

TWENTY-SECOND WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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- Thurs. **Memorial of St. Pope Gregory the Great**
3 **THE ESSENTIAL WORK THAT IS PATIENCE**
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- Fri. **Friday of the 22nd Week in Ordinary Time**
4 **THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL READING**
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Sunday

THE REAL HEART OF THE MATTER

A reflection inspired by a retreat conference of Fr. Ronald Knox

Why did the Lord want to come to earth as a Jew, and then spend so much time and effort criticizing the observance of the customs that most perceived as proper signs of being Jewish? It was, I think, because he saw one primary failing as characteristic of the “lost of the House of Israel” to whom he had been primarily sent. They were lost because the way they observed the prescriptions of the Law treated them as values in themselves. Usually we interpret this as critiquing all religious practice done for the sake of appearances. Yet the actual failing is common to the whole human race. How much of your life is dominated by a feeling that you have to keep up appearances and need to do what people expect? Are we better than the Pharisees Jesus took to task or just like them?

Put yourself for a moment in Jesus’ place when the Pharisees criticize him for letting his disciples ignore some of Israel’s many purity regulations. Today we still hear concern about washing one’s hands before eating. How would you reply? In effect, Jesus reminds his critics that purity is important only as it keeps one’s heart fixed on God and entrusts all one’s mind and heart and life to God. Yes, but isn’t that what one does in observing purity regulations? God gave them to us through our ancestors and sages and we do them, whether or not we see a deeper meaning in them, simply to obey God in every way and time and place!

But, Jesus adds, you are forgetting things like justice; i.e., like treating others as you want people to treat you—respecting and caring for them and treating them fairly. Are you praying to cover up the fact you are robbing widows of the little they have to live on? You see, actually you often treat religious customs as though they were more important than justice. God has not only called you to love him with all your mind and heart and life but also to love your neighbors, and love them as God loves them. Unless your religious customs help you do this in deed and not just in thought you are not loving God but pretending to love God while you spend your time and energy on trying to build up yourself and make yourself more important socially. Do you want others to honor you or do you seek your honor from God? You seem to use a pretended honoring of God as a means to get honor from other people.

We are as God sees us. What’s wrong about seeking “human respect” is that it gets us into the habit of asking, “What will others think?” and forgetting to ask, “What will God think?” We are commanded to help one another. That means helping one another put God first and showing love for one another in ways that helps them too put God first. As you observe customs of courtesy and mutual respect do you do this in ways that help all concerned recall God’s love for us and our need to love God by loving each other so that we all go steadily toward God and God’s Kingdom?

Monday

ABSENCE AND PRESENCE

From *Walking in Wonder* by John O Donoghue

Sometimes it is lovely to be absent from things. I am reminded of a writer who, describing a character, said “he has quite a good presence, but a perfectly delightful absence”. In other words when he was not around, happiness increased in some way.

The art of disappearing certainly has its own kind of value. In a strange way, in modern society we seem to be inhabiting a world of absence more than presence through the whole world of technology. Very often it seems that the driven nature of contemporary society is turning us into the ultimate harvesters of absence, that is, ghosts in our own lives. In post-modern culture, the mind is particularly homeless, haunted by a sense of absence that it can neither understand nor transfigured. Religion is challenged and often finds it difficult to converse with the modern spiritual hunger. Politics seems devoid of vision and is becoming more and more synonymous with economics. Consumerist culture worships accumulation and power, and creates with incredible arrogance, its own hollow and gaudy hierarchies.

When our time is filled up with forced presence, every minute is filled up with something. Sometimes, when people in a society are unable to read or decipher the labyrinth of absence, their homeless minds revert to nostalgia. They see the present as a massive fall from a once glorious past, where perfect morality, pure faith and impeccable family values pertained, without critique or alternative or any smudge of complexity or unhappiness. All fundamentalism is based both on faulty perception or unreal nostalgia. It is used to look away from the challenges and potential of the present and to create a future which is meant to resemble a past that never really existed.

Thus, we need a real theology and spirituality of presence. One of the deepest longings of the heart is for real presence. Real presence is the goal of truth, the ideal of love and the intentionality of prayer here and in the beatific vision in the hereafter. Real presence is the heart of the Incarnation and it is also the heart of the Eucharist. This is where the imagination works so beautifully with the absences and emptiness of life. I remember once in Venice, during an amazing music festival, I attended an outdoor concert in Piazza San Marco, with Stravinsky’s music and a ballet, and the moon was full and the sea was wild. There were certain moments in that concert when moon and ocean and dance and music and audience congealed into one pulse—an amazing experience of unity, and in some strange way a breakthrough into real presence. When we experience real presence, we break through to what is latently in us, that which is eternal.

