

THE THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

THE FOUNDERS OF THE CISTERCIAN ORDER

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DISCERNING THE NEEDS OF ONE'S TIME

Developed from a reflection by Fr. Guerric Heckel, OSCO

The great founders of religious life had such an impact because of their ability to discern the urgent needs of the people of their age and responded with originality. As we honor Sts. Robert, Alberic and Stephen I find myself asking: What are the urgent needs of our day?

First off, our existing institutions aren't designed to handle the magnitude or complexity of a globalized world. The economic, ecological, political and systemic realities facing us require new forms of organization and leadership anchored in team-work, diversity and networking.

Second, living an "asceticism of love" is not longer a matter of imitating a suffering and sacrificial hero, but of embracing the daring, empowering mission of the Gospel imperative to work for a new reign of God on earth. Following Christ is much more about the transformation of this world and its inhabitants than an escape into salvation in the hereafter.

Third, there is a growing awareness that those in "secular" life are integral to the living of the core meaning of a "vowed" life. Take the hunger for genuine hospitality as one of the urgent needs of our time. John Vanier, the founder of the L'Arche communities, has written: "Communities that have trouble making room for strangers because they have grown insulated or preoccupied with their own needs and struggles and communities that are dying".

Theologian Diarmuid O'Murchu puts it this way: "Religious aren't about a different set of values but about the values all humans yearn for in their deepest selves. Monks and nuns are called to take these values more seriously and strive to live them out authentically. Yet ensuring holiness doesn't result in having a privileged position about others. Dialogue and networking are likely to be the strategies for future monastic life. Monks need to engage the cultural spiritual hunger in more creative ways".

We have heard that everyone has a call to be a mystic. Monks express that call in a special way which includes the call to foster it in others. We aren't dealing with a model for life that revolves around observing laws as much as emphasizing community life more than individual holiness. How we relate to others in community is (e.g.) what celibacy is about. Sharing resources characterizes poverty and the exercise of co-responsibility expresses obedience. We emphasize a spirituality of engagement rather than escape.

Our founders, if they lived today, would doubtless be discerning "Embracing God's Creation and Ecological Responsibility". This emphasis on the creation of a new earth as the heart of spirituality resounds through Pope Francis' Laudato Si. That calls for a community which is able to grow, learn, and adapt to an evolving world. Isn't that what characterized the Cistercian Founders? Foundings are fueled by a kind of wild, creative energy from the Spirit. Vision and hope are the driving forces. Without one another's support that vision wouldn't have caught fire. Our charism involves keeping that vision of new life alive today.

GOD'S PROMISES & HOSPITALITY WITHOUT HESITATION

A reflection from a sermon of St. John Chrysostom

How blessed was Abraham in the hospitality he showed. His tent was like a common dwelling place for travelers and offered food to every stranger, as though it were a free Inn. It wasn't hidden away so none would know of the rest or refreshment it offered. If it was in the desert it was also right on the road leading through it. It was on the gateway road into Palestine.

Abraham, you passed your whole day under the oak tree and travelers found you a good angel of rest and refreshment. Christ appeared to you in the company of two angels and so your hospitality led you to share your tent with God and angels. How blessed that tent which received God and through which God appeared in human form and showed you the mysteries of his coming incarnation. These are the mysteries of our salvation.

The glory of your guest wasn't hidden from you by his servile form. For you had other eyes than those of the body by which you perceived the Lord. And so you recognized the mediator of God, the Son destined to be made known standing between two living beings. O Blessed Man, how I admire your personal care for those who appeared before you. You could have ordered a servant to deal with their needs but instead you yourself ran with youthful eagerness—though you were actually an old man—and organized the work of hospitality.

Your wife too, eagerly shared the work with you, loading the table with unleavened bread (for zealous hospitality couldn't wait for fermentation). But all was done in fear and reverence, not as for the entertainment of a human guest but like the offering of a sacrifice to God. So the fruit of your hospitality as itself good, O Blessed one, as well as the reward for your devotion was a good as great as salvation!

Look! Beyond all hope, fertility was restored to a barren womb. The near dead body of a very old man was revived for the begetting of a legitimate heir. You received from the only God the promise of an only son. "*At this time I shall return*", God said, "*and Sarah will have a son*"! Truly you both are blessed! How shall I praise you for your faith?

