

THE MOST HOLY BODY & BLOOD OF CHRIST TWELFTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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GIVING THANKS FOR THE LORD'S GOODNESS

A reflection from a sermon by Theophilus of Alexandria

What could bring greater happiness to those who love God, who long for true life, than the ability to enjoy God for ever while resting in divine contemplation? People who fill themselves with ordinary food and drink, and even indulge in selfish and passing pleasures, like to boast of their physical well-being. Those, however, whose first care is for their souls have a much better reason to be glad about a better sort of well-being. Having grown up nourished by the Holy Gospel, they will shine. As Isaiah says, it will be as though they were dressed in cloth of gold, richly embroidered!

Our spiritual journey has brought to us the highest and most life-giving mystery. The Lord has set before us a gift that words can't even describe rightly. We are meeting together for a life-giving and sacred meal. It brings us to the fulness of our heavenly calling. We have put on the wedding garment that is undefiled faith. We have come to Christ, our host, and Christ who waits upon us, Christ who loves and refreshes us, and Christ who is our food.

More than a fatted calf has been prepared for us. Wonderful are the words we hear spoken to us. Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. For us this lamb has been slain. The Heavenly Father is filled with joy that the Only Son is offered as a willing and voluntary victim. He isn't offered by the enemies of God but offers himself. His passion is voluntary!

Are you certain of his love for you? Pay attention, then, to the words of those who foretold all this. Consider, for instance, the words of King Solomon's prophesy: "*Wisdom has built herself a house and set up seven pillars; she has slaughtered victims and prepared wine and spread a table*". These are all symbolic realities. They pointed to what is not being fulfilled in fact. What is being given us are the unfailing delights of a heavenly banquet.

At this dinner the Heavenly Giver is present in person. The divine gifts are placed before you. The sacred meal is ready. A life-giving wine has been prepared. The King of Glory summons us and the Son of God receives us. God, the Incarnate Word, invites us. The personal and subsistent Wisdom of God, having built a house, a temple not made by human hands, is giving us his own life-giving blood in the form of wine and his own body in the form of bread.

What a wonderous mystery. How marvelous the arrangements made by our God! How unsearchable the divine mystery! The Creator offers himself for the joy of his creatures. The one who is life itself gives himself to human being as food and drink for everlasting life. "*Come, eat my bread and drink the wine I have prepared for you!*" These are his words. I have prepared myself to be your food and drink, if you indeed long for me. I, says the Lord Christ, am the Word and Image of the Father, and I share flesh and blood with you so you may be saved. Taste and see how good the Lord is! What better reason could we have to give thanks?!

GOD'S GIFTS OF GRACE

A reflection taken from a sermon by John Henry Cardinal Newman

Let's consider the majestic and even severe sanctity of Holy John the Baptist. He seems to have had a privilege very nearly as exalted as the Most Blessed Mother of God! She was conceived without sin and he was born without it. Each was, in the way chosen by God, freed from every obstacle to doing God's will fully and with a pure and complete gift of self in God's praise and service.

St. John in the beginning of his existence was a partaker of Adam's curse and so lay under God's wrath. He had need of that grace which is the life and strength of every human person. Yet Christ, the Lord and Savior, came especially to him, brought by the Holy Mother of God. When Elizabeth greeted Mary and she responded the grace given to her was given also to John and he was cleansed from sin and brought as close to God as a human person can be.

Think of the reason why we celebrate the "birth" of John the Baptist. The Church doesn't celebrate anything unholy. It doesn't celebrate any birth except that of Jesus and of Mary and of St. John the Baptist. It doesn't matter how holy they later became. It doesn't celebrate St. Augustine's or St. Gregory's or St. Bernard's or St. Aloysius' birth. They were all born in sin. The Church celebrates their conversions, the gifts given them by God, their martyrdoms, their deaths, and even the translations of their relics; but it doesn't celebrate their births. What it celebrates is God's grace and the wonders it works in all sorts of people.

Reflect, then, on the very special grace given to the Baptist. The way he began, under the power of this grace, was the way he lived and the way he died. He was carried away by the Spirit into the desert. He lived on the simplest food and with the rudest of clothing, and perhaps in caves otherwise inhabited only by wild animals. For thirty years he led such a life. It was a life of mortification and of meditation. He lived in this way until God called him to preach penance and proclaim the coming of the Christ. He was even given the grace to baptize his Savior. And then, having done the work God had given him to do, he laid it aside. He was an instrument of God, used and then laid aside when it was time. He languished in prison until the grace of martyrdom came.