Tuesday

INTERRUPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES from *Reaching Out* by Fr Henri Nouwen

What if our interruptions are in fact opportunities if they are challenges to an inner response by which growth takes place and through which we come to the fulness of being?

What if the events of our history are molding us as a sculptor molds the clay, and if it is only in a careful obedience to those molding hands that we discover our real vocation and become mature people? What if all the unexpected interruptions are in fact an invitation to give up old fashioned and outmoded styles of living and are opening up new unexplored areas of experience? And finally: what if our history does not prove to be a blind impersonal sequence of events over which we have no control, but rather reveals to us a guiding hand pointing to a personal encounter in which all our hopes and aspirations will reach fulfillment?

Then our life would indeed be a different life because then fate becomes opportunity, wounds a warning, and paralysis an invitation to search for deeper sources of vitality. Then we can look for hope in the middle of crying cities, burning hospitals, and desperate parents and children.

Then we can cast off the temptation of despair and speak about the fertile tree which witnesses the dying of the seed. Then indeed we can break out of an anonymous series of events and listen to the God of history who speaks to us in the center of our solitude and respond to his ever new call to conversion

Wednesday

RETURN TO SIMPLICITY

From *The Monastic Way* by Fr Basil Pennington OCSO

The monk chooses a life that is gently but firmly ordered by a Rule so that he can expect day to follow upon day with the steady, simple, yet awesome rhythm of a monastic cloister. His home, its garden, its cloister walks, its church of austere beauty, its modest cells—all seek to leave his life uncluttered, free, supported in its singleness of direction—designed to leave all the doors open to the Divine wide open so that the deifying light may enter unhindered. The furnishings are sparse and spare, what will support life and not encumber it. The clothing is what is needed.

The cowl of the Cistercian is an ample white garment, no pleats or appendages. An ample embrace enfolds the monk in contemplation.

The Master has said “Unless you become as a little one, you cannot enter the kingdom”. The monk in many ways opts to be a little one, living always in the Father’s house, expecting all things from the father of the monastery, doing what he is given to do, free to devote his attention to the one thing necessary. With as pure a heart as possible, he seeks the kingdom of God and his justice, confident that his heavenly Father will take care of everything.

Nowhere is this mature, childlike simplicity as transparently evident as on the faces of the seniors. Look at a man’s face and it will tell you everything. The face is the mirror of the soul. One thing our seniors have in common is this: as the years roll on, their smiles become more and more constant, more gentle—if I may say more sweet, more pervasive, more heartwarming. Oftentimes the joy of heaven seems to be already invading them, sometimes in the midst of prolonged and painful illnesses. There is something truly childlike in the way they receive life and accept all that comes along. Sometime in choir look at the faces opposite, they will tell you everything.

The Cistercian life offers a unique blend of the values of solitude and the loving support of a community of sisters or brothers. In the monastery all is geared to allow each to be free to be with God and to support each in a faithful response to his or her call. The monk is the privileged one who has received the grace and the gift to respond to that call.

Thursday

THE ESSENTIAL WORK THAT IS PATIENCE

A reflection from On Pastoral Care by St. Pope Gregory the Great

All of us are sick, at least spiritually, and we need to be helped to learn patience. We need to think, for instance, of how great were the evils our Redeemer had to bear at the hands of the very beings he had created out of love. Think of the horrible insults and criticisms he had to bear. How many slaps did he receive from scoffers? Yet what he was doing was snatching from the power of the ancient enemy the souls of those he held captive. We have to bear the pain of this process and so we must look to Our Lord for an example of patience.

The Lord silently endured scourging as a way to set us free. He cleanses us with the water of salvation but its power comes from the love that didn't screen his own face from the spittle of treacherous people. He freed us by the mediation of his torments so that we would not have to bear eternal torment. He endured blows to free us for everlasting honor enjoyed amid the choirs of angels. He offered his own head to bear a crown of thorns and didn't shrink even from this to free us. He drank bitter gall so that we might be inebriated with the wine of everlasting sweetness.

Think of the patience that enabled him to endure mocking adoration. He held his peace and in doing it he adored the Heavenly Father for us. Though he was equal to the Father in divinity and was life itself, he was willing to pass through death that he might prepare us for everlasting life and actually bring us to it. We were dead in spirit but by his patience we have been brought to life.

Why do we think it so difficult when he have to bear illness and pain? Aren't these simply punishments that God gives us by way of discipline? We have done evil and deserve what we get. But God himself was willing to bear the same for us when he didn't deserve it at all. If God endured such great evils, and it was as though they were a response to his good deeds on our behalf, then how could we be ungrateful? If we are grateful, how can we fail to patiently bear all that will bring us to our redeemer and eternal lover?