You had no hesitation in believing the promise. You weren't disturbed by it. You didn't consider how dead your body had become—after all you were about 100 years old! Nor did you think of the barrenness of Sarah's womb. Your faith was strengthened because you knew that God was able to fulfill whatever God promised.

Nature's creator is not a slave to nature's accustomed ways. God is all nature's creator. God is subject to no constraint by nature in any of his works. Nature obeys the free will of its creator in every kind of change and creation. That is why, O Blessed ones, you weren't disappointed in your hopes. At the appointed time, and even in age so old that you were nearly dead, you became parents. You became the givers of new life. And you did it by your blessed exercise of hospitality. We are called to imitate both of you. We too have received a promise of new life. We will receive that promise even as we share your gifts with all those who come to us.

OUR FUTURE AND INCARNATIONAL HUMANISM

A reflection from Angel of the Schools by Jacques Maritain

Against an old scholasticism which was incapable of recognizing in Aquinas the true heir of St. Augustine, Thomas defends the rights of truth in the natural sphere and the great value of reason. Against the Averroists, incapable of recognizing in Aquinas the true interpreter of Aristotle, Thomas defends the rights of revealed truth and the supreme value of faith. He affirms both the essential naturalness of metaphysics and the essential supernaturalness of the infused virtues like faith and hope and charity. He defends the essential subordination of the natural to the supernatural, proclaiming not only that grace perfects nature without destroying it and that the properly divine life that grace implants in us can alone heal the wound in our nature. Grace must take hold of nature absolutely.

Aquinas' special achievement was to bring all the virtues of the mind into the service of Jesus Christ. He saw what we call the problem of culture and humanism. He answered its questions. That answer was: Sanctify it by grace.

A human person becomes perfect only supernaturally. A human person develops only on the Cross! A genuine Christian humanism is possible, but only on the premise that its ultimate goal is union with God through the humanity of Christ the Mediator. The means of that development must be proportionate to its essentially supernatural goal. It must be a humanism of the incarnation, an incarnational humanism.

This requires that it order itself entirely toward love and contemplation. It must entirely subordinate mere knowledge to divine wisdom, just as the holy soul of Aquinas did. One must subordinate metaphysical wisdom to theological wisdom and theological wisdom to the wisdom of the saints.

This wisdom realizes that the form of reason can subject the world only if it is itself subject to the supra-rational and supra-human order of the Holy Spirit. That means it is subject to and formed by the Spirit's gifts.

Unless this happens in fact, any humanism—even a Christian one—can only lead to the destruction of human kind and the ruin of all that is human and of this world. We can only create the humanism our time needs if we learn from the Spirit, and by means of the virtues it infuses in us through grace, to imitate Christ in our hearts and in our minds, in our humanness and in our adoption as Children of God. We must open ourselves to grace if we would show the way to open nature and ordinary human life to that love which saves all things, and all men and women.

THE CHRISTIAN CALL TO PRAY

A reflection from a sermon by St. John Henry Newman

The privilege of intercession is a trust committed to all Christians. The only requisite is a clear conscience and communion with Christ in the Church. We leave secret things to God. Only God knows what each person's genuine advancement in holiness and holy things is. Only God knows the real power prayer has in the unseen world of God's Kingdom as well as on earth. Only two things concern us: The first is to exercise the gifts God has given us. The second is to make ourselves more and more worthy of these gifts by our exercise of them.

One of our Lord's parables shows us a slothful and unprofitable servant hiding the talent given by the Lord rather than taking the risk involved in using it. May this sin be far from us! And we make this prayer with special fervor in regard to our greatest gift—that of influencing others by our words and deeds. In the ordinary way, we can hope to influence only a few. But by prayer we may benefit the entire world and every individual in it. It doesn't matter whether those benefited are high or low in social status, whether they are strangers or friends, or even whether they be enemies.

It is a fearful thing to look back at our past lives from this perspective. How can we tell but that our presidents, our country, our Church, our communities, and even our special circle of friends and acquaintances would be in far better condition or circumstances than is the case had we been in the habit of earnest and serious prayer for them? How can we complain of national or personal difficulties, how can we denounce and blame evil-minded and powerful people if we have made little or no use of intercession on their behalf?

