

THE TWENTY-THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

- Sun.** **The Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time**
Sept.8 **RENOUNCING EVERYTHING FOR CHRIST**
 A reflection from Conferences by John Cassian
- Mon.** **Memorial of St. Peter Claver**
9 **GIVING ONESELF TOTALLY WITH CHRIST**
 A reflection taken from Wikipedia
- Tues.** **Tuesday of the 23rd Week in Ordinary Time**
10 **EXAMINING ONE’S MOTIVES FOR SERVING GOD**
 A reflection by Fr. Hubert van Zeller, OSB
- Wed.** **Wednesday of the 23rd Week in Ordinary Time**
11 **DO YOU BELIEVE TRIALS LEAD YOU TO GOD?**
 A reflection by Fr. Damasus Winzen, OSB
- Thurs.** **Thursday of the 23rd Week in Ordinary Time**
12 **ACCEPTING THE CROSS YOU ARE GIVEN**
 A reflection by Anthony Bloom
- Fri.** **Memorial of St. John Chrysostom**
13 **GIVING THANKS EVEN FOR CROSSES**
 A reflection from a homily on Romans by St. John Chrysostom
- Sat.** **Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross**
14 **THE CROSS BRINGS ALL THINGS INTO UNITY**
 A reflection from St. Gregory of Nyssa’s
 Commentary on John’s Gospel

RENOUNCING EVERYTHING FOR CHRIST

A reflection from the Conferences by John Cassian

One who doesn't renounce his possessions can't be my disciple. In fact, as the tradition of the Fathers and the authority of the Holy Scriptures affirm, there are three renunciations which everyone must strive to make. Let's reflect on them.

The first renunciation is on the material level; we are told to devalue all ordinary wealth and all ordinary possessions. The second renunciation is personal; we are to turn away from our former way of life, especially from its vices and improper attachments whether physical or spiritual. The third renunciation is global and has to do with hope. It calls upon us to withdraw concern and attention from all that is merely passing and perceivable in order to contemplate what lies ahead of us in Heaven so as to desire what is as yet unseen.

In Scripture we find that God commanded Abraham to make these renunciations, and all at once. God said to him: "*Leave your country and your kin and your father's house*". "*Your country*" means all ordinary wealth and possessions. "*Your kin*" means your former way of living with the habits, especially the bad ones, that you have grown up with and that are as familiar to you as blood kin and members of your family. Finally, "*your father's house*" means every secular memory aroused by the realities we can perceive.

The goal is to die with Christ to the "elemental spirits" of this world. When this is achieved one is able to contemplate, as St. Paul says, "*not the things that are seen but those that are unseen, for what is seen is temporary and what is unseen is eternal*". This is achieved when in our hearts we leave this temporal and visible house and turn the eyes of our mind toward that house in which we shall live forever. Though we live in the world, we need to cease to follow "the spirit of this world" so as to fight for the Lord.

We are called to proclaim a holy, Christian way of life. That means proclaiming, as St. Paul says, that our homeland is in heaven.

It doesn't do much good to make the first of the three renunciations, even if we do that with wholehearted devotion and by the inspiration of faith, unless we also carry out the second with the same zeal and fervor. Having made these renunciations, we become able to make the third. What we do then is leave the house established by the one who fathered us as members of the human race, and so as children of wrath like everyone else, and turn inwardly toward heavenly realities alone.

These renunciations are not our goals. Our goal is to fix our minds solely on Heavenly realities. What enables a person to contemplate in this way? We mustn't pamper our bodies but cleanse ourselves from all attachments to worldly refinements. This is how we draw close to the perfection the renunciations aim at. This is made possible by casting away every feeling and attitude focused simply on worldly things. That frees us to raise our minds up to constantly meditate on divine realities. We will contemplate spiritually the realm of the invisible. The other side of this is losing all concern for the frail body that encloses our spirit and the place where we are. That is the result of being absorbed by divine and spiritual realities.

GIVING ONESELF TOTALLY WITH CHRIST

A reflection taken from Wikipedia

A member of the Society of Jesus, Peter Claver was assigned to work in Cartagena, in what was then the New Kingdom of Granada. It was the center of the slave trade for Spanish America. Scholars estimate that about 10,000 slaves per year were sold there, mostly for work in the silver and gold mines, as replacements for Indian slaves who died too frequently. Records indicate that Peter Claver baptized about 300,000 slaves during his forty year ministry and heard some 5,000 confessions each year as part of that ministry.

