

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

WHERE ST. BENEDICT WOULD LEAD US

A reflection by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

When Moses went to Pharaoh to seek freedom for Israel he asked for permission to go three days journey into the desert to worship God. St. Benedict has led us into the desert to worship God, and he does it in three stages. He has taught us to make a spiritual three-days journey and has shown us how to complete it. The first day's journey is completed by means of fear of the Lord, the second by mortification, and the third by the way of obedience. Listen to Blessed Benedict as he explains these ways.

“The first degree of humility is fear of the Lord”. This means contempt for riches and the honors of this present world and the first indication of this is humility. Indeed, each of us can see this in oneself. How could you have put aside wealth and possessions, how could you have made this particular journey, unless the fear of the Lord had urged you on? When you were still in and of this world didn't you acquire what you could? If you have given up this sort of cupidity you have indeed completed a journey.

The second way still lies ahead of us. It is the mortification of the flesh. St. Benedict says, “the second step in humility is that one doesn't love what one individually wants and one doesn't take delight in satisfying the desires of the flesh”. We mortify the desires of the flesh by vigils and fasts and labors. St. Paul tells us that he was in hunger and thirst and toil and hardship. He saw the members of his body as though they were fighting the law in his spirit. Benedict lived for some years on bread and water and yet was barely able to escape the temptation of lust. One who wants to complete the second stage of our spiritual journey must cease to delight in satisfying the desires of his flesh.

Now he explains the third stage of our journey. “The third step in humility is that one, for love of God, subject self to a senior in all obedience”. One wholly gives self over to God in all obedience by subjecting oneself to another. One can't eat as one likes, or fast or work when one chooses, but does these things when another commands it.

A person who has completed these three days of journey into the desert has offered God a sacrifice of penance, of sorrow and distress, of voluntary poverty and of forsaking concern for self-esteem. One mourns and weeps for one's sins so that they are removed by the tears of repentance. Then one will have truly gone out of Egypt and offered God a pleasing sacrifice.

After Benedict taught us these three things he added “the fourth degree of humility is to follow patiently and with a quiet mind in the way of obedience, even in hard and contrary things and in the face of injuries”. Let's love to be insignificant for Christ, to be paupers for Christ, to be rejected for Christ. This is what our Blessed Father Benedict teaches. He leads us to the pastures of eternal happiness, the inheritance of those who are children of God. He leads us to joy.

Monday

BEARING THE BURDEN OF CHRIST'S WAY

A reflection adapted from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Do you find the way of faith difficult? Recall Christ's words to his disciples calling them to eat his body and drink his blood, and then remember that many found these words too hard to bear. Christ turned to those who remained and asked: "Will you too leave me?" How will you respond to the rough and hard things of the life of discipleship? Will you imitate Simon Peter: "Lord, you have the words of eternal life! To whom else can we go?" If you do respond in this way why do you find weariness in Christ's teachings?

"O Lord, we pray, that you will grant abundantly to those who hope in you what seems hidden from us! Let us always hope in you, even if we are killed. Grant that I may hope even more if scourged, lashed, burned and killed! Only live in me, Lord!"

Blessed is the one who continues in the way of wisdom and with steadfast faith, and who bears trials patiently and with confidence, obedient unto death. Such a person knows that the labors of discipleship will heal the deepest wounds of sin and sorrow. But to achieve this wisdom we mustn't let anything lead us away from the exercises of wisdom. We must never stop praying—whether we pray the divine office or pray privately or pray in "divine reading". We must never turn away from the silence in which we find God no matter how hard such a daily labor may seem. Then one must continue with Scripture. Without perseverance in study how should the Scriptures open themselves to you? Then there is the work of our hands and the many times it seems unrewarding. But don't we realize that the consolation and satisfaction we seek is often reserved to the end of a labor? Recall what Isaiah said: "In silence and in hope is our strength!"

Meditate on such things. Wait in silence for the salvation of the Lord. Let the waters of Siloe, as Scripture says, flow silently but inundate the dryness you experience. You will experience this not once but many times, if only your silence is the cultivation of holiness. Meditate and continue in this exercise so that your progress may be revealed to you. The Book of Wisdom says: "You have desired wisdom, keep holiness and God will give both to you".

What is horrible thoughts rush in upon you? Fear God and examine carefully whatever thoughts want to enter your heart. You can only do this in the fear of God. Fear of the Lord runs away from evil, both in deed and in thought. It is ever aware of God eternal eye—to whom the entire wheel of time as well as its moving finger is always present. One who at first is restrained by fear is afterwards upheld by love and meditates on holiness and so finds rest and delight in the embrace of wisdom. The outpouring of love casts out weariness and distress with an inpouring of gladness. God wishes to make us partakers of all these things, and even of his own nature. Look to the wisdom of God, to Jesus Christ who lives and reigns in love for ever and ever.

