

# **THE FOURTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME**

## **THE FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD**

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Sun.           **THE FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD**  
Feb.2       **TRUSTING IN GOD & IN GOD'S PROVIDENCE**  
              A reflection from a homily by Origen of Alexandria

Mon.           **Monday of the 4<sup>th</sup> Week of Ordinary Time**  
3           **GROWING STRONGER IN LOVE FOR GOD**  
              A reflection from a homily by St. Gregory the Great

Tues.           **Tuesday of the 4<sup>th</sup> Week of Ordinary Time**  
4           **BELIEVING IS BETTER THAN SEEING**  
              A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

Wed.           **Memorial of St. Agatha**  
5           **WHAT A LIFE CAN MEAN TO FUTURE GENERATIONS**  
              A reflection developed from an article from "Catholic Online"

Thurs.           **Memorial of St. Paul Miki & Companions**  
6           **ONLY CHRIST GIVES MEANING TO OUR LIVES**  
              A reflection developed from an article from "Catholic Online"

### **MONASTIC DESERT DAY**

Fri.           **Friday of the 4<sup>th</sup> Week of Ordinary Time**  
7           **BRINGING OURSELVES INTO SUBJECTION**  
              A reflection from a sermon by Bl. Henry Suso

Sat.           **Memorial of our Lady**  
8           **MARY AS SERVANT OF THE LORD**  
              A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

## **TRUSTING IN GOD & GOD'S PROVIDENCE**

**A reflection taken from a homily by Origen of Alexandria**

**It is good for us to reflect on the way God fore-ordains all things for salvation. Think of the way God pre-arranged for Simeon to embrace God's Son. First, he was given a revelation by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he has seen the Lord's Anointed. Second, he didn't enter the temple by chance but was prompted by the Holy Spirit to go there at a particular time. We should remember the Scripture which tells us that "*all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God*". This means that if we too want to embrace Jesus, and even enfold him in our arms, we must strive with all our might to follow the guidance of the Spirit.**

**The Holy Spirit has today led us to God's Temple. At this moment we are standing in the Lord Jesus' temple, the Church. It is a temple built of living stones . When your life and conduct are truly worthy of the name of Jesus, you are standing in the Church and so in the Lord's Temple.**

**Have you come to this temple led by the Spirit? If so you will find the Lord Jesus. If you find him you will take him in your arms and you too will say: "*Now, Lord, you can let your servant go in peace, as you promised!*". Notice how peace is linked with dismissal from one's present responsibilities in the Church and with death. Simeon didn't say that he wished to leave this world but that he wished to go to the Lord in peace.**

**The promise of peace had been made to Abraham. He was told, "*you shall go to your ancestors in peace when you have reached a ripe old age*". Who, then, can hope to die in peace? It is the sure hope of those who have that peace of God which surpasses all our abilities to understand. This hope guards the hearts of those who experience it.**

**Who, then, leaves this world in peace? Those who understand that "*God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ*". Such a one isn't God's enemy or opposed to God. Such a person has complete peace and concord through the good works he has done in God. This is the sort of person who is allowed, like Abraham, to go in peace and to be in God with the holy patriarchs.**

**But talking about the patriarchs isn't sufficient. Only speaking of Jesus is adequate. He is the prince and lord of patriarchs and of all others. Listen to St. Paul: "*It is better to die and be with Christ!*" One who has Jesus dares to say, like Paul: "*It isn't any longer I who live, but it is Christ who is living in me!*"**

**Here we are standing in the Temple of God and holding the Son of God. We embrace him and so we pray to Almighty God, and to the Son of God who is in Jesus, that we be found worthy of being released from all earthly duties and so be found worthy of going to better things and places. We long to speak with Jesus and embrace him but we seek only to give him glory for ever and ever.**

**All this is true because of God's loving providence. He has chosen us from before all ages to be his own and to know his Son.**

## **GROWING STRONGER IN LOVE FOR GOD**

**A reflection from a homily by St. Gregory the Great**

**The pursuit of the contemplative life is something for which a great and sustained effort on our part is required. It is an effort to rise from earthly to heavenly things. It is an effort to keep one's attention fixed on spiritual realities. It is an effort to pass beyond and above the sphere of the visible in order to gain access to realities that are larger and more open.**