St. Peter died in his seventies and for the last four years of his life was too ill to leave his room. The Jesuit superior hired an ex-slave to care for him and the result was that he was neglected and even physically abused and starved during that four year period. He refused to complain and chose to see this as a just punishment for his sins. Both his brother Jesuits and the Cartagena city administration considered him and his ministry to the slaves a nuisance and wanted to forget him.

The common people of the city thought of him as a saint, however. They made so much of his death that a public funeral with much pomp was ceremony had to be ordered. Those who had looked down on his work were embarrassed, but that did not change their attitude toward slavery or ministry to slaves.

Claver was unusual in going into the holds of the slave ships when they arrived to bring what help he could to those chained there and to help them to the dock and to basic medical attention. The conditions were horrifying and filthy—it is estimated that about a third of each cargo of slaves died at sea. This would mean that about 100,000 enslaved persons died on the way to Cartagena.

He didn't forget the slaves he had baptized but visited them where they were working. He tried to strength them spiritually and to get the slave owners to treat them humanely. He recruited volunteers to help him in these ministries and to gather fruits and other foods that would help improve the physical condition of those newly arrived.

The slave trade was immensely profitable. Those making money from it weren't welcoming of Claver's efforts. Slaves could be purchased in Africa for about 3 crowns and sold in America for 23 crowns. Only the strongest survived but that was enough to make a huge profit. Claver's work undermined the slave trade and so he was not supported or approved.

Claver's goal was to emphasize the human dignity of those enslaved, not only by leading them to become Christians but by sharing their lot to the extent he could and so pointing out the need for better conditions. When visiting the baptized he insisted on staying in the slave quarters and eating as they did. If it wasn't suitable for a Spaniard then it wasn't suitable for any human person; if it wasn't suitable for a priest it wasn't suitable for any Christian!

The church where his body is found—in a coffin with windows under the main altar—was originally that of the Jesuit house of residence where he suffered and died. The church has now been renamed in his honor. His work is promoted today by the Knights of St. Peter Claver, the largest African-American fraternal organization in the United States, and by those working in the Apostolate of the Sea. His message is about respect for human dignity proclaimed by faith and the commandment to love one's neighbor.

EXAMINING ONE'S MOTIVES FOR SERVING GOD

A reflection by Fr. Hubert van Zeller, OSB

When God sent the prophet Amos to preach in the Kingdom of Israel he proclaimed his message in the central shrine the northern kings set up to keep people from going to worship in Jerusalem. This temple had been established not to promote service of God but to help consolidate and preserve political power and all the benefits that came from it. Lest we think this was done only in the northern kingdom we have the case of Jeremiah to show it was true also in the Kingdom of Judah.

It is well to keep in mind what we hear in Scripture: *"Let's lie in wait for this just one because he is not of our kind and is against our doings; he criticizes us and corrects us and makes our ways seem sins while boasting that he knows God. It is painful even to see him."* But they didn't simply reject what was said to them in God's name. *"Let's test him by outrages and tortures and see how meek and patient he really is"*.

Too many, especially the leaders of Israel, trusted in wealth and wanted to Lord to make sure they kept it. What did Amos have to say? *"Woe to you that are wealthy!"* *"Woe to you who put your trust in the mountain of Samaria, ... you great men, heads of the people, who go with state into the House of the Lord"*. The prophets had no more regard for human prudence than they did for human depravity. They cast their lot with God, as did the Lord Jesus.

The priest at Bethel complained about Amos to King Amaziah of Samaria, *"The land can't bear all this words"*! He was a disturber of the ordered course of things and as such was eventually silenced. This unfortunately hasn't changed. The same fate is dealt out still to the people who walk with God and proclaim the consequences of God's word in the field of social and individual justice.

Perhaps Amos, along with Isaiah and Jeremiah and many others, was one of those to whom Our Lord referred when he added to the final beatitude *"for so they persecuted the prophets that were before you"*. How many refuse to accept God's word at face value because that would interfere with their way of making money or living in self-preoccupation rather than in service to others. Amos would probably have been glad to hear that they are blessed who are spoken ill of without truth.

Are you ready to examine your way of interpreting God's word and to ask yourself if you are distorting that word because you want to hang on to your ways of living, of making money, of feeling secure, and of trying to control your own surroundings? Do you serve God in order to keep anyone from disturbing what you think of as your well-being? Are you ready to put yourself instead into God's hands. *"Behold, the slave of the Lord. Let it be done in me according to your word"*.

DO YOU BELIEVE TRIALS LEAD YOU TO GOD?

