

THE SEVENTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

ASH WEDNESDAY BEGINS LENT

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DEPENDENCE ON GOD

A reflection from The Ladder of Perfection by Walter Hilton

When love acts in the soul it does so wisely and gently, for it has great power to kill anger and envy and all the wrathful and melancholic passions. It brings into the soul the virtues of patience, gentleness, peaceableness and friendliness to one's neighbor. People guided only by their own reason find it very hard to be patient, peaceful, sweet-tempered and charitable, especially when others treat them badly and wrong them. True lovers of Jesus have no great difficulty in enduring that. Love fights for them and kills wrath and depression.

Through the spiritual sight of Jesus, love makes people at ease and peaceful and so ready to endure and become so like God that if they are despised and disregarded or suffer injustice or injury, shame or or ill-treatment, they pay no attention. They aren't greatly disturbed by such things and won't let themselves be. They don't want to lose the comfort they feel inwardly. They can easily forget all the wrong that is done them. They would rather forget than forgive, and so it seems easier to them.

It is love that does all this. Love opens the eye of the soul to the sight of Jesus and confirms it in the pleasure and contentment of the love that comes from this sight. It comforts the soul so much that it is quite indifferent to what others do against it. The greatest harm that could befall such people would be to lose the spiritual sight of Jesus, and they would suffer all other injuries rather than this one.

When true lovers of Jesus suffer harm from their neighbors, they are so strengthened by the grace of the Holy Spirit and are made so truly humble, so patient, so peaceable, that they retain their humility no matter what harm or injury is inflicted on them. They do not despise their neighbors or judge them, but they pray for them in their hearts, and feel more pity and compassion for them than for others who never harm them.

The fact is that those filled with the love of Jesus love those who injure them better, and more fervently desire their salvation, just because they see they have so much spiritual benefit and profit from the neighbors' deeds. This was not the intention of those who did the deeds but it is the result. This love and humility are beyond human nature. These come only from the Holy Spirit. They come to those the Spirit makes true lovers of Jesus.

TRANSFORMATION BY THE NEW COMMANDMENT

A reflection from the Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux

“Jesus said to his disciples: You have learned that it was said, Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth..,” (Mt.5:38) The Lord explains this by adding “But I say to you, love your enemies .. pray for those who persecute you”. No doubt, we don’t have any enemies in our Carmel, but there are feelings. One feels attracted to a certain sister whereas with another one would rather make a long detour than meet her. Without even knowing it, then, that sister becomes the object of persecution. Well, Jesus is telling me that it is this sister who must be loved. She must be prayed for even though her conduct would lead me to believe that she doesn’t love me: “If you love those who love you, what reward will you have? Even sinners love those who love them”.

And it isn’t enough to love; we must prove it. We are naturally happy to offer a gift to a friend. We love especially to give surprises. But this isn’t charity, for sinners do this too. Here is what Jesus teaches me: “Give to everyone who asks of you and from the one who takes away your goods ask no return.” Giving to all who ask is less sweet than offering oneself by the movements of one’s own heart. Again, when they ask for something politely, it doesn’t cost so much to give, but if, unfortunately, they don’t use very delicate words, then the soul is immediately up in arms—unless it’s well founded in charity.

One can find a thousand reasons to refuse what is asked of one. And it is only after having convinced the asker that she has been trackless that you finally give what is asked. Then you do it as a favor. Or maybe she will do you a small service but it could have been done in a twentieth of the time spent in setting forth imaginary rights.

Although it is difficult to give to one who asks, it is even more so to allow one to take what belongs to you without asking to have it back. I say it is difficult! I should have said that all this “seems” difficult. For me isn’t the “yoke of the Lord sweet and light”?

When one accepts the Lord’s yoke one feels its sweetness immediately. One cries out with the Psalmist: “I have run the way of your commandments when you enlarged my heart”. It is only charity which can expand my heart. O Jesus, since this sweet flame consumes my heart, I do run with joy in the way of your “new” commandment. I want to run in that way until the blessed day when I join with the virginal procession that follows you into the heavenly courts and sings your new canticle. That canticle must be love!

PUTTING GOD'S WILL FIRST

A reflection from a homily by St. John Henry Newman

When Jesus' disciples first heard a prediction of his passion from his own mouth they shrank from his words. What did he do in response? He met a blind person and he took him and gave him sight. Why did he give the blind person this special favor? He tells us explicitly. He says: "*Your faith has made you whole*"!

Here is a tacit rebuke to the slowness of his own disciples and friends to believe. They don't believe that all things are possible to the one who believes. This poor outcast is a lesson for us too. O my own friends, this poor fellow puts us to shame. He has had faith in Jesus while we stumble at his words. When Peter says "*Far be it from you, Lord*" to suffer in that way. Is this the way to reply when I tell you something?