**In this world we find that ordinary things, so to speak, hem us in and narrow us. There are times when one succeeds in overcoming the blindness and the obscurity of what is spiritual. Then one catches at least a glimpse of boundless light, be it ever so fleeting. But such experiences are too momentary and all too quickly we must again turn away from self toward God. For a moment we saw the light which is approached with bated breath but then we had to return to sighing and mourning because of obscurity and our blindness.**

**The Scriptures give us many beautiful illustrations of this situation. I like especially the tale of Jacob's wrestling with an angel all night long. He was returning to the home of his parents and on the way he somehow encountered an angel. Like anyone who engages in such a struggle, Jacob found his opponent stronger at some times and weaker at others, and found the same true of himself.**

**Now let's interpret this tale as about us as we strive to come to God in contemplation. We seem to come into God's presence and we put forth every sort of effort to behold God as God is in himself. It is as though we were engaged in a contest of strength and at one moment seem to prevail and to gain access to that boundless light. Briefly our minds and hearts seem to experience what we long for and the next moment we feel drained and overcome. The very sweetness of the taste we have had of the Lord seems to do us in.**

**Using this metaphor, when the divine presence is experienced, seemingly directly, we seem to overcome and then we seem to lose all that strength. Now recall how the angel struck Jacob on his hip; ever after Jacob limped. In effect, God strikes our merely carnal affections and loves and causes them to begin to wither away. He does this by the experience we are aware of in our minds. We seem to experience God as God is in himself and all else seems to lose its attractiveness.**

**It necessary follows that the stronger we become in our love for God alone the weaker becomes our love for this world. What we need to do is, like Jacob, hold fast to the angel. Don't let go! Then our love for God alone will grow stronger. And, in proportion, our merely earthly love will grow weaker. Everyone who experiences weakness in one part area leans on the strength experienced in another area. Don't be distressed if the attractiveness of ordinary things diminishes. What you want to do is to lean more and more on the attractiveness of God.**

## **BELIEVING IS BETTER THAN SEEING**

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

***“It is better for one person to die for the people’s sake than for a whole People to be destroyed.”*** That’s what Jesus’ enemies said, and it was true. It was better that Jesus should bear the darkness of human flesh than that the entire human race should wander and stay lost. God let the splendor of the image of the divine nature be obscured by the darkness in the nature of a slave so that the life of the slave might be freed and preserved. He let the radiance of eternal life be dimmed in the flesh so that the flesh might be purified. So let the fairest of the children of humankind be darkened by passion in order that all the children of humankind might be enlightened. Yes, let Christ be defiled on the cross, let him grow pale in death, let him have no beauty or comeliness, but in order that he might gain the Church as a beautiful and attractive bride, without spot or wrinkle.

I recognize the image and likeness of our sin-darkened nature in Jesus. I recognize those tunics of skin that clothed our first parents when they sinned. I know, Lord, that you are gentle by nature and meek and humble of heart. You are pleasing in appearance, kindly and anointed with the oil of gladness above all kings. How is it, then, that you are rough and shaggy, like Easu in the story of how Jacob stole a blessing? Whose is this wrinkled and blackened face, whose this shaggy hair? They are mine! For Christ’s hands are made hairy by their likeness to mine, a sinner’s.

I acknowledge this shaggy growth as my own, and in my own flesh I see God my savior. It wasn’t Rebekah who clothed me. It was Mary! As she who bore Christ was holier, so he who actually received the blessing was more worthy. Christ has taken on my likeness because it is for me that the blessing is being claimed, the inheritance requested. He had heard the words: ***“Ask of me and I will give you the Peoples that are your heritage, and the ends of the earth that are your possession”***. Your heritage? Your possession? How, then, can that be given which Christ already possesses? Why urge Christ to ask for what is already his own? It is for me that Christ asks; he clothed himself in my nature in order to plead my cause.

Listen to Scripture: ***“He bore the chastisement that brings us peace”***. Isaiah says that. ***“The Lord has laid on him the guilt of us all. He had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every way, so that he might be merciful”***. The Letter to the Hebrew says that. All is done so that God may be merciful. What we hear from Christ’s lips and what we see in him, is about the mercy that is for us.

The words Christ speaks are spirit and life. What we see in ourselves is mortal. We are subject to death. But one reality is seen when we look at ourselves, and another reality is believed to be there. Our senses tell us that we are sinful but our faith assures us that we are bright and beautiful because Christ dwells within us. We must live by what our faith tells us. We must live by faith now and always.