A reflection by Fr. Damasus Winzen, OSB

It is significant that the prophet who actually witnessed the downfall of the Northern Kingdom is called Hosea. The name means “God saves”. The message was a proclamation of pardoning love and of hope. In the midst of the dark clouds of God’s wrath appears the very heart of God’s love! God is the great lover. It is like the love of a bridegroom and bride or the love of a father and a son. In both relationships Hosea was deeply wounded. His wife was unfaithful and his son disobedient, but his love was too deep to be extinguished. He bent down to his harlot wife and to his prodigal son in compassion. That is what God does for his People.

In these ways, personal experience revealed the secret of God’s loving heart. God loves too much to be wrathful forever. The denunciation of Israel’s unfaithfulness is followed by the solemn promise: *“I will betroth you to myself forever; I will betroth you to myself in righteousness and justice, in love and in compassion. I will betroth you to myself in truth”*. God’s complaint over the disobedience of his son, Israel, ends in a moving confession. *“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? My heart is turned upside down, my compassion is like a blazing fire. I will not carry out my fierce anger nor will I destroy you again, Ephraim. I am God and not a human being, I am the Holy One in your midst and I will not destroy you.”*

These words represent a climax in the self-revelation of God. The difference between God and humans isn’t so much seen in terms of power or perfection but in terms of selfless love, ‘agape’. It triumphs over wrath. This is the very core of the Christian revelation! God is love!

The revelation of this love through Hosea is God’s answer to state-supported harlotry in Israel. It worships vitality, fertility, procreation and prosperity. In order to free Israel—and us—from such worship, God will strip away all ordinary wealth and prosperity. God will lead his People into the desert, into exile. There God will speak to Israel’s heart. God will reveal to them divine love and teach Israel to call God “my husband” rather than “my master”. The name ‘baal’ mean ‘master’ but not “loving master”.

“The valley of desolation will become a door of hope”, says the Lord. But this was not the ultimate hope. That only appeared when God sent his only son. That is when God gave to his people a new heart. The Heavenly Father sent the Only Begotten Son into the valley of the Passion to redeem all from divine wrath. Hosea’s message is fulfilled for us in Jesus. We have only to walk with Jesus day by day.

ACCEPTING THE CROSS YOU ARE GIVEN

A reflection by Anthony Bloom

The Lord himself took upon his shoulders what we might call the “first cross”. It was the heaviest and most appalling cross but after him thousands and thousands of men, women and children have taken crosses upon themselves. These may seem lesser crosses compared with Christ’s, but they are still frightening. Innumerable crowds of people have lovingly and obediently walked in Christ’s footsteps, treading the long way that leads from earth to the Kingdom of God. They walk now; they have walked thus for two thousand years and they will walk however long God asks. Along our way through life we see innumerable crosses on which the disciples of Christ are being crucified.

However far we look we see cross after cross. We see the bodies of martyrs, we see heroes of the spirit, we see monks and nuns, we see priests and pastors, but most of all we see ordinary people, the humble people of God. They have willingly taken upon themselves the cross of Christ. There is no end to this procession. They walk through the centuries knowing that Christ foretold that we will have sorrow upon this earth but that the Kingdom of God is for those who walk with Christ like this.

Think of the many who walk with heavy crosses. They are rejected, hated, all because of the truth and the name of Christ. They walk as pure victims for God. They are old and young, children and grown-ups. But what we see raises a terrifying question: Where am I? Where are we? Am I, are we, going to stand and do nothing but look? Can we manage to watch this long procession, this throng of people with shining eyes and hope unquenched, with unflinching love and incredible joy in their hearts, and simply let them go past?

Aren’t we called to join them? This ever-moving crowd is marked as a crowd of victims, and a crowd of “the little ones” who inherit the Kingdom of God. Aren’t we, you and me, going to take up our cross and follow Christ?

Christ has commanded us to take up a cross and follow him! He has thus invited us to the banquet in the Kingdom. He is at the head of the procession! More, he is together with each of those who walk in the procession. Is this a nightmare? How can human flesh and blood endure this tragedy, the sight of all these martyrs, new and old? We can endure it because Christ is Risen! We don’t see in our Lord the “defeated prophet of Galilee”. That is how his tormentors saw him, but we know him in the glory of his Resurrection! We know that every word of his is true. You know that the Kingdom of God is ours—if we simply follow Christ!

GIVING THANKS EVEN FOR CROSSES

A reflection taken from a homily on Romans by St. John Chrysostom

Let's leave types and figures behind and fix our attention on the reality that they foreshadow. *"The bodies of animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary as a sacrifice for sin are burnt outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate, in order to sanctify the people through his own blood."* The former rites prefigured events to come and Christ fulfilled all by his suffering. The text implies that he suffered of his own free will, since it suggests that the ancient Hebrew rites were prophetic signs and that this gave them their meaning. Christ suffered outside the city and the temple but his blood was taken up to heaven and its temple.