The themes that light up his life are those of grace and holiness. To be holy is to be close to God. This is not something we can do of ourselves. We can only respond to the call of divine grace. He was called to witness to holiness in all he was and did. He was called to consecrate his entire life and self in response to God's grace, calling him even while still in his mother's womb.

This is a most marvelous grace and calling. A most marvelous saint John was. From childhood a hermit dedicated to living only for God and the coming of God's kingdom. Yes, he was also a preacher to those who were fallen and perhaps living in sin. He called them to God not only by word but example. As God had called him through Mary's word to Elizabeth so he called others through his words until the time came for him to point to the Lamb of God and then retire from the scene until the Lord indicated to him the further grace he should live. All these were graces of witnessing to God's grace and love. We can do no better than that.

THE WORKS OF GRACE GOD DOES IN US

A reflection from a sermon by St. Bernard

Come, let's consider ourselves and the actions of the Trinity in us. Let us recall how God has shown his concern not to lose us forever. He had made all things and governs all things wisely; God's power and wisdom are apparent in all things. There is most of all, however, goodness in God, and goodness beyond measure.

Through the prophet Isaiah God has said to us: "*I think thoughts of peace*". God thought to send to us his Son to be our peace and to bestow peace. Kindness induced the Word of God to come down to us from on high; compassion drew him; obedience steered him in all things, patience armed him, and charity revealed him through words and wonders.

Yet evils also surround us. A serpent was sent by the devil to pour poison through a woman's ears and into her mind and thus into the source of all future generations. From the soles of our feet to the top of our heads there was not health in us. We had gone astray from the womb. Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit to purify us from our ancient wound and cleanse us in order to ensure everlasting health for us.

Jesus tells us that his conception, every one of life's stages—his boyhood, adolescence, young manhood and everything including his death—instructs us, destroys evil in us, prepares our resurrection and ascension and finally sends us the Spirit to help our weakness. We see clearly, then, the way we should walk and the care we should take. In my own life I have held to the paths of poverty and obedience, humility and patience, charity and mercy. You, my fellow disciples, are to walk in the same ways.

Through Isaiah the spirit teaches us: "*Sow for yourselves righteousness*". Reap the hope of life and turn on the light of knowledge. The Lord's mercy is before us always and follows me all the days of my life and crowns me with mercy and compassion. What, then, does the one who has sought you with such concern not ask? That you walk thoughtfully with your God.

No other than the Holy Spirit causes this concern within us. The Spirit probes the depths of the heart to make clear the intentions and thoughts of our hearts. The Spirit doesn't allow the slightest chaff to settle in our hearts but consumes it by the fire of his ever-watchful eyes. The Spirit is gentle and sweet and bends our wills gently, straightening and directing them fully towards his own heart. He leads us to understand God's will, to love it fervently and to fulfill it effectively. What more could we ask? God has given us a way of life that leads to his love and Kingdom, and we only need to live its demands conscientiously and wholeheartedly.

THE PATH TO HOLINESS

A reflection from a sermon by St. Bernard

I rejoice that we are all students in the Lord's school, the Spirit's school. Here we learn goodness, discipline and knowledge. Here we affirm with the words of the psalmist: *"I have understood more than all my teachers"*. Why is this so? Because we have clothed ourselves not in purple and fine cloth but in understanding and we ever strive to better understand the testimonies of God's prophets and holy ones. Happy are those who remain in this school of the Holy Spirit.

Let's pray: *"Don't cast me away from your face or take your holy spirit from me, but create a pure heart in me, O my God, and renew a right spirit within me."* It is characteristic of the Lord to cast away whatever is impure and to banish *sin*. To receive the Holy Spirit is to receive that holiness without which no one will see God. And yet who can refrain from every evil? Who can restrain himself, not only from bad actions but even from bad thoughts?

We must let God strip off our "old nature" and put on us a new one. We are to become new in the spirit of our minds and not simply in our flesh. We need to ponder what is right and walk in the newness of the Spirit and not simply in the written word. Christ brought a beautiful model of uprightness from heaven and he left it on earth. It is instilled in all his works.

Once the body has been set right through holy actions, and the heart purified and renewed by upright thoughts, saving joy is restored. Then we walk in the light of God's countenance and exult in God's name all day long. What, then, do we need to do except let ourselves be strengthened by a ruling spirit that is holy? In what is this strengthening if not in love? What other gift is worthy of our God? Nothing whatever will be able to separate us from this love of God.

