

THE SECOND WEEK OF LENT

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REAFFIRMING OUR FAITH IN GOD

A reflection from a homily by St. Pope Leo the Great

In the presence of chosen witnesses the Lord unveiled his glory. He invested his bodily appearance with such splendor that his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as snow. This is the body he shares with us! You see, the primary purpose of this transfiguration was to remove from our hearts the scandal of the Cross, the one we have to bear with Him. He reveals the hidden glory that God gives. This is to prevent faith from being shaken by the experience of self-abasement and suffering. He underwent it voluntarily and we by the Providence of God. Why did he do all this? He was laying the foundations for the Church.

The change which we are to receive fully in resurrection is revealed in order to lay the foundations for the hope we have as Church. The change we see in Christ is one the entire Church will receive. We need to be schooled in looking forward to the change, the glory, and the new life seen in Christ. The Lord had told this to the disciples in speaking of his majesty, which will come to be revealed also in us. *“Then, in the Kingdom of God, our Father, the just will shine like the sun.”*

The Blessed Apostle Paul bears witness to the same reality: *“I consider that the sufferings of this present time aren’t worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us.”* He says it again: *“You have died and your life is hidden in God with Christ. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear in glory with him.”*

Further instruction was given during the Transfiguration. It strengthened the apostles and perfected their understanding. Moses and Elijah represent the Law and the Prophets. They appeared in conversation with the Lord. There were, in fact, five witnesses to what happened, the three apostles and Moses and Elijah. But the Law declares: *“On the evidence of two or three witnesses every claim shall be confirmed.”*

What could be more fully confirmed than the Word proclaimed with two trumpets, the Old Testament and the New? Here they sound in perfect unison. The writings of the ancient covenant are in perfect accord with the teachings of the Gospel; the pages of both covenants agree with one another. He who was promised by mysteriously veiled signs is now revealed clearly and distinctly by the radiance that is Christ’s glory. St. John says it, *“The Law was given by Moses, butt grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ”*. In Christ all is fulfilled. His presence teaches the truth of the prophecies and his grace makes it possible for us to obey the commandments.

We are to let our faith be confirmed. It is done through the preaching of the Holy Gospel. No one should be ashamed of the Cross. By it Christ has redeemed the world. No one should be afraid to suffer, especially for the sake of justice. No one should doubt the fulfillment of the promises made of old. It is through toil that we come to rest; it is through death that we pass to life. Continue to acknowledge the love of Christ, for he took upon himself all the weakness of our human nature. What he conquered, we too will conquer. We will receive the promise he has given us. The Father’s voice should always be ringing in our ears: *“This is my beloved Son; in Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!”* Hear this voice in his commands. Hear it in hardships. Hear it in everything. That is how our faith is reaffirmed daily and always.

LETTING GOD SOFTEN OUR HARD HEARTS

A reflection from a Commentary on the Seven Penitential Psalms by St. John Fisher

God looked down from heaven mercifully. In spite of the great and numberless gifts bestowed on us by the merciful Lord, we continue to fall into every sort of sin and wretchedness. Our ingratitude is so great as to separate us from God. Isn't it a marvel that after this God looks down on us with such mercy?

Our God brought the People, Israel, out of Egypt in marvelous ways. He did so many signs and wonders. He caused them to pass through the Red Sea without getting their feet wet. He sent angel's food to them from Heaven. He sent them wild quail. He caused water to flow from a rock to relieve their thirst. He gave them victory over all their enemies. He made the waters of the Jordan river stop and back up. Then he divided the Promised Land and shared it according to the number of people included in Israel. He had mercy on them so often, even after they committed idolatry.

Now God has called us into grace, we who weren't members of Israel. He grafted us, as though we were shoots from a wild olive, into the true olive tree that is faith. He allowed natural branches to be cut away so this might happen. Most of all, he didn't spare his own Son but gave him up to the Passion for the redemption of all of us. But we too are ungrateful beyond measure. We don't pay attention to God. We don't consider how much love God has shown us. We forget all this and we refuse to follow the example of our merciful Lord!

Are your hearts tough like steel? Are your hearts harder than flint? Think of the great ingratitude that sets us apart from our God. It is a marvel beyond all marvels that God looks down upon us after all this. Can't we allow these marvelous gifts of God be a kind of continually reminder to all Christian peoples, to us and to those coming after us? "He looked down mercifully upon us from heaven" the psalm says.

It has seemed good to Almighty God to look down from his exalted throne in Heaven and take pity on us here on this earth. Let us think and let us write about the goodness of God. May this cause us to always remember! We would have all who live after us tell one another how mercifully the Lord has dealt with us. Reaching out to others should help us soften our own hearts and open them to God's gifts of grace.

TAKE THE HISTORY OF GOD'S MERCY TO HEART

A reflection from a Commentary on John's Gospel by St. Cyril of Alexandria

We read in the Book of Deuteronomy that *"I will raise up for them a prophet like yourself, one of their own race, and I will put my words in his mouth and he will speak as I command him; anyone who won't listen to the words the prophet speaks in my name I will punish"*. In Deuteronomy we receive a kind of summary of what Moses proclaimed on God's behalf. If we pay close attention we will notice a resemblance of Moses and Christ. It is of Christ that Moses spoke when he told the people of a prophet to come who would be of Israel's race and would be like him in speaking for God.