When we pray litanies, or psalms or turn to God after holy communion for whom do we pray? How can we accept the responsibility we bear for the souls of those who, in our own time, seem to have lived and died in sin? Are there souls that have been lost or are now waiting for judgment, are there non-believers and blasphemers and profligates and covetous people, are there extortioners or people who have died with few or doubtful sins of faith and we have never interceded for them? Think of the worldly, the double-minded, the merely ambitious, the unruly, those preoccupied with trifles or those who are self-willed and can we fail to mourn for not interceding?

So much depends on our use of God's gifts! What manner of persons ought we to be, or become? But the kind of person we become depends on our holy or unholy way of life and our godliness. God grant that in times to come we may be more diligent than up to now and that we may better reflect the image of the Son of God! Don't we wish to keep our hearts unsullied and bright so as to reflect that image before the Heavenly Father? Don't we want to be clean from the dust and stains of this world, from envies and jealousies, from strife and debate, from bitterness and harshness, from indolence and impurity, from care and discontent?

God grant that we may labor, and not only with our personal strength but in the power of God's Holy Spirit. We can be sober and chaste and temperate and meek as well as affectionate and good, faithful and firm and humble and patient and cheerful and resigned. Doesn't this kind of person pray powerfully to our Lord and God for all those who lack these gifts, and for our own failure to use them on their behalf? Hasn't God promised us the power to be a person filled with virtues and freed from vices? Hasn't God promised this no matter the circumstances or the times or the kind of people we find ourselves dealing with? We are God's instruments for salvation.

GOD'S CALL & THE VIRTUE OF DUTIFULNESS

A reflection from Holy Pagans by Cardinal Jean Danielou

Holy Scripture and the Fathers speak of Lot's dutifulness as an example for us. When the angel appears to him and calls him to rise up and leave Sodom with his family, he obeys. This in spite of his sons-in-law. He sets forth and without a backward glance, his eyes fixed on God's will. His wife, on the contrary, can't tear herself away from her former life and she turns back, being turned into a pillar of salt in punishment. Our Lord himself deals with this story and gives it its full meaning. *"On that day, if anyone is on the housetop with his goods in the house let him not go down to take them away.. Remember Lot's wife. Those who seek to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives will save them"*.

Lot represents a person who consents at the call of God to leave the circle of familiar things and move toward the unknown. He doesn't shut self up in a world of personal experiences but accepts guidance toward what is foreign and of which nothing definite is known. We can't use our previous experience in deciding to trust God and trust that God will lead us in a good way. People like this can escape from imprisonment within themselves. They can escape the unending cycle of biological life, from the alternation of desire and satiety in which the people of Sodom lived enclosed.

Lot comes out of Sodom; i.e., he leaves a slavery to the senses and emerges into a freedom of the spirit. Only those who leave in this way, and do so without hope of return or without even a backward glance, go forward. They burn their boats and thus lose their lives. But they have found in very truth the way to life. This is the living way and walking upon it one will never cease to go forward.

Those, however, who turn to look back, do not consent to let themselves be wholly dispossessed of what they had. They try to keep a tight hold on their possessions. Such people, just like Lot's wife, find they are fixed in a kind of spiritual immobility. It is a form of spiritual death. Thinking to save what they have they actually lose themselves.

What gives particular value to the example of Lot and of his wife is that they show us ordinary persons. We are not dealing with eminent people like Melchizedek or Enoch. We are not dealing with sages or priests. We are contemplating ordinary everyday people living an ordinary everyday life.

Lot, because he obeys in the end, represents how important all the ordinary virtues are in leading one to God. These virtues are woven into uncountable ordinary lives. These are the lives of those numberless men and women who have known only the interior light of their consciences. Yet they have obeyed.

They recognize in the call of their consciences a revelation from God. In Lot, for instance, holy scripture acknowledges the authenticity of virtues to be found even in pagans. It recognizes that these virtues can lead people to salvation. That is the grace and wisdom of God as it acts in ordinary lives like our own. We can hear God and we can obey God's grace, and we can come to God. We must only continue to obey God's voice.

