

THE SIXTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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FULFILLING AND NOT ABOLISHING

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

The activities with which we fill our days are by God's design reflections and radiations of the light of Jesus. He leads us in a task which surpasses our own strength and is a gift. It is given to build and shape us. The Lord tells us he didn't come to do away with the law but to bring it to its perfection. Neither does he come to abolish all in us that seems not to be a gift of our God but to build and perfect everything in us so that it can share in his saving work in building up others. We are to abolish what is imperfect, incomplete or even sinful but to show how God transforms everything into means for loving and building up. This is the work of God which culminated in Jesus.

Human works are meant to be reflections of the work of God in Jesus. His name wasn't chosen by human beings or human wisdom but by God. Time opens before us as waiting to be filled with such works. All that exists is really a work of God already. But everything can be fulfilled, filled even more with God's presence. Isn't that what we long for in ourselves? We are to work for it in every way we have the opportunity, not only for ourselves but for everyone.

This truth is a new light that illuminates all human working and activity. Our deeds aren't a vain attempt to fill a void but are expressions of a joyous and trusting commitment to God. In all things we want to perceive the active mystery of God and God's presence. When we act in this light we accept this gift from God and we manifest it. That is what it means to walk responsibility in the light of Christ toward our Heavenly Father.

Our God is the ultimate and definitive good. We come to this good by passing through the secondary and transitory goods in which God has manifested aspects of his love. That is why our lives can be filled with hope. It is a hope for a good which is found only in the hands of God. Helping others find God through these good things is a responsibility entrusted to us. Hope stirs up and sustains our living out of this responsibility. The responsibility itself gives witness to that hope and begins to actualize it.

Because we are believers, we consult the Bible to learn the work God proposes to each of us. It asks us to begin by shifting our attention from the work we are called to do and fix it on the wonderful works God has done for and in us. He has revealed himself and the mystery of his love in Jesus the Beloved Son. It gives us a perspective by means of which we entrust ourselves and our work entirely to God and God's action. It is an invitation to realize that we are called to become part of God's design which he has let us know through his Son. We thus begin to share in the joy of building up one another and our world day by day. That is the grace and gift of every one of our days, and of our entire life.

OUR OFFERINGS TO GOD

A reflection in From Scripture to Life by Chiara Lubich

“If you bring your gift to the altar and there recall that your brother or sister has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar and go and first be reconciled and then come and offer the gift.” This is one of those sayings that would initiate a real revolution in us and our world if we properly understood it and lived it. It would assure peace and a new kind of peace. Jesus asks us to imagine a person going to the Jerusalem Temple to offer a sacrifice. Perhaps he even imagined us going to Church to offer ourselves to God by participating in Mass. These offerings represent the most important moment in our relationship with God. Well, then, says Jesus, if you at the point of making the offering and remember some lack of agreement with a neighbor break off your act of offering and go find that other person and get reconciled.

Notice that he doesn't say this about what another has said against you or your behavior toward him or her. He speaks a common disagreement. Perhaps it is about something that gets in the way of your working together to spread or witness to the Kingdom coming to be among us. The point is that we remember there is no “peace” between someone else and ourselves. “Peace” as used in the Bible means “right relationship” and it is right or wrong depending on its impact on our witnessing to Christ and God's call to us.

Jesus isn't making any significant change in what we find in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophets had already anticipated the idea that God prefers love of neighbor and so mercy and compassion, especially toward the weak, to the offering of sacrifices. They tell us that when people who oppress the poor are offered to him he viewed this more as an insult than as praise. The new dimension of what Jesus tells us, the way he fulfills the Law already given, is in that any rift in fraternal communion is reason enough to delay the offering of sacrifice or self to God until the rift has been repaired.

Jesus tells us that we cannot remain indifferent to a lack of communion with a brother or sister. That ought to strike us hard because we have just celebrated a period dedicated to bring about union between us and those of other Churches. If we remain indifferent to a disagreement, even when we aren't responsible for causing it, is a reason for seeing self as not yet acceptable to God as a sacrifice. Jesus is putting us on our guard not only against serious outbursts of hatred, but against every attitude indicating a lack of solicitous love towards a brother or sister in Christ. We are to act in a way that works to eliminate even mere indifference or lack of goodwill or attitude of superiority or carelessness toward another. We must not be superficial in our relations but must search the innermost recesses of our hearts and eliminate all indifference.

