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Sunday

TURNING ORDINARY VALUES UPSIDE DOWN

A reflection by Fr. Alonso de Orozco

Listen to our Lord: “*Whoever wants to be greater among you should be servant to you all, and whoever wants to be first among you should be your slave*” (Mk.10:33f). What a heavenly wisdom! What a marvelous teaching! Would that ecclesiastics, and all people, wrote this deep in their hearts! Does a free person ever long to become a slave? Does anyone strive with all their might to become one? Yet there are people who strive to be over others and don’t stop to think of what the Lord has commanded.

I recall that St. Paul said, “*Whoever wants to be a bishop wants something good*”. But those who want it don’t notice that the episcopate is a burden and not an honor. Both St. Augustine and St. Thomas explain this and St. John Chrysostom, followed by St. Basil, tell us that it is good to want a good work but is pure emptiness to seek to occupy the first place. Isn’t this implicit in the fact that the Pope gives himself the title “servant of the servants of God”?

So that his disciples might learn this serious lesson even better, Jesus offers himself as a wonderful example. Listen to him: “*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many*”. This is like the clearest of all possible mirrors in which to see yourself. Those who have a pastoral office in the Church ought to keep this always and everywhere before their eyes. Then they can be humble and poor in spirit. Jesus knew well how tyrannical the ambitious can become and what great damage this can cause—not only to human beings but to angels. Jesus came humbly from heaven in order to tear down the tower of Babel by the strength of humility.

“*Though the Son was in the form of God, he didn’t think that equality with God was something to be clung to, but he emptied himself and took the form of a slave.*” He did this in order to bring us from earth to a heavenly state. That is why I plead with you to contemplate the humiliating death of Christ with the entire power of your mind. Follow in his steps. Don’t long for a first place in this life, as the two apostles did. Like the wild grass it withers quickly and is gone. Isaiah warns us of this.

What we should do is drink the Lord’s cup and freely carry the cross. We need to cry out with David: “*What return am I to make to the Lord for all he has given me? I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his holy ones.*” What does it mean to drink the cup of the Lord? St. Jerome tells us that it means dying to our personal longings and wants, and to this world’s, and leading an innocent life with Christ and like Christ.

Listen to Christ’s promise. “*To the one who overcomes as I have overcome, I will give a place on my throne just as I have a place on my Father’s throne*”. To God and to his Christ be glory and honor through endless ages. Following Christ and giving God glory is our task. That is how we turn the world upside down so all can be the Kingdom of God.

Monday

MY EXPERIENCE OF THE CROSS

Extract from a letter by St. Isaac Jogues

This extract begins after Isaac Jogues had been declared a captive—the equivalent of a slave, all the belongings of his group taken, particularly the Mass vestments. This last caused him suffering in a special way.

“During my captivity I constantly thought of my past life, so blameworthy by reason of my sins and infidelity to God, and I groaned at being stopped in mid-course, having no good works to send before me and rejected by God, for I was left without sacraments. I wanted to live and dreaded death. I prayed to God: “When shall there be an end to my miseries and grief?”

Isaac had been forced to run the gauntlet and then had his right thumb and some fingers bitten off. The pain was over but the suffering from rejection and the seeming failure of his mission continued.

“I had recourse to the support of Holy Scripture, certain passages of which I kept in my memory. It was these that taught me to think of the Lord as good, even if I felt no devotion. I recalled that “holy ones shall live by faith” and “were your law not my great delight I should perish in my grief”.

He was remembering the psalms. I spent two months in this “retreat”; I became, like St. Bernard, the disciple of the beech trees. I thought of nothing but God. On the road, since I was almost naked and spent the largest part of the night outdoors, I suffered much from the cold. But that was not too important; what did bother me most was to see my captors use for secular purposes the vestments destined for use at the altar. One made leg wrappings out of two humeral veils.”

Isaac made little of the physical pain but mourned the “profanation” of what he viewed as sacred. His captors had no idea of what was tormenting him in his mind, and wouldn’t have cared in any case. All that he had taken for granted was taken away from him because he was in an alien culture with a quite different set of values. He could only try to react as he thought St. Paul had done, as seen in his letters to the Corinthian church.

“Throughout this whole period, which lasted until about mid-January, I could say to God” To this very hour we are victims of hunger and thirst, are poorly clad and knocked about, are vagabonds and wear ourselves out in manual labor. When they call us ugly we speak well of them. When they persecute us, we bear it patiently. When they insult us, we speak gently. We have almost become at present the world’s scum, the scapegoat of society”.

Whoever is deprived of social respect and must live in poverty and want knows what Isaac and his companions suffered, physically and mentally. Support could come only from God and one another as trusting in God. They would teach us this. We are to strengthen one another in our service of God no matter how great the psychological and mental burdens we bear. We offer these sufferings to God and help one another do whatever we see in Scripture is God’s will.