The Church has had us read at part of the Divine Office about the call of Abraham. It asks us to meditate on his great acts of obedience. First he was called to leave his kindred and country and go to a strange land. Second he was called to sacrifice his son.

Think of the obedience acted out in the lifting up of the knife to kill his son. The call to leave everything had been trying enough. Now he is called to sacrifice his dearly beloved Isaac. What a stumbling block this would have been to a faith less strong than his!

If the disciples were shocked that the very image of the Godhead should be put to death, surely Abraham had cause for offense in that his own hand as a father should be lifted up to kill his son. Yet he went about the fulfillment of this command as calmly, quietly and seriously as if it were an ordinary action. This shows his faith and gains him the blessing!

You can be sure that this will turn out to be our way too. God never gives faith without putting it to the test. No one who lacks faith can enter the Kingdom of Heaven! Know, then, all you who have come to save your souls, and wish to serve your God, that you must begin by making up your minds to generously surrender your very self.

This requires a generous faith. You have to put yourself into God's hands, and you can't make any bargain with God. You can't stipulate conditions. You must say, "O Lord, here I am—I will be whatever you ask me to be—I will go wherever you send me!" Isn't that what we must do this very day?

“ANOINT YOUR HEAD AND WASH YOUR FACE”

A reflection from a sermon by St. Bernard

Today we enter the holy season of Lent, a season of Christian warfare. We aren't the only ones. It is common to all Christians. Why shouldn't all share in Christ's fast? Would we reject what is disagreeable and take our share of the pleasurable? Happy is the one who clings to his Head through everything and follows him wherever he goes!

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Let the ointment of love flow down from our Head over all of us. Let not the smallest thing lack anointing. Notice, then, what he teaches us in the Gospel: *“When you fast anoint your head”*. The Spirit of God is upon Christ and anoints him. At his baptism the Spirit of God was upon him and the Father said: *“This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased!”* The Father anointed him with Divine Love. Then he sent him to us.

And after all this is he asking us to anoint him as the words seem to suggest? Yes. We anoint Christ when we are his good odor in every place. And remember these words were spoken against hypocrites. So don't pretend. Hypocrites disfigure themselves and so we are told to wash. The face is mentioned because one's way of life is seen in one's face.

Hypocrites fail to anoint their Head when they let their affections be drawn away from Christ by empty flattery. They want their own reputation to be every where. In few words, Christ points out hypocrisy and condemns vanity. He urges us to practice goodness in the sight of God and human beings. To anoint and wash is to show yourself blameless. You strive for Divine grace and seek not your own glory but that of your Creator.

A washed face also reminds us of the need for a pure conscience and a devout mind. If one fasts out of vanity, such a one is told to wash. If one fasts with impatience and rancor that one must anoint the head. In that case the “head” is one's inner mind. It is anointed when one takes spiritual delight in fasting. Fasting in a bodily way is anointing oneself and abstinence of the flesh is refreshment of heart.

I can also speak of the anointing with oil that heals wounds and brings peace to troubled consciences. Don't try to get something from your fasting, as a sinner does. I don't sell my fasting! Let no murmuring or impatience come upon you as you fast. Indeed, if it is difficult you must glory in your tribulation. You must glory with no trace of vanity. Let your face and your entire self be cleansed of the oil of sinners. We seek only the healing oil of Christ's love.

REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE DUST

A reflection from Seasons of Grace by Fr. Pius Parsch

Ashes are a symbol of this passing world and of death. They are also a symbol of penance. The practice of sprinkling ashes on the head in token of penance is one which was customary even in ancient times. The Hebrew Scriptures give us the famous example of the inhabitants of Nineveh. They took to heart the preaching of Jonah the prophet and did penance in “*sackcloth and ashes*”. By doing this they won God’s forgiveness and averted impending wrath.

In our times the Church wishes to teach us truths that go yet deeper. We are taken back in spirit to the first Ash Wednesday in human history. It was the day when God passed sentence upon our fallen race. “*Cursed is the earth that you work; with labor and toil you shall eat of its produce all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth for you .. and in the sweat of your face you shall eat your bread until you return to the ground out of which you were taken; for you are dust and unto dust you shall return*” (Gen. 3:17f)

These final words are often used on Ash Wednesday. The Church repeats them in tracing a cross of ashes on us. She does this by way of striking the opening chord of a symphony that will resound through all the weeks of Lent—right up to the Easter Vigil. There the melody will reach its climax in a thrilling statement: “*Happy fault that won so great and glorious a redeemer*”!