We commonly try to make up for rudeness or outbursts of impatience. We ask pardon by a friendly gesture. On occasion, of course, that may not be possible. What matters most is the radical change in our inner attitude. Instead of instinctive rejection we must respond to others with complete acceptance, limitless mercy, full forgiveness, sharing and attention to the others' needs. If we act like this we will be able to offer God any gift we like and he will accept and acknowledge it. We will attain that union with our God which is happiness, not only in the present but forever.

OUR RESPONSE TO GOD'S GIFTS

A reflection from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

Christ gave his life for you and he gave it for all. Are you holding a grudge against one of those for whom Christ gave his life? How can you approach the table of the Lord in peace if you hold something against a fellow servant? Your Master calls you to imitate him. But he didn't refuse any kind of suffering for both of you and won't you even let go of your anger? You claim to love the root and wellspring and mother of every human virtue and yet look what you are doing!

Has someone offered you an outrageous insult? Has another wronged you times without number? Has someone even endangered your life? Compared to what Christ has done for all of us what are these things? The person with whom you are angry hasn't yet crucified you. But Jesus forgave those who did precisely this! And he tells us all that if we refuse to forgive our neighbor the Heavenly Father will refuse to forgive us. So what goes on in your conscience when you begin to pray the words "Our Father.."?

Christ went so far as to offer his blood for the salvation of those who shed it. What could you do that would equal this gift? If you refuse to forgive an enemy you harm yourself rather than the enemy. You are earning for yourself an eternal punishment on the Day of Judgment. There is no one God detests and repudiates. The closest he comes is what he does to those who bear grudges and whose hearts are filled with rage. Listen to his words: *"If you are bringing your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sisters has something against you, leave your gift there at the altar and go and be reconciled. Then come and offer your gift."*

Are we really to do this, literally? Yes, Jesus says. Your sacrifice is offered in order that you, and all, may live in peace with one another. If the attainment of peace is the object of the sacrifice, and if you fail to make peace, then even if you share the sacrifice itself your lack of peace will make this sharing fruitless.

Before all else, then, we must make peace. That is the point of every sacrifice and only if you do that can you benefit from the sacrifice. The reason the Son of God came into the world was to reconcile the human race with God the Heavenly Father. As Paul says, *"Now He has reconciled all things to himself, destroying enmity by the cross."* As well as coming to make peace he calls us blessed only if we do the same. *"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God."* He says this himself.

So far as a human being can, you must do what Christ did. You must become a promoter of peace both in yourself and for your neighbor. Christ calls such a one a child of God. The only good deed he mentions as essential at the time of sacrifice is reconciliation with one's brother or sister. Of all the virtues, the most important is love.

ZEAL IN DOING WHAT YOU CAN

A reflection from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

Listen to what St. Paul says: “You have become imitators of the Lord by receiving the word amidst much oppression, yet with the joy of the Holy Spirit”. You have felt oppression in what pertains to the body but joy in the Spirit. Do you ever wonder how that is possible? One answer is that you were distressed by what happened but not by what came of it. The Holy Spirit didn’t allow you to be cast down by showing you the good that came of what you endured for God’s sake. Of course you couldn’t be joyful while you were suffering, for instance suffering for your sins, but, on the other hand, a person can be joyful even after having been scourged just by knowing one has become more like our Lord.

This is how joy in the Spirit shows itself. It brings gladness in place of what would otherwise bring sadness, You were persecuted or oppressed in some other way but the Spirit didn’t forsake you while this was happening. It showed you that what you went through was working a great good in making you like Christ. It showed you that being like Christ is a more important thing than avoiding sufferings. It wasn’t really the sufferings that brought you joy but the knowledge that you had become more like your Lord and Savior.

In the case St. Paul is speaking of it wasn’t suffering as such that brought joy but the fact that enduring the suffering with gladness but that for those who experienced it the suffering “made them an example to all the faithful of Macedonia and Achaia”. He says that those who suffered have shone so brightly that they have become teachers for those who came to the faith before they did.