DOES JESUS' NAME REALLY MEAN FULLNESS OF LIFE

A reflection taken from the Salesian website

“People were bringing little children to Jesus so that he would touch them. The disciples scolded them, but when Jesus’ saw this he was indignant and said to them: Let the little children come to me; do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the Kingdom of God belongs.”

What does Jesus’ name stand for? It stands for salvation which means “well-being” or “fullness of life”. So when Jesus tells us to let the children come to him he means “let them have life and have it to the full”. But many children in our world have no opportunity even to grow up. It is estimated that 11 million children die of disease and starvation each year. That doesn’t include those who are injured in wars or abused sexually and maimed psychologically.

About 150 years ago, Don Bosco, realized that his world was in a similar situation. In Italy too many young people lacked the opportunity to know the fullness of life. In 1841 he began to work among the young people of Turin. He wanted street children to (a) have a home where they were welcomed, (b) have a playground, (c) have a school that educated them for life, and (d) have a church that would evangelize them. Today there are 16,000 Salesian priests and brothers, there are 14,000 sisters and there are 24,000 co-operating lay persons.

These aren’t enough. You are called to help and serve children, whether they are Catholic or not, Christian or not, American or not. When we celebrate the feast day of St. John Bosco we celebrate this ministry to children. But the only way to celebrate such a day is to give oneself to the same ministry to children. Everyone can do important work. One of the most important of these works is prayer. Do you spend any time in your average day praying for children and those who reach out to help them? There are very many people who work hard daily to prey on children and use them. There must be even more people who pray for them and seek to help them in other ways.

Each of the four aspects of Don Bosco’s program can transform lives. It reminds us how great is the difference that opportunities for education make. Think how the knowledge that someone cares for you and that you have opportunities to play and enjoy your young life can transform a life. Think of the difference it makes when children actually get to meet Jesus! This last is why the tale of St. Dominic Savio has been so important in the Church. Each of us can be as important as Don Bosco was, and for as many people. Start praying and then take the opportunities that come your way to help in other ways. It is what God calls you to do. Don’t refuse to listen to or follow God’s call.

MARY AND OUR LIFE OF FAITH

A reflection taken from "The California Network" website

The name of Mary always makes us think of Jesus. Mary is the mother of Jesus and thus the Mother of God. But when we think of Mary and Jesus we also think of prayer. Next to Jesus' "Our Father" the "Hail Mary" is no doubt the world's best know prayer.

When we think of Mary we also think of famous shrines at Lourdes, or at La Salette or at Fatima. Because of these shrines Mary has a message for us and for the entire world. That message is: Turn to God and pray. This is a message about the journey we are all making and which is never finished until we die. If we do pray, and if we give an example of prayer, we will influence others to turn to God and to be transformed by God's grace and find a new life.

It is a marvelous gift to know that God is using you to bring those whose faith is weak and those who have no faith at all out of the kind of desert they live in and toward a place of life and life's fullness. You are leading them towards friendship with the Son of God. Jesus is the one who give us life and life in all its abundance.

To many it appears that the influence of Christianity in the lives of many men and women is growing more and more faint. To many it appears that more and more people haven't any room for God in their lives. But when God disappears from a life those concerned don't become greater but they begin to lose the dignity, their divine dignity. A face that has not encountered God loses its splendor. Such people end up thinking they are the mere products of a blind evolutionary process. But that makes them things that can be used and even abused. This is precisely what our epoch of history has experienced so vividly, and horribly.

With Mary and by listening to her message we can begin to understand these truths. We must not drift away from God, or let others do that. We must make God present. Mary teaches us to begin with prayer. That is how God becomes great in our lives. We too are called to be divine and that process is continuing in us every hour of every day. But if that is so then we should let the fact show in the ways we behave, the ways we care, the ways we forgive, and the ways we love.

Mary only wants to help us deepen our friendship with Jesus. The deeper it is the more power resides within us to show others how wonderful life can be when it is lived with God and with God's Son, Jesus Christ. That is what we celebrate today as we remember Mary, both Jesus' mother and ours. Let us be glad and rejoice in the gift God gives us in giving us Mary and her message.