We have received ashes humbly and yet filled with confidence. We went to the altar to receive the ashes, in the form of a cross. We did it humbly because we realize our sinful condition.

We who must daily fight against desires of the flesh and are surrounded by all sorts of sorrows—many not our own. We must face temptation, and evil and even sin. But we can be full of confidence in spite of it all. All the consequences of original sin are transformed by grace. It is in the sign of the cross and in the triumphant and transforming power of grace we know that God will bring us to the final victory.

LET YOUR HEART BE WHERE YOUR TREASURE IS

A reflection from a homily by St. Peter Chrysologus

If you are going to remain here on earth then it makes sense to store up your treasure here on earth. But you are planning on going up to heaven! So why do you want treasures you will have to leave here below? If you care for treasures that are destined to be left behind you are caring for others' treasures and not your own.

Living here below where we are pilgrims, we find it rather hard to be poor, sad, and without honor. We find this hard even if it lasts only a short time. But when we are among the eternal citizens of our everlasting country what will it be like for us to endure pain because we showed contempt for the everlasting and fixed our attention on the temporary?

Think of the pain that will punish our ignobility of desire. We will be ashamed as though we were naked. What, for instance, would it be like to be sentenced to torments when others were being raised up to possess the Kingdom of God? When a poor person is led up to sit at the head of the table with God and a rich one is dragged away to spend forever in the gathering of the damned how will you feel if you too haven't prepared for the Kingdom?

It is terrible even to imagine people who have hoped to acquire what is divine and find they have gained the opposite. They have defrauded themselves of heavenly treasures for the sake of earthly ones. This is exactly what comes of setting your heart primarily on earthly treasures.

What is on earth can raise one even to heaven if it is used for alms giving. If we set our hearts on heaven that is where we shall go. If we set our hearts on the earthly we will be buried in the earth and not taken to heaven. This is why the Lord Jesus said: "*Where your treasure is, there your heart will also be*".

Please, send your treasures to heaven ahead of you. Don't let yourself bury your God-given soul in the earth! Gold comes from the depths of the earth. The soul comes from the highest Heaven. Clearly, it is better to carry the gold to the abode of the soul than to bury the soul in the depths from which the gold was mined.

This is why God orders those who are prepared to serve in his army here below to fight as persons stripped of concern for riches and unencumbered by anything but pleasing Him. To these he grants the privilege of reigning with Him in Heaven. The choice is yours to serve God or earthly wealth. You make that choice daily. Make the right choice!

LET TRUST IN GOD DRIVE OUT ALL FEAR

A reflection from a sermon by St. John Henry Newman

The Gospels set before us the duty of faith. This faith rests upon what we call God's almightiness or omnipotence. Nothing is too hard for God. We believe what the Church tells us about God's deeds and providence because he can do all things. But there is another grace which the Gospel teaches us, and that is hope or trust.

You observe that when the storm came upon the disciples in their boat, they were in great fear. They thought some great calamity was about to befall them. Hope and fear are contrary to one another. They were afraid because they didn't hope.

To hope isn't only to believe in God but to believe, and be certain, that God loves us and means to do good for us. That is why this faith is a great Christian grace. Faith without hope is not certain to bring us to Christ. "The devils also believe and they tremble", as the Letter of James tells us.

They believe but they don't come to Christ, because they don't hope but despair. They despair of getting any good from Christ. They know that they will get nothing but what is bad and so they keep away. Remember what the man possessed by a devil said to the Lord. "*What have we to do with you, Jesus the Son of God? Are you coming to torment us before the set time?*" (Mt.8:29)

The coming of Christ will be no comfort to the devils, quite the contrary. They knew he meant them not good but punishment. But to us humans he meant good and it is by knowing and feeling this that people are *brought* to Him. We will not come to God until we are sure of this. We must believe that God isn't only almighty but all-merciful.

Faith is founded on the knowledge that God is almighty, hope is founded on the knowledge that God is all-merciful. The presence of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ excites us to hope quite as much as to faith. The very name 'Jesus' means 'Savior'. Besides, he was so loving, meek and bountiful on earth.

Jesus spoke to the disciples in the midst of the storm they feared: "Why are you fearful?" You ought to hope. You ought to trust. You ought to set your heart on Me! Why am I here? Why am I in human flesh? Why do I have these hands that I stretch out to you? Why do I have these eyes filled with tears of pity for you? It is because I wish you well. I want to save you! Storms can't harm you if I am with you.

Can we do better than place ourselves under Jesus' protection? Do you doubt Christ's power of good will? Do you think I neglect you because I was asleep? Am I unable to protect you unless I am awake? Why do you doubt? Why are you afraid? Have I been with you so long and yet you don't trust me? Be at peace. Be quiet because I am at your side. Be at mine.