This is what it means to be apostolic. By suffering one can teach others how to have faith in God. Those who come to know of the suffering learn from it. So you see what zeal for the faith and for God can do. You don’t need to use up a lot of time to teach this lesson and you can’t do it if you put off living in a way that brings this sort of suffering. You had heard the preaching of the Gospel’s Good News and then you became teachers and proclaimers of it simply by what you endured. One can quickly become a shining light, even to those who had received the light before you did.

The important thing is not to let your practice of faith through your way of life slacken off. The future is always unclear. The seeming delay of the Lord in coming doesn’t mean that, like a thief coming at night, he will show up when we least expect him. The point is not to fall asleep in regard to living the practice of faith we have begun. It doesn’t matter if the Lord comes to us when least expected. If we are living our hope in God to the best of the gifts the Spirit has given us then his coming will be that of a royal messenger calling us to all sorts of good things. Everything good has been prepared precisely for us! All we have to do is stay awake in doing what our faith and hope in God calls us to do.

MAKING OURSELVES READY TO DO GOD'S WILL

A reflection from On Mortality by St. Cyprian

Listen to St. Paul: "We will not have you ignorant concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not sorrow as for people who have no sure hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again" we must believe that we too shall die and arise. We who hope in Christ and believe in God's love, mustn't we be ready to answer God's call when we are summoned into his kingdom? God wills that what Christ has suffered we too shall suffer, though not in the same ways. We are prepared to accept God's will for us, whatever it may be, by this hope and our trust in God's promises.

Can anything more difficult be asked of you than responding joyfully to God's call to come to the abode of Christ? When we are called to accept various responsibilities in the community of believers don't we entrust our self to God's grace and do what we are able to do? How frequently have I been told that I am responsible for preaching to you publicly that we have nothing to fear from death, or from any of the other things that those who have no faith fear so much? How often have we been told that we are like travelers or voyagers and need not fear the dangers that come with that status. There are robbers and there is bad weather and there are mishaps. But whatever befalls us God is with us and promises us safety and joy in his Kingdom when all is finished.

Our faith can't be separated from the hope that it proclaims to us. We are already living with God. No matter what happens this will not be changed or lost! If we don't show by the testimony of our lives that we trust in God wholly, then we are pretending to believe. We are then prevaricators of our hope and of our faith. There is not gain in trying to live any virtue without genuine and trusting faith. We can't proclaim the truth in word and all the while deny it by our deeds.

Think now of what we have been promised. We are to come to a heavenly kingdom. What we need is a sound mind, a firm faith and the rugged virtue that lives both without hesitation. One way we do this is by our way of accepting the death of those we love. We know that our own summons will come. We need to prepare to accept it without hesitation. We know we are living by faith when we can contemplate our own death with spiritual gladness. We are not getting rid of trials but are going toward rewards. O Lord, when you call grant that we may answer gladly. Help us prepare for that call by our ready answers to the calls we hear every day in worship and preaching and in the ready of Scripture. Let us, then, fear nothing as long as accepting what happens to us or is required of us can be seen as your will.

PURIFYING THE CHURCH AND THE HEART

A reflection taken from Catholic News Service

The man we call St. Peter Damian lived St. Benedict's Rule as a Camaldolese monk. We don't know why he became a monk and the name "Damian" only means that his brother Damian had paid for his education. He wanted everyone to live their faith with never flagging dedication to doing God's will. He pursued this by writing letters and treatises against the sale of Church offices (simony), and against violations of celibacy by monks and the clergy in his famous Gomorrah Book. He became so well known for these efforts that the pope ordered him to accept ordination as a bishop or get excommunicated. You can see from this that he loved monastic life and didn't want to leave it. However, he had to spend his life as a reforming Cardinal and trouble shooter for three popes. He died on the way to his monastery after reconciling the community of Ravenna with the pope.

Peter Damian cared deeply for the poor and when outside his monastery always had poor people share his meals. He lived as a monk both inside and outside his monastery and impressed everyone by his dedication to Christ and the Church. He has never been officially canonized but people who worked with him considered him a saint and celebrated an annual mass of remembrance. Finally, in the early 1800s, Pope Leo XII declared him a Doctor of the Church and ordered his feast day to be celebrated everywhere.