Everyone who would proclaim the Gospel, as our God has called us to, must do so by deeds more than by words. We must do this by our righteous way of life. When we do this, we leave footprints that others may follow, and even walk in. If we are to do this then we have to be awakened and stirred up by what we bear for the sake of others and following the example of Christ. If the head languishes the members of the body have neither vigor nor direction. Christ never languished and has always been ready to bear whatever might be necessary to lead us to the Heavenly Father and eternal salvation.

We can only follow in these footsteps if we allow ourselves to be corrected and set in order and on the right path. We should regard all we suffer as only penance done to make us ready to proclaim in our deeds the saving love of our God. We have to lead one another in patience if we are to do what God calls us to do. Let us, then, pray with all our heart to receive the grace by which we may become patient as the Lord was. That is what we can show daily in all we do, and especially in all we suffer.

Friday

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPIRITUAL READING

from *Difficulties in Mental Prayer* by Dom Eugene Boylan OCSO

Spiritual reading is central in the life of the monk. It should overflow into the other hours of the day and becomes more and more a meditation. Spiritual reading and meditation are as necessary for the life of the soul as the daily food for that of the body.

Without constant spiritual reading, not only can there be little progress in prayer, but there is less hope of perseverance in the spiritual life. To try to lay down a minimum time for this exercise would be too delicate a matter. The grace of God can always adapt to circumstances, and the circumstances of each monastery are a special part of His plan. Where there is sufficient time at an individual's disposal, it may however, be said, to reduce the time for spiritual reading, without due cause, to less than three hours in the week is to starve the soul, and will bring about the consequences of such starvation. And it would seem that, for at least half of this time, the reading should be done personally. A total diet of public reading only can hardly be sufficient to meet the needs of each individual monk.

In some monasteries, owing to special circumstances, it may not always be possible to spend half an hour daily, even in broken periods, at this exercise. Where that is the case, one should be careful to seize such opportunities as may occur on Sundays or holidays, to nourish the soul by suitable reading. In those houses where books are read for the community, each individual should supplant the general fare by reading in private such matters as suits his own special needs. The building up of a vivid living memory of Our Lord by frequent reading is of great importance. Reading, which should never be commenced without a short but fervent prayer for help, should always be regarded in a spirit of faith as containing a message from god Himself, somewhere in the lines or between them, which prayer, faith and confidence will make possible.

Thus, spiritual reading is the foundation-one might say, the essential foundation- of a life of prayer, and it is the best preparation for that life.

Saturday

THE JOY OF HAVING A MOTHER

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

No authentic text of Sacred Scripture tells us directly about Mary's birth. This very ancient feast is born of the Church's childlike love for its mother. It marks the beginning of the liturgical year in the Eastern Church and in parts of the west the beginning of the pastoral year. Thus, the entire Church lovingly celebrates this feast as children do their mother's birthday—even though they have no exact idea of the circumstances of her birth. One might say we are drawing attention to the fact that there is a mother and she is this mother through whom the divine design became real for us. The Church exults with joy at the thought that it has a mother and that it has this mother!

Mary is the one who made Jesus part of a people. From Abraham through David and through the long genealogy of Jesus' ancestors, she made him part of a people, of a tribe, and placed him in the context of a real place in Israel, Bethlehem. She placed him in a specific set of surroundings. She made God human and incarnated God in time.

The divine design, according to St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, is expressed in five great stages—awareness, predestination, call, justification and glorification. They include everyone destined to share in God's design, which becomes a detailed and precise reality and assumes a local color and geography. That design becomes part of a culture and is worked out within precise historical limits. We might say that through Mary the divine design passes from the abstract to the concrete.

The Messiah and our salvation come from a great story—glorious as well as wretched, painful and humiliating. The genealogy shows this. It also comes through a simple and humble story. How does this help us grasp the meaning of the Birth of Mary? Ask: What are we celebrating?

The reply is Mary's personal and free gesture. We are celebrating her being-generated, her birth in the love of God, and that of her parents. All is done with the simplicity of those who have nothing and receive everything.

The birth of Mary is totally gratuitous. It is a pure and radical act of receiving. This infant, this little girl called Mary, doesn't accomplish anything in her birth. She is simply given the destiny of being the object of God's working. From this point on—yes—her actions will be personal, courageous, and definitive commitments. But her birth prefigures the approach Mary will consciously cultivate, and we must cultivate.

She is dependent on God's actions, on God's initiative and God's love. Her birth is the triumph of God's free initiative of tenderness, of compassion and of love. God bends down to us and in pure love calls us to a mysterious alliance. Our task is to be alert today to the challenges due to today's history and respond by depending wholly on God but doing all God gives us to do. We incarnate God's design in our time.