Moses had been appointed a mediator between God and God's People in ancient times. This was intended to help those who heard him accept and understand God's commands. Christ is the mediator between God and the entire human race and if you consider the ministry of Moses you will more easily understand that of Christ. For our sake, the Son was born of a woman. Being human, like Moses, he could communicate in a human voice, and in a more effectively teachable way, the will of God that is so often hidden for us. The Son, being God, knows the will of the Heavenly Father. As the Wisdom of God He knows all things, even the depths of God.

We are offered a share in the inexpressible glory of the Supreme Being, God. God can't be seen in a pure and unveiled way by human eyes. Scripture teaches us: "No one can see my face and live". The only begotten Son of God had to become like us in our weakness. He had to cloth himself in a human body. He did all this according to the mysterious plan of God's Providence. He did this to make known to us the will of Heaven. He made known to us the will of God, the Heavenly Father.

Listen to the Scriptures: *"I will make known to you all that I have heard from the Father"*. The same thing is said again in another place: *"The Father who sent me has told me what to say and how to speak"*. If we would enter into and share the glory that has been revealed then we must both listen and obey. That is what is necessary.

In his role as Mediator, Moses can be regarded as a type, a foreshadowing, of Christ. This is the case because he faithfully communicated the divine will and commands. The mediator of Moses was that of a servant of God. The mediation of Christ is that of a Son of God. In Christ we are in contact with one who shares in the very nature of God. Who could better mediate between God and us? He links us as reconciled to God with the very God to whom we have been reconciled. What must we do? We must live like those who are reconciled with God and with God's commands.

In Christ we see and experience the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets, and so with all that the Heavenly Father commands. We are called to live in God's commands and love as we live in Jesus Christ. You know the history of God's love for our race and remembering this we are to live in that love.

REMEMBERING WHAT WE BELIEVE

A reflection from Fr. P. de Chardin's The Divine Milieu

In its highest and most general sense, the doctrine of the Cross is that to which all adhere if they believe that the vast movement of human life and history takes us onto a road that climbs upward. Life has a terminus. It imposes a kind of direction on all who share it. The movement is toward the highest possible spiritualization of humanity and requires the greatest possible effort. To admit all this as a fundamental principle is to range oneself with the disciples of the Crucified One. Once that choice has been made, the final distinction has been drawn between those who will content themselves with pleasure-seeking and those who will reach the goal of spiritualization.

This is made less vague and more practical by Christianity and Christian faith. The perspective which lead to renunciation as implied in Christ's life are gradually clarified and expanded. Ultimately, one finds oneself uprooted, just as the Gospel asks. We leave behind hopes based on anything perceptible on this earth but the process goes on gradually. The process doesn't wound but respects the admirable beauties of the created world and of human effort.

Jesus on the Cross is both the symbol and the reality of the immense labor of the past centuries. It, little by little, raises up the created spirit and brings it back the depth that belongs to the "divine milieu" in which all things exist. Christ represents and is creation, but as upheld by God and in God. Creation in Christ reascends the slopes of ordinary being, sometimes clinging to them for support and sometimes tearing itself from them in order to pass beyond them. It always compensates by physical suffering for the setbacks caused by more downfalls.

The cross is not inhuman. It is superhuman. We can now understand that from the very first, from the very origins of humankind as we know it, the Cross has been placed on the crest of the road which leads to creation's highest peaks. In the growing light cast by revelation, creation's arms—at first bare, show themselves to have put on Christ. At first sight the bleeding body may seem funereal to us. Isn't it from the night that glory shines forth? If we go nearer to the light we will find the flaming Seraph that came to St. Francis. The royal road of the Cross is neither more or less than the road of human endeavor, supernaturally righted and prolonged. Once we have fully grasped the meaning of the Cross we are no longer in danger of finding life sad or ugly. Passion and compassion are one and set the heart and mind on fire. A Christian isn't asked not to faint or not to be overwhelmed, but we are asked to keep climbing toward the final light that comes to us from and through the Cross, and the Risen Christ.

AGREEING TO FIND ALL YOUR STRENGTH IN GOD

A reflection from The Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis

Do you hope to escape what no mortal has ever yet escaped? Has any saint ever been without the Cross? Our Lord Jesus Christ was not one hour without some sorrow or pain as long as he lived with us. He tells us it was right for him to suffer death and to rise again and only so to enter into his glory. How could you seek any other way to Heaven?

You err greatly if you seek any other way than that of the Cross. The more one grows in the Spirit the more painful do the crosses become. It is by the firm and trusting certainty of Christ's love, in which we seek to daily increase, that we experience more and more the pain of our exile from God.

But one who is tried by pain isn't left without all comfort. We see the great fruit and the high reward that comes of bearing the Cross. When a person freely submits to this sort of tribulation that person is daily strengthened by inward consolation. Sometimes this will be felt in the midst of adversities. But one who follows Christ doesn't want to be without sorrow and trouble. The more one suffers for love the more accessible is the life to come in God.