Tuesday

THE FRIENDS WHO HAVE GONE BEFORE US **Developed from Aelred of Rievaulx's On Spiritual Friendship**

Who is a greater friend than Our Lord and Savior? What's more he has given us the formula for genuine friendship: "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*". We all love ourselves but we learn to love by being loved and besides our Lord and our parents we learn to love from friends. A monastic community must be and community of friends who love one another as Christ loves each of us. But we love ourselves best if we love God. Who taught you how to love God even more than you love yourself? Those who have taught us the monastic way of life did this. Today we remember them as teachers and friends who have gone before us and now beckon us to follow them into the fullness of God's love.

If you have become a person worthy of being chosen for friendship with God, you love God above all else. If you are such a person do you think you should be rewarded for loving God or yourself? From the very nature of things each creature loves itself "gratuitously". You transfer this same affection to the other that you love as friends, loving them gratuitously. Unless you do this, you can't appreciate what true friendship is. Do you, then, love God less than yourself or your friends? Of course not.

The one whom you love is another self. God has loved us in a way that makes us another self, another Jesus. As St. Ambrose said, returning this love isn't a tax payment but a free gift full of beauty and full of grace and not acquired by purchase but by generosity. That's how we share love of God with our human friends, as Christ has shared with us as his friends. That's how our departed brothers shared love of God and Christ with us. It was the greatest gift a friend can give a friend.

The intention of those chosen as "friends" has to be tested in a subtle way so that both know they are joined in friendship gratuitously and not in the hope of gaining some advantage or possession. That is to think of friendship in a mercenary way and not in terms of gratuity. The extraordinary thing we await from God is that he will enact and share with us, as creatures who have been uplifted, the capacity to love one another as God himself loves us. God does this among the degrees and orders distinguished by divine decree, and among the individuals who have been chosen so they know charity and friendship. In this way, just as each rejoices in what is its own so will it rejoice in the good of others. The happiness of each one taken individually will be the happiness of all and the totality of the happiness of all will be the possession of each individual.

Here we test ourselves and one other. No such testing is needed once we have entered God's Kingdom; divine perfection beatifies all. This is the norm by which we now measure friendship and so we see how truly friends are those who have taught us this way to God. Reflect today on the divine example of love so we may pass it on in our turn. Let us pray to our departed to help us today and every day to share this gift with those who come after us and look to us to teach them what our predecessors taught us.

Wednesday

WE ARE ONE

from **New Seeds of Contemplation** by Fr Thomas Merton OCSO

I cannot treat other men and women as humans unless I have compassion for them. I must have enough compassion to realize that when they suffer, they feel somewhat as I do when I suffer. And if for some reason I do not spontaneously feel this kind of sympathy for others, then it is the will of God that I do what I can to learn how. I must learn with others to share their joys, their suffering, their ideas, their needs and desires. I must learn to do that not only in the cases of those who are of the same class, the same profession, the same race, the same nation as myself, but when people who suffer belong to other groups, even to groups that are regarded as hostile. If I do this, I obey God. If I refuse to do it, I disobey Him.

Compassion teaches me that my brother or sister and I are one. That if I love them, then my love benefits my own life as well, and if I hate them and seek to destroy them, I seek to destroy myself also. The desire to kill is like the desire to attack another with a red-hot iron: I have to pick up the metal and burn my own hand while burning the other. Hate is the seed of death in my heart, while it seeks to damage another. Love is the seed of life in my own heart when it seeks the good of another.

In terms of political problems, it is true that they are not solved by love and mercy alone. But the world of politics is not the only world, and unless political decisions rest on a higher foundation, they can never do any real good for men and women. Politics must be built on a new force, the power of love, the power of understanding and human compassion, the strength of selflessness and cooperation, And the creative dynamism of the will to live and to build, and above all the will to forgive. We need above all else the will for reconciliation.

These principles are derived from religious wisdom, which for me, is Christian wisdom. But many of these principles run parallel to the ancient teachings of Buddhism. They are in fact in large part universal truths. They are truths which will help us slowly and with difficulty build a civilized world in which happiness will be possible. This will happen, not merely by making life materially better, but by helping human beings understand and live their lives more fruitfully. The key is to understand that "No man is an island" and that a selfish life cannot be fruitful or true.

Thursday

LITTLE THINGS THAT ARE IMPORTANT

A reflection taken from talks by St. Pope John Paul II

God keeps especially in mind those who are in need and those who suffer. The Son of God was born poor and lived among the poor in order by his poverty to make us rich spiritually. This is how God's plan of redemption works. We are not, then, merely God's servants; we are God's children. Can we doubt that our Heavenly Father gives good things to his children? God's greatest gift is Christ. Christ is always there for us; Christ relieves and refreshes us when we are weary and burdened and suffer. Yes, with all his strength Christ calls upon those who have the means to help others and who believe in Him to work for greater justice and to share with those who are in want and need. No one needs to lack food, clothing, housing, work or the goods of culture. All can share in that which gives dignity to the human person.

Sharing with others freely, in imitation of God and Christ, is part of what gives us dignity. This sharing shouldn't be simply physical but spiritual as well. Christ's is a pressing appeal to spend our lives in putting ourselves at the service of those in need of physical and spiritual help. It is a charity which is generous and does not sympathize with injustice. It seeks truth. More, it doesn't fear spiritual poverty but reaches out to it.