Tuesday

READING NINETY- SIX

Julian of Norwich

And thus, in all this beholding it seemed to me to be necessary to see and to know that we are sinners, and we do many evils that we ought to stop, and we leave many good deeds undone that we ought to do. And for this we deserve pain and blame and wrath.

But notwithstanding all this, I saw truthfully that our Lord was never angry, nor ever shall be for He is good, He is life, He is truth, He is love, He is peace; and His power, His wisdom, His love, and His unity do not allow Him to be angry.

For I saw truly that it against the character of His Power to be angry, and against the character of His Wisdom, and against the character of His Goodness.

God is the goodness that cannot be angry, for He is nothing but goodness. Our soul is one -ed to Him, who is unchangeable goodness, and between God and our soul is neither anger nor forgiveness, as He sees it.

For our soul is so completely one-ed to God by his own goodness, that there can be absolutely nothing at all separating God and soul.

To this understanding the soul was led by love and drawn by power in every showing. That it is thus-and how it is thus-our good Lord showed truly by His great goodness, and also that He wills that we desire to comprehend it.

Everything that this simple soul understood, God wills that it be shown and known, for these things that He wishes to keep secret, He Himself mightily and wisely hides out of love. For I saw in the same showing that much that is secret is hidden that can never be known until the time that God of His goodness has made us worthy to see it. With this I am well satisfied.

And now I yield myself to my mother, Holy Church, as a simple child ought.

Wednesday

LONELINESS

George Basil Cardinal Hume, OSB

It is my life's experience that there is no day on which I shall keep from tears and not know some sadness or misfortune. I weep bitter tears for myself when my mind knows only anguish and anxiety, my body both pain and fatigue. If God be the goodness which is claimed for him, if he has that love for us which no human love can match, then why does evil seem to rule our hearts and hold sway in his creation? Yet his message still is "Rejoice, do not be afraid".

Terror comes when we see no hope of escape from the darkness that surrounds us, when we see no light. Terror is the child of despair, ugly and cruel. But when terror holds us in its grip, hope is often born. Darkness yields to light. A savior has been born among us, the Lord Christ himself. For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son.

Do not be afraid. We need never be alone. Every burden that is carried by us is also shared by him. He tells us "Give me your burden and I will make it mine". He will not always lift the burden from us, but being his too it is now lighter and sweeter. We do not understand why we are fallen and sinful, burdened and wounded. He does not will our sadness or our pain. He wants us to know his goodness and to trust, to find love and rejoice. The secret hidden in his words will slowly be shown to us. It is the secret of his love, warm, close and true.

Dear God, be with those who feel lonely and unloved. May they feel enveloped by the warmth of your Spirit. May they know your presence, respond to your love, and realize your closeness to them at all times. And when I am lonely, be with me too. Amen

Thursday

GOD IS LOOKING FOR ME

Fr Henri Nouwen

For most of my life I have struggled to find God, to know God, to love God. I have tried hard to follow the guidelines of the spiritual life-pray always, work for others, read the Scriptures-and to avoid the many temptations to dissipate myself. I have failed many times but always tried again, even when I was close to despair.

Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me and to love me. The question is not "How am I to find God?" but rather "How am I to let myself be found by him?". The question is not "How am I to know God?" but "How am I to let myself be known by God?" And finally, the question is not "How am I to love God?" but "How am I to let myself be loved by God?".

God is forever looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home. In all three parables which Jesus tells in response to the question of why he eats with sinners, he puts the emphasis on God's initiative. God is the shepherd who goes looking for his lost sheep. God is the woman who lights a lamp, sweeps out the house, and searches everywhere for her lost coin until she finds it. God is the father who watches and waits for his children, runs out to meet them, embraces them, pleads with them, begs and urges them to come home.

It might sound strange, but God wants to find me as much as, if not more than, I want to find God. Yes, the amazing truth is God needs me as much as I need God. God is not the patriarch who stays home, never moves, and expects his children to come to him, apologize for their errant behavior, beg for forgiveness, and promise to do better. On the contrary, he leaves the house, ignoring his dignity by running towards them, pays no heed to apologies and promises of change, and brings them to the table richly prepared for them.

I am beginning now to see how radically the character of my spiritual journey will change when I no longer think of God as hiding out and making it as difficult as possible for me to find him, but, instead, as the one who is looking for me when I am doing the hiding.