We too have a share in the blood that was brought into the Holy Place—the True Holy Place. We have a share in the reality that was signified by the ancient rites. Our fellowship is in sanctification and not simply in the shame inflicted on Christ. Yes, shame was the cause of this sanctification. So just as Christ himself was scorned and criticized, we too must be. If we go out to him and stay with him we will have fellowship with him.

What does the text mean when it speaks of *"going forth to him"*? It means that we are to take our share in his sufferings. We are to accept our part in his shame. It wasn't by mere chance that he suffered as he did or where he did. We too, then, should carry this cross, right out of this world as we keep ourselves free of merely earthly entanglements. If, for instance, Christ endured disgrace as a condemned person, so must we.

Through Christ, let's offer a sacrifice to God. What sort of sacrifice should it be? Listen to St. Paul. He tells us that a verbal sacrifice is praise to God's name. This means offering prayers of praise and thanksgiving and singing hymns. These are the *"fruit of our lips"*. He tells us that we aren't to offer sheep, oxen and calves—such as our ancestors in faith gave to their priests. These aren't enough. We must offer a thanksgiving that is an imitation of Christ.

Don't neglect to offer what you have! *"Don't neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."* We bring these to God through Christ, for there is no other way in which a sacrifice may be offered except through the Son and through a contrite heart. We are to give thanks for all we have received and for all Christ has suffered on our account. Let's accept all we are given gratefully. We may receive poverty, or sickness or anything like them, for God alone knows what is best for us. If we don't know how to pray—as Scripture says we don't—how can we know what is best for us? Let's work at giving thanks for all things that come. With a generous heart let's accept whatever the Lord sends us, even our crosses.

THE CROSS BRINGS ALL THINGS INTO UNITY

A reflection from a Commentary on John's Gospel by St. Gregory of Nyssa

The teaching which tradition has handed down to us presents the Cross of Christ as bringing all things together and to God. To understand this rightly one has to keep it in mind that all the words and teachings of the Gospels have a divine and higher meaning as well as an earthly and ordinary one. There is no exception to this rule. There is nothing that is not revealed as a mixture and unification of the divine and the created, of the divine and of the human. Every word and every deed exists in a created or human way but it also has a mystical meaning that reveals a reality which is properly divine.

There is, for instance, a human element in our deaths but there is a divine significance in the way it comes about. In accord with this rule, we must learn to notice not only the creaturely aspect of things but the divine as well.

Now it pertains to the Godhead to pervade everything that is. God is in some way present in every part and aspect of the reality of all that exists. After all, nothing can remain in existence without remaining in God. The very endurance of what exists forces us to believe that God's Nature pervades all things.

We learn this from the very shape of the cross. It is divided into four parts or dimensions in such a way that its four extensions converge in the middle. He who was stretched upon the cross, when God's plan of salvation was fulfilled by his death, is the one who binds all things to himself and makes them one. In his own person he brings the diverse natures of all existing things into one accord and harmony.

We conceive of everything as either above or below, and as extended to the ends of all things on both sides. Consider, then, the constitution of all reality, whether in Heaven or in the Underworld or at either extremity of the universe. Everywhere your thoughts are met by the presence of the Godhead. God alone is grasped as in every part of every existing thing. God is the one who maintains all things in being.

This means that the whole of creation looks to God, so to speak, as its center. It is from God, as within each and every thing, that all and each flow forth. It doesn't make any difference whether they are above the very heavens or below everything or whether they are located at one extreme of the universe or the other.

This is wonderful knowledge! It was more than fitting that we should realize this by contemplating the Cross. This knowledge comes to us through hearing and sight and through reflection. Recall what St. Paul said to the people of Ephesus. Know, he said, *"the depth and the height and the breadth and the length"* of all things and recognize this in the Cross. *"At the name of Jesus Christ all beings in Heaven and on earth, and in the Underworld, shall bend the knee"*!

He is thinking of the central cross-beam and that which holds it up. Two beams and with four parts. This designates everything that is in Heaven and the Underworld and all that lies in between. Here we have a "mystical" meaning. We are taught this lesson by the cross. By learning it we begin to see God in all things and bidding all things together. What better way to feel our mind and heart lifted up to God in a prayer of praise and thanksgiving. In prayer we experience the reality that will be our joy and gladness for all eternity. We begin to know the joy that Christ alone can bring us when we see this wonder everywhere. We encounter God in every direction toward which we turn. We can do this now and at every moment.