## **WHAT A LIFE CAN MEAN FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS**

**A reflection developed from an article in "Catholic Online"**

**Almost nothing is known about the actual life of St. Agatha. She was probably born about 231CE and martyred about 251. All of this took place in Palermo or Catania, Sicily. What we are told in the Acts of her martyrdom, written several centuries later, is what believing Christians came to see as the meaning of her life for them. The trials she is said to have undergone are the trials that they feared they would not bear with faith. Her example assures them that as God kept her safe so God will keep them safe. Those fears are still with us and we still need the example of Agatha.**

**Agatha, even as a girl, had dedicated her life wholly to God. For her this involved refusing to marry. But a man who wanted her, and was continually refused, decided he could force her to give him what he wanted when a persecution begun under the emperor Decius. He denounced her and, in fact, was the local judge to hear her case. So her could continually try to force her to chose to surrender to him or to suffer what he thought she would deeply fear.**

**We are told that she met all threats and tortures with prayer. "Lord Jesus Christ, you see my heart and you know my own desires. Possess all that I am! I am your sheep: Make me worthy to overcome the devil." This is the prayer all want to make, and pray it with a trust like Agatha's.**

**The judge imprisoned her in a public house of prostitution, sure this would be supremely terrible for her. She had to enduring a month of propositions and attempts to, in effect, rape her. She would not surrender her gift of self to God. When the judge saw he couldn't subdue her in this way she was again brought to court. Her response was to publicly state that true freedom was being God's servant. So she was put in a prison, but what we supposed to frighten her seemed to be a relief. She used her time there to proclaim Christ as Savior.**

**She was then tortured, first on the rack, then by having her body raked by iron hooks, then burned by fiery sticks, then whipped. Since she bore all this in what seemed a cheerful spirit, the judge ordered her breasts to be cut off. He sent her back to prison without any medical help. Since she got better, and attributed this to the Lord, she was rolled over burning coals laced with sharp rocks and again returned to prison. She quickly got better and so was beheaded.**

**Agatha has served as patron, and model, for those assaulted sexually, those losing their breasts to cancer, and rape victims. As she stood fast in all these trial so can we. She is also patron and model for all who have to suffer because of their faith and have their health and life endangered for that reason. That is what her fidelity to her vocation caused her to mean for the generations who came after her. It is faithfulness to God that counts. God makes the witness a grace for others and a sign of his enduring love and care for all.**

## **ONLY CHRIST GIVES MEANING TO OUR LIVES**

**A reflection developed from an article in “Catholic Online”**

**The twenty-six martyrs of Japan whose memory we celebrate today were killed for reasons connected with trade and the fear of foreign influence on Japanese culture more than for their faith. Clearly they didn’t die to advance trade or to change a culture, however, but as witnesses to the truth that only in Jesus Christ do we find the path to God and to the fullness of life.**

**Paul Miki, a Japanese Jesuit, who has become the symbol of this first group of martyrs in Japan, was born into an important military family but sent to a Jesuit college for an education that would fit him for the new situation Japan found itself in due to contact with Spanish and Portuguese business people and missionaries. While studying there he became a Christian and then joined the Jesuit community. He became famous for his preaching of Christ.**

**When the ruler of Japan became worried about foreign influence and about trade arrangements with Spain and Portugal he swept up a disparate group of Christians since they symbolized the results of foreign influence on Japan. The group included a man who had renounced Christian faith for Buddhist but had been reconverted by Franciscan missionaries. Another was simply a cook for a missionary group and yet another had come to help one of those arrested. Three boys were included because they happened to be in the right place at the right time. All were marched to Nagasaki, a trip of some 400 miles in winter cold. They chose to sing the Te Deum all during the march.**

**All of them knew that their faith was not the fundamental reason why they were to be crucified. They knew that the Japanese version of crucifixion was to hang a person on a “T”-shaped framework and transfix him with two spears. They also had their right ears cut off in case they managed to escape and needed to be identified as prisoners.**

**The important point for all of them was that they were dying because they were Christians and were determined to be faithful to Christ and God by using their deaths to witness to Christ. All used their long march to proclaim Christ to all by-standers and curious people. All sought to persuade these Japanese to turn to Christ and find a new life. The Christian mission to Japan had gone well and the Church there was thought to number about 300,000 people. They saw that the harvest was rich and thought they had been sent to help reap it.**

**The message they give is that the circumstances of our lives always provide many opportunities to witness to God’s love and to the beauty of human love as it is transformed by faith in Christ. If we live and die for faith in Jesus Christ and for love of our neighbors then the circumstances matter very little. What matters is that we glorify God and proclaim his love for all.**