Friday

PRAYING FOR HELP TO LIVE AS A MONK SHOULD

A prayer composed by St. Anslem of Canterbury

Holy and blessed Benedict, the grace of Heaven has made you rich with a full blessing of goodness, not just to raise you to glory but that many others be drawn to that same blessedness. Wondering at your life, stirred by your counsels, instructed by your gentle teaching, I call to you, blessed of God, for help. For I profess to lead a life of continually turning to God, as I promised by taking the name and habit of a monk. But my conscience convicts me as a liar to God, O Holy Father Benedict! I beg you not to be scandalized by my many faults but to have pity more than I deserve.

I pledged to serve under your leadership, however feeble a soldier I might be. You have accepted my pledge and placed me under your tutorship, however slow a pupil I might prove. I vowed to live according to your Rule, however carnal a monk I might prove. My perverse heart is as dry and cold as a stone when it comes to deploring the sins I have committed. But when it comes to resisting the occasions of sin, I am pliant. My mind is swift to study what is useless and slow even to think of what is good. How slow I am to recall the virtues and with what difficulty do I try to practice them. How long it would take to tell the whole story of my gluttony, laziness, inconstancy, impatience, vainglory, detraction and disobedience. Sometimes my sins drag me hither and thither mocking at me, and at other times they come in a mob and trample me underfoot in triumph.

O blessed Benedict, see indeed how bravely this soldier fights and what marvelous progress is made in your school of the Lord's service! What a marvelous monk I am! Yes, you see a false monk, lost to virtue and burdened with sin. Where shall I turn?

Jesus, my good Lord! Look at my afflictions and my trouble and forgive all my sins! Hear, O Lord, don't cast me off or forsake me. Lead me and help me to do your will. Let my life at least attest what my heart and mouth confess so freely but don't live. Hear the voice of my prayer, my Lord and my God. By the merits and intercession of Holy Benedict, your dear friend, my master and leader, help me.

And you, my good leader and gentle master and dear father, Blessed Benedict, I pray by the mercy that God has shown to you and the mercy you have shown to so many others, that you have compassion on me. Lift up one who is cast down! Strengthen one who wavers! Lead and protect me in the battle against sin. Bring me to the victory and lead me to the heavenly crown. Do it by that charity which you are so anxious for us to take as our rule of life. Make it your care that we may be truly willing, and effectively able, to do all that we ought. We long to glory before the face of God, who lives and reigns forever. Help and lead us and teach us to love the Father and one another as Jesus has loved us.

Saturday

ST. BENEDICT AND HIS RULE

Fr. Michael Casey OCSO

The Rule of St. Benedict is a rule-this is something we must never forget. It is concerned principally to outline the rudiments of a monastic way of life that is conducive to living in substantial fidelity to the Gospel. Benedict talks about ordinary things, food and drink and clothing, about what the monks do at different seasons, how the liturgy is arranged, and the choreography of meals. He gives rules for governance and procedures for admitting newcomers to the community. There can be no doubt that this is a pragmatic document, designed to create an oasis of order and discipline in a century when Italian society was torn apart by serial wars and their consequences. The Rule is a how-to manual, how to organize a community so that its members can realistically undertake the long journey of seeking and finding God.

The value however, for the modern reader is less in its practical institutions than in the way these prescriptions embody beliefs and values that transcend the particular expressions that Benedict considered appropriate.

Benedict's Rule is a call to action. Just look at the Prologue and see the roll call of verbs directed to the reader "Listen...Fulfill...Labor...Fight...Rise up...Run...Do good...Seek...Pursue...Set out...Respond by deeds...Amend evil." It is clear that Benedict does not see the monastery as a pious country club in which the monks lounge around all day waiting to be sanctified. Rather, those who enter the monastery are turning their backs on an easygoing life and committing themselves to positive effort to make possible their dream of spiritual advancement. Monastic life is like the humdrum daily activity of laboring in a workshop.

The first thing the monk is called to in the monastery is self-knowledge. We become aware of our unconscious resistance to the call of God, which expresses itself both at the level of thoughts and actions. Next comes the struggle against embedded tendencies, failing often, and learning to rely on the help of the grace of God than on our own desire for self-improvement. Our failures teach us to turn to God with a strong sense of urgency, recognizing that the only thing we can make of our lives is a mess and calling out to be saved.

In turning to St. Benedict and his Rule we enter the monastery and see it as a school of the Lord's service. Benedict is proposing to teach us to do what we have to do, and how to allow God to do what God has to do. It is an exciting and demanding challenge.