Do you know how to possess yourself, to possess the gift God has given you in a holy way and not in dark passions or lusts? You have received a holy spirit. Is it your will that, whatever you want others to do to you, you also do for them? You have received a right spirit for service of your neighbor. This is the uprightness that each law commends to us. Then we are taught by our nature and by what is handed down in Scripture. If we persevere with strength in receiving both, we receive the ruling spirit of God. It is what God approves.

Manifold is the Spirit who inspires us in so many ways. The Spirit is bestowed on all for their benefit—for working the miracle of salvation and for help and for consolation. The Spirit lavishly bestows the common goods of life, and on both the good and evil. Truly God is unbounded in goodness and love. How ungrateful not to acknowledge this goodness. Doing this helps our weakness in every struggle if we turn to God with our entire hearts; then God works salvation. We can see by such experience that we are children of God. We experience God, the Spirit, in the mighty flame of love we find in our hearts. Let us too be filled with the spirit of forgiveness and with exultation. Let's us live our lives of dedication with all the fervor of the Spirit.

THE GRACES OF PREPARING FOR HOLY FEASTS

A reflection from a sermon by St. Bernard

How do you prepare to celebrate a holy day or the feast of a saint? Do you think of decorations and special meals or of freedom from work? Remember that worldly celebrations are often accompanied by drunkenness and other works of darkness. We mustn't be children of the night but of light. There are three benefits we can hope to receive from our celebration of a holy day. We can think of the help that can come to us from the holy one we celebrate. We can think of the good example we can give to others if we celebrate what is holy in a holy manner. We can think of our own shame because we haven't lived a holy life.

When we celebrate a feast of the Lord or of a saint, we should remember that those who are with God don't love us less but more and better because they are with God. God is love and the more we are like God the more our life expresses love in all we are and do. What is good in anyone is not decreased by that one's closeness of God but made more perfect. That is why we should look for graces and helps when we celebrate the Lord or one of the saints.

St. Paul once noticed that God uses us very ordinary people to make provision for the good, and especially the salvation, of others. God didn't reject his Chosen People because so many failed to believe in Christ but will use our faith to help them. Jesus (e.g.) came among us to help all and he helped us through the Israelites that came to him and worked with him when he called them. Now he would do the same with us. We are to think of the examples given us by those who have followed the Lord, even to death. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the light". Others have walked that way. They were people made up of the same stuff that we are all made up of, and yet they walked with the Lord and turned neither to left or right. Why do think we can't follow them just as they followed Christ? We are offered the grace that they were given; they accepted it.

See the reasons for being ashamed? Why do we think that we can't do what they could do only by the grace of God? Besides, we live in what is called a valley of tears and shouldn't expect to escape tears and trials. The Lord Jesus bore his cross and we must expect to follow in his footsteps. He has commanded us to do this. Why should we look only at the wonderful things our Lord and the saints have done and ignore all that was dark and difficult and painful? We have great cause for rejoicing but we have good cause for sorrows too.

Ponder all this as you prepare for a holy celebration. If we do then they will lead us to turn to God with special fervor and dedication. Think of what great things God did, not only through his only Son but through the Blessed Virgin and through saints like Peter and Paul. Paul tells us that precisely when he was humanly weak, he was strong in God. You and I, then, can't plead human weakness as an excuse. It isn't an excuse but a shame. When we are weak, we can best witness to God's love and grace by doing all that is involved in walking the way of holiness. That is what our special celebrations are about. Let us rejoice in God's great marvel that is the grace which enables us to do what we of ourselves cannot. It is in God that we are strong, and never stronger than when we confess our weakness.

WHAT IS WORSHIP OF THE SACRED HEART?

A reflection by Fr. Jean Leclerc

There are two essential aspects of our celebration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The first is that we are worshipping God when we worship the Sacred Heart. We worship God incarnate in Jesus Christ, our Savior, and we worship him in the humanity which he took upon himself. When we speak of someone's heart, we usually aren't referring to that person's physical heart simply as an organ that pumps blood through the body. We are referring to the heart also as a symbol of a person's love and concern for others. In Jesus Christ we encounter God become human and so taking to himself a human heart, physically and symbolically. Because of its unity with the Godhead, the humanity of Jesus is really and truly (hypostatically) united to the Person of the Word of God made flesh. This heart is the center and sign of the charity of God in human form. That is what we worship when we worship the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

When we worship God, we primarily worship. We don't worship God to make reparation or to plead for this or that. If we do these things, we do them as part of worshipping our God. We are adoring God as redeeming and uplifting love. If we would make reparation, we can only do this by letting ourselves be taken into the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Christ. We do it because we want the entire world to experience the effects of this redemption. Christ alone takes away the sins of the world and we can only be a part of this as one with Christ.

