will be blown away at the Day of Judgment. But we are told, **“you have an anointing from the Holy One which makes you known to one another”**. This spiritual anointing is the Holy Spirit. It has a sacramental sign in a visible anointing.

How, then, does this enable us to know one another and discern who truly belongs to Christ and Christ’s Body? The answer is we are known by our love, for one another and for all, even for our enemies. One needs no other instruction than this. The anointing fills us with love for God, for our Savior, and for one another and for all who are children of God by creation but perhaps not yet by re-creation.

Do you want to know that you are God’s? Look at your actual love for God and one another. This is the last hour. It is the hour for us to mature in love. We are to grow to the full stature of Christ! What stature is meant? The stature that is loving as Christ showed love when he washed the feet of his disciples and told them to imitate him. The last hour is the time to learn to wash the feet of all that we want to invite to be brothers and sisters and truly belong to Christ and to our God and Heavenly Father.

LEADING OTHERS TO CHRIST

A reflection taken from talks by St. Pope John XXIII

The Gospel of St. Luke presents us with a picture of Mary hurrying to bring help to Elizabeth. But she not only brings human help, she brings the salvation that is Christ. This is a sign and symbol of what we are all called to do.

There are many apostolates to which God calls us. There is an apostolate of learning, because faith comes from hearing and so we must always keep our ears open to God's voice, even as the ears of Elizabeth and her unborn son, John, were open to the words God spoke through Mary. There is an apostolate of teaching, by which the words received in truly open ears and hearts are shared with others, even as was the case with Mary's. She didn't intend to teach when she uttered her Magnificat but she did. Then there is the apostolate of dying which is that of helping one another surrender oneself completely into God's loving hands. Mary learned this by sharing in the dying of Jesus, her son and her savior. These are all apostolates to which we too are called.

Mary is at the heart of the Christian revelation as she is at the heart of all Christian living, precisely because she went wherever God directed her to go. That is what brought her to Elizabeth; an archangel, a most special messenger of God, told her of Elizabeth's need for help in responding to the gift of God given to and through her.

God reveals to us the needs of others and it is up to us to respond. Why would God's providence reveal such needs except to call us to reach out as Mary did to Elizabeth? This is truly one of the loftiest aims of human life, and a most meritorious answer to the call to the Lord's service.

Motives for melancholy, however, are never in short supply. They have never been lacking in the history of the world! A wise Christian must do whatever is possible to free oneself and others from such sad thoughts. Mary provides a wonderful example and source for consolation and strength.

Jesus never preached a greater sermon than from the cross when he gave himself completely into the hands of his Father. Who was there to hear those words and absorb them completely? All the world knows the story of the Lord's last testament when he left his own mother to the world as universal mother. She was to witness to all the total giving of all that is precious and wonderful to us into the hands of our God! She witnessed it and she made it her own gift of self. She is to help us all learn to make that gift.

God calls us to work to perfect our own spiritual lives and we have Mary to imitate. We must be constant in our search for what is best and in making our conduct ever a better and better instrument of God's grace for others. We must cherish in our hearts a great confidence, perhaps like that which the child Jesus showed to his mother as she taught him to pray and to love God's Holy Word and will. We seek to embody and even to hasten the triumph of the charity of Christ.

How can this fail to encourage mutual love and concern? We are to learn to feel impelled by all that unites people and prepares for the Lord's coming to redeem and unite the entire world. Mary can only lead us to Christ and Christ leads all to God. We are sent to help this happen.

WORSHIPING AS A CHRISTIAN

From In Defense of the Christians, by St. Justin Martyr

We hold a common assembly on Sunday because it is the first day of the week. It is the day on which God put darkness and chaos to flight and created the world. It is also the day our Savior, Jesus Christ, rose from the dead. He was crucified on Friday and on Sunday appeared alive to his apostles and disciples. He taught them the things that we are passing on for your consideration.

None may share the Eucharist with us unless they believe that what we teach is true, unless they are washed in the regenerating waters of baptism, and unless they live in accordance with the principles given us by Christ. We don't consume the bread and wine of the Eucharist as ordinary food and drink, for we have been taught that as Jesus Christ our Savior became human by the Word of God so this food that our flesh and blood assimilate makes us become the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus.

The apostles in their recollections, called gospels, handed down to us what Jesus commanded them to do. They tell us that he took bread, gave thanks, and said: Do this in memory of me; this is my body. In the same way, he took the cup, he gave thanks, and said: This is my blood. Ever since that time, we have constantly reminded on another of these matters. The rich among us help the poor and we are always united. For all that we receive, we praise the Creator of the universe through his Son, Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit.

In our Sunday assembly the recollections of the apostles, or the writings of the prophets, are read as long as time permits. When the reader has finished, the president of the assembly speaks to us, urging everyone to imitate the examples of virtue we have heard about in the readings. Then we all rise together and pray.

At the conclusion of our prayer, bread and wine and water are brought forward. The president offers prayers and gives thanks to the best of his ability, and the people give their assent by saying, "Amen"! The Eucharistic bread and wine are distributed, everyone present communicates. The deacons take it to those who are absent.

The wealthy, if they wish, may make a contribution. They themselves decide the amount. The collection is placed in the custody of the president, who uses it to help the orphans and widows and all who for any reason are in distress. This may be because they are sick, in prison, or away from home. In a word, he takes care of all who are in need through the sharing of those who have enough.