The divine economy of salvation, as revealed by Christ, isn't manifested in the freeing of human persons immediately from all that is evil. It begins as an interior transformation of what is spiritually evil into something good; it is accomplished by imitating Jesus. We are called to become new persons, like Christ. What is good builds people up in the image of Christ. Did any of those with Christ at Gethsemane suffer? Were they scourged and crowned with thorns? Did they walk the way to the Cross and die on it? Christ drained the cup of human suffering to show how it can be transformed individually and interiorly.

Jesus says to each of us: Come, follow me! It is an invitation to take part in this process of transformation. In my flesh, says St. Paul, I complete what is still lacking in Christ's sufferings—those of Christ's Body. This is itself a transformation of what caused his sufferings. We can each and all make these words our own. Then, again like St. Paul, we can share this with others by showing them how even suffering can be made good for the one who suffers. We can show it because we have experienced it.

The suffering need not be great or prolonged. It need not be physical, for suffering as such is primarily spiritual. But suffering is transformed. We become different persons spiritually, more capable of helping and sharing. Jesus wants love and its solidarity to grow from sufferings and around them, however small they may be. This is a good possible only for human persons. It is a good which never passes away. We do little things but doing them is no little thing! Are you ready to accept this gift today in whatever it may be, little or great, that may cause you suffering and distress? Mary our spiritual mother did many wonderful little things like this. Now she shows us how. She does little things with a love that makes them tremendously important and wants us to do the same.

Friday

HOW DOES ONE WAIT FOR THE LORD? A reflection from a homily by St. Macarius of Egypt

We have heard very often that those who wish to be found worthy of eternal life must become a dwelling place for Christ and be filled with the Holy Spirit. We are told that such people must produce the fruits of the Spirit and keep the commandments of Christ purely and blamelessly. But one begins all this by first believing steadfastly in the Lord and by devoting oneself as entirely as possible to obeying the commandments and to renouncing worldly interests; i.e., one must free the mind from immersion in secular affairs.

But when we hear this, even we monks tremble for we know we are sinners and that all of the things we have listed are beyond our unaided human powers. But then we recall, by God's gift, that none of this depends simply upon us. It is all a gift of God. But how, then, are we to know we have received this gift?

Do you find you persevere in prayer and do so as ceaselessly as you can? Are you always waiting in expectant faith for the Lord to visit and assist you? Do you keep this goal constantly in view? But we know that sin is within us and that all our efforts don't seem to be sufficient. But this very thought is a beginning. For example, we are to make every effort to do good and do it by showing humility. Isn't our sense of our sin an expression of humility? Of course, we are not to seek honors or praise or special distinctions or special treatment from anyone—just as the Gospel teaches. But if we present ourselves as sinners how can we fall into any of these faults?

What is the most important thing? It is to have the Lord always before our eyes. It is to wish above all to please God. Is God not pleased in a special way by humility? Have you not felt humbled continuously by the failure that follows every effort to depend simply on yourself? Jesus said, "*Learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart, and then you will find your rest*". We need not seek to do all the things we have mentioned as though we had the strength for that. We do not. What makes us more humble than this reflection?

The Lord has taught us to be on the lookout for opportunities to be merciful, to be kind, to be compassionate. These are the good works that make us good according to the Lord's teaching. "*If you love me enter through the narrow gate.*" What is this gate if not the small and humble deeds of mercy and kindness and compassion. We don't have to wait for opportunities to show these virtues in great and extraordinary ways.

We should never forget how humble the Lord was in the way he lived and in the gentle things he did to help others. Take this as a pattern for yourself. If you help others pray you are helping yourself pray and becoming like the Lord. And this happens in many other ways as well. One day the things you now have to force yourself to do, and that you do with a reluctant heart, you will find yourself doing willingly. You will have made a habit of invariably doing what is humble and merciful and kind and so of doing what is right. You will have become ever-mindful of the Lord and are a person who is always waiting for him by doing what he commands you.

Saturday

MOTHER OF SORROWS, MOTHER OF COMPASSION

Dom Hubert Van Zeller OSB

Only by entering into the sufferings of Christ do we enter into the sufferings of others. This is compassion in its fullest sense, in its twofold direction. There can surely be no higher title given to Mary than the Mother of Compassion.

Entrusted with the care of humankind, Mary became mother of the whole person-weakened by original sin, tempted to actual sin, broken by the suffering of having sinned. More closely identified with her divine Son than any other... the relationship between this Mother and this Son leaves no possible room for misunderstanding or non-cooperation. Consequently, if Christ enters into the wayward heart of humankind, Mary does the same. Mother of Christ, she is mother of his mystical body, and the mystical body is still being tempted and tortured as the actual Body was tempted and tortured on Holy Thursday.

It is perhaps our tendency to imagine that the Immaculate Conception puts Mary so far outside the common weakness to let her see sin only as it were academically: pitied, yes, but, because never experienced, not fully understood. Far from making her less understanding of sin, the Immaculate Conception makes her more so. Where in the rest of us sin blunts our sensibilities- causing us to condone, certainly, but not always to show