## **BRINGING OURSELVES INTO SUBJECTION**

**A reflection from a sermon by Bl. Henry Suso**

**God created Lucifer and adorned him with many beautiful gifts and graces. But what did Lucifer do? He took satisfaction in himself. He was pleased with himself most of all and wanted to be something special. In this same instant in which he wanted to be this special something he became nothing and fell very low.**

**We find the same thing in our first parents, whom God also adorned with precious gifts and graces. The devil tempted Eve but she didn't want to die and become nothing. So the devil responded by telling her she would not die but become wise. The promise sounded so pleasant, and rang so sweetly in her ears and was so tempting, that she seized the forbidden fruit and tasted it. This was the undoing of all of us.**

**One who wants to becoming something must be satisfied to be nothing. This renunciation of self, the willingness to be nothing, is the basis and foundation of our holiness. One who wants to become what God didn't make one ends up no longer being what one was. This is a necessary consequence. God, the pure and loving, is an unchangeable essence and all creatures exist for God and through God and not for themselves.**

**A human person needs a profound abandonment and renunciation of self. How profound must it be? If a stone were to drop into a bottomless ocean, it would never stop sinking—because that ocean has no bottom. We must have a like immersion and submersion in God's fathomless depths. We must be grounded in God no matter what heavy trials come upon us, interiorly or exteriorly. Trials may be caused by others or by one's own frailty. This cause a person to sink ever deeper into God.**

**We shouldn't complain or fret. We shouldn't seek self in anything. We should seek only God, in whom we are submerged. One who seeks anything in addition to God doesn't truly seek God. Our entire happiness should be to give glory to God and to fulfill God's will at all times.**

**We must never seek our own profit, our own exultation or reward. We must seek God alone and say with the Eternal Son: "*I am not looking to my own reputation but to the Father's*" (Jn. 8:49). One who acts contrary to this teaching is acting unrightly and committing an error.**

**No matter how beautiful a glass container may be, it isn't perfect if there is in a hole in it, even the size of a pinpoint. No matter how small the flaw, it takes away completeness and perfection. Renounce yourself wholly and turn entirely to God. That is subjecting oneself wholly to God.**

## MARY AS THE SERVANT OF THE LORD

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

*“I am the slave girl of the Lord; let what you have said be done to me.”* These words express a clear recognition of a special relationship with God. Mary calls herself a slave, the slave of another in whom she finds the meaning of her life, and this may seem a problem. Bondage isn't thought a humanizing relationship. Yet if we put the expression in its spiritual-biblical context something deep and wonderful emerges.

Mary's words reflect those of the prophet Isaiah. *“Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight”*. Mary understands herself in relation to these words of Isaiah. This understanding echoes in the words of the angel, *“You have won God's favor”*. She sees herself in a close relationship of favor and support. This isn't how an ordinary slave would see herself. Isaiah said that God's servant had been *“endowed with God's favor”* and Mary was told *“the Holy Spirit will come upon you”*. This is the promise to which Mary responds by identifying herself as the Lord's slave. In short, we need to understand what Mary says in terms of *what* Isaiah's “servant of the Lord” says.

She is a servant loved by God and pre-chosen by God to be filled with the Spirit. But in Isaiah this is an awareness proper to God's Chosen People and not just to an individual. Mary represents a People and speaks in their name. When God calls Israel his servant he isn't degrading Israel but exalting it. That is why the angel says that Mary isn't to be afraid but to remember that the Lord is with her. Mary is expressing her unity with a People deeply loved by God, chosen by God and sustained by God's power. God does that for her.

Mary's heart is the heart of her people, the expression of their dedication to God. That is what it means for her to be the “Virgin Israel” and the “Daughter of Zion”. But beyond this, Mary has a sense of unity with all human kind. Think of the words, *“I have appointed you as a covenant for the people and a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison and those who live in darkness from their dungeon”*. Mary lives a triple awareness of her personal relationship of dedication to God, of being the expression of her People's response to God's love and call, and of a responsibility toward all humanity.

If we think of Mary as the model for all believers we should remember that we live in all these relationships that she did. She has been given to us by her Son as our mother and that means we share all those relationships even as God gave them to her. We are called like Mary. Are we prepared to live in the sense of our relationships to God and to God's People and to all humankind as she does? That is our challenge.