All this is not within human power. It comes only through grace. A frail human being ought to accept and even love adversities, the very things that everyone's natural inclinations flee from. No, it isn't in any human being's power to love the Cross, to love to chastise oneself and make oneself more submissive to the will of the Spirit. Who wants to feel honors gladly, or to be despised or to patiently bear all trials and the displeasure that goes with them? Who doesn't want to benefit from one's work in the world?

If you trust in God then God will send you strength from Heaven. The world and the flesh will become subject to your love of God. And if you are strongly armed with faith, and marked by the Cross of Christ, you won't need to be afraid of spiritual enemies. They will be made subject to you. Steel yourself like a faithful servant to God and bear the cross of your Lord Jesus. For love of you he was crucified. Prepare yourself to suffer all sort of difficulties and of inconveniences. There is no way of escaping such things. But form yourself to be patient. Drink from Christ's chalice with Him. Leave consolations to God's will. God will send them as is more helpful to your growth. When tribulations come accept them as themselves consolations. You are with Christ and that is consolation enough.

WHAT DO YOU FEAR WHEN YOU THINK OF HELL?

A reflection from The Diary of a Country Priest by George Bernanos

What do you make of hell? Is it a kind of penal servitude that last for all eternity? Is it like a prison on earth to which you condemn yourself in advance? What reasonable person could stomach such a notion of God's justice? If you don't like the notion isn't it easy enough to put it to one side and ignore it? In effect, one has judged "hell" by the standards of our world and recognized that hell is not of this world.

Is an eternal expiation required? The miracle is that we ordinary people have been able to think of such a thing. After all, scarcely have we finished sinning when, or so we think, a look and a sigh and a dumb appeal is enough to bring us grace and pardon. It's because the worst of human beings, even one who no longer seems capable of love, still has the power of loving. Our very hate is resplendent of this power and the least tormented of the fiends in our hell could warm himself in what we call despair.

Hell is not to love any more! Does that sound ordinary to you? Does that sound possible for a human being who is still alive? We do love less, or direct our love elsewhere than before. But even understanding is a way of loving. Suppose this ability, which seems so inseparably ours, should disappear. Wasn't it of our very essence? What a prodigy! A human being has stopped loving! That person has, therefore, stopped understanding. And yet that person is alive?

The mistake we make is to imagine the damned remain like us with our perpetual changeability. But they are, we're told, fixed forever. But that isn't a person. If God should lead us to a thing like we imagine, what could we say or do? Even if such a thing were what remains of the very vilest and worst person who ever lived I would find myself capable of feeling for his or her suffering. But if there are such beings as we imagine to be in hell they would have nothing more to share. If one is fixed can one even feel what we call suffering?

Yes, there is a time for mercy and a time for justice. But can we ever stand without either because we don't experience any change in anything? God has so made us that we can never remain human and cease to be capable of love. What God calls us to do is reflect that to cease to love, and to love others, would be to cease to be human. But we want to be more and more human. Let us, then, open ourselves more and more to love. This is the time to begin.

TAKING UP THE CROSS WITH CHRIST

A reflection from a homily by Timothy of Antioch

The saving power of the Cross is more far-reaching than we can imagine. It is firmly established as the stone on which the era of grace finds its solidity. We see this with our own eyes. But we also know that it was foreshadowed under the Law mediated by Moses. We can learn better to understand this by looking at the “posture” of Moses as he stands before God. This prefigures the victorious cross of Christ centuries before the era of grace began.

We have all heard the story about Joshua son of Nun fighting against those who opposed God’s people and asking for his prayers. “Pray, Moses, servant of God because the enemy is stronger than we are and they are gaining the victory! Give us the support of your prayer.” An earnest petition addressed to God is more powerful than weapons.

The “posture” of Moses is that of prayer. Instructed by a revelation from the Divine Spirit Moses stood and stretched out his hands toward God. He climbed a hill from which he could see the battle. He did not kneel or bow his head or even speak. He spread out his hands and lifted up his head and made his body assume the shape of a cross.

This foreshadowing of the cross shows us that it is to the cross that we owe the glory of victory over our enemy. It is not to any movement of the lips. It is not to any thought in the mind. What happened? As long as Moses held out his arms Israel was victorious. But as soon as Moses grew tired—after all he was only human—then the troops led by Joshua began to be defeated.

When it was realized what was happening, two were appointed—Aaron and Hur—to stand next to Moses and support his arms. Only when the enemy had been totally routed and a decisive victory won did he let his arms fall. It was through the sign of the Cross that victory had been won.

God said to Moses: “*Write this up for me as a reminder to future generations*”. The Lord as well, in his human nature, put tyrants to flight through the cross. The first human, Adam, propagated death through eating of a tree. Jesus took a dead tree through which no sap any longer ran and from it made a sap of life flow. The Lord made new life spring up through a dead and barren tree. He has put this cross into the hands of those who believe in Him and an unconquerable weapon against our deadliest foe. “*If anyone wishes to be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*” That is what we do by our observance of Lent.