To adore God is to offer ourselves to God. This is the purpose of all adoration of the Sacred Heart. It is the heart of Jesus Christ fully and for all eternity offered wholly and fully to God the Father in the Holy Spirit. Sometimes this has been referred to as "devotion" to the Sacred Heart. The Latin word behind the English means simply to dedicate oneself wholly. In Christian faith the word refers to the interior disposition by which a person dedicates self, gives self, consecrates self to God through Jesus.

Devotion is worship. Primarily, it is a form of liturgical worship. That means it is a community worship and not something merely or primarily private. What is more, this worship is a way of acting out Christian faith in action. The meaning and the fruits of worship have to overflow in Christian living and serving. That is what devotion to the Sacred Heart points to first and primarily. Because this devotion has so many and such rich facets it can't stop with Jesus' human heart. If we plunge into this self-dedication, we plunge into that of the Church to its Lord and bride—into the life of the Trinity itself. In the eyes of the Heavenly Father, each of us and all of us together as a Church constitute only one heart in and with the heart of Christ.

If we would deepen our understanding of what we do, we should recall how St. Paul spoke of charity and its manifestations—concrete and practical ones—as love, and spoke of his love for his converts as in the being loved in the "viscera", what we think of as the heart, of Christ. There is no one who loves as is needful for us human beings, needful for redemption, unless one loves as Jesus Christ.

LETTING GOD RAISE US ABOVE OURSELVES

A reflection from a sermon by St. Bernard

A glorious, solemn feast has dawned, that of the martyrs and foremost of martyrs, made sacred by their deaths, Peter and Paul. They are two great lamps which God has set up in his Church like two wonderous eyes in Christ's Body. They are given us as teachers to whom we can safely commit ourselves. They show us the path to life and bring us to that one Mediator who has made peace between heaven and earth by his blood and who "*committed no sin, nor was guile in his mouth*". But how, then, can I possibly approach Jesus? He is the purest one and I am so sinful! For this very reason, God gave me two great sinners. If I feel I am the greatest of sinners, yet I think I may be able to approach two who were themselves such great sinners and still found grace with God.

Perhaps they learned from the forgiveness they received how to forgive others as well as forgive themselves. They were great sinners, and didn't forget their sins because they were so readily forgiven. They constantly proclaim themselves sinners and never minimize their sinfulness. Perhaps there is no sin greater than Peter's, and Paul certainly thought himself the greatest of sinners. They teach us how much in need we are of forgiveness, and what great things God's love can do with repentant sinners. Notice that Peter's sin didn't take away his call to lead others to Christ and even to call the other apostles to unity in Christ. Paul was forgiven for the sin he committed perhaps out of pride and all the learning he was so proud of became a reason to turn from reliance on himself and to reliance on God and on Jesus Christ. He had been a violent person and worked horrible deeds of violence on innocent people simply because they believed in Jesus as the Messiah and was made a chosen vessel, leading others to that very faith.

It was only fitting that such people should be appointed as pastors for others, and taught how to be mild and gentle pastors as well. They were strong to defend and protect but they were gentle in receiving and forgiving those who turned to God. They both understood the great tragedy of those who have sinned but can't accept the grace of forgiving themselves.

Peter and Paul are our masters. They learned the paths of life from the Master of all. They teach us still. What have they most especially taught us? It wasn't the skill of catching fish or making tents. It wasn't skill in reading learned writers or thinking subtly. They certainly didn't teach us to go on and on learning but never coming to the truth. What they taught us and still teach us was how to live. Is that a minor matter? It is perhaps the greatest matter of all. A person swollen with pride doesn't really live. One who is infested with such disorders simply disfigures self rather than living.

One lives well who lives in an orderly, friendly and humble way. One lives always paying heed to one's ways. One guards oneself from sinning and giving scandal. One strives to love and be loved and to show oneself gentle and friendly, to endure and to help. I thank you Lord Jesus who have revealed these things to little children and to sinners. Let us ever follow you and leave everything for your sake.