He embraced the Camaldolese form of Benedictine life because they fasted on bread and water most of the time, prayed all 150 psalms daily and practiced many physical mortifications as penances. His remaining time was spent studying the Bible and the Fathers of the Church. His writing career began in letters calling people to penance and purity of life. After that he lived under obedience to three popes working most to reconcile those who were at odds with one another or the Church. In his own time his glorification of celibacy was thought exaggerated and his work for purifying the Church, and its monks and clergy, are focused on their obedience to law.

His famous book on sins against purity belongs to a genre called "penitentials". They are written for priests who know little theology with the goal of helping them assign proper penances to those whose confessions they hear. It lists every sort of sin against celibacy in some detail and then provides a penance in terms of the Church rank of the sinner. Most of them are very demanding. He demanded that all take their commitment to Christ and the Heavenly Father with utter and unwearying seriousness. Nothing was too difficult if it brought one closer to God! Since monastic life seeks to bring those who live it close to God he wanted to live it in the most demanding way he could find. Monks or clerics who didn't live up to the demands of their life were to be expelled or removed from pastoral office.

St. Peter Damian cared very much for God and God's will and wanted to do all he could to draw people to accept that will and live it with all their hearts. Those who had dedicated themselves to monastic life or pastoral offices were to be lights for the world, attracting others to live a life of dedication. It was better, he believed, to have a few who genuinely sought God with all their hearts than to have many who were lukewarm. He was a witness to what it can mean to give all one's heart and mind and strength to the search for closeness to God. His was a "strenuous" view of Christian living. He showed the people he met and worked with that it is possible to live such a life and find joy in it. He was not at all gloomy but rejoiced in doing all he could with all his might. The rest has to be left to God. His influence for reform was very great.

THE BEAUTY OF LIVED CHRISTIAN FAITH

A reflection from The See of St. Peter by Bishop Jacque Bossuet

What is the principle of the Church's unity and of the Church's beauty? True beauty comes from health. What makes the Church strong makes her lovely. Unity makes her lovely and that unity makes her strong. United from with by the Holy Spirit she has a common bond of outward communion and must remain united with those God has appointed to govern her. This the one unity guards all these realities.

We find in the Gospel that Jesus Christ wills to begin the mystery of unity in his Church by choosing twelve disciples. But to consummate that unity he chose one. The first of them is Simon called Peter. Then he told those he had chosen: Go, preach; I send you". Jesus Christ, Son of God, speaks to Simon, son of Jonas. It is by him that Christ speaks and in speaking acts and stamps first upon Peter his own immovable loyalty to the Father. He never moved from his confession: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*" The Word of God makes out of nothing what pleases him, and gives strength to a mortal to do what is otherwise impossible. And Peter's confession lives on in his successors.

Jesus Christ pursues his design. He says to Peter: "I will give to you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven". These keys mark the authority of governance. All is subject to these keys; all, my brothers and sisters. We declare this with joy because we love unity and hold obedience to be our glory. It is Peter who is first called to love Jesus before all others. And he, by charity, is to be servant of all.

I have presented this unity in the Holy See. Would you see it in the entire episcopal order? It must appear in St. Peter here too. Jesus said, whatsoever you shall bind shall be bound. These great words have also set up bishops because the force of their ministry consists in binding and loosing those who believe. What was said to Peter was said to all the Apostles. The one who gives the power to Peter gives it also to all the Apostles. So Christ breathes equally on all, so he sends the Spirit with that breath.

It was, then, clearly the design of Jesus Christ to give to one alone at first what he afterwards meant to give to many. But the sequence doesn't reverse the beginning nor does the first lose its place. The promises of Jesus Christ, as well as his gifts, are without repentance. And what is once given to several carries its restriction in its division. Power given to one alone, however, is without exception and carries with it plenitude. It need not be divided any further and share with any other. It has no bounds except those which its terms convey.

Is this not beautiful? Is this not a path to health and strength for the Church? Do you see in it God and God's beauty? Then follow Christ in the work of building up his Church as an instrument of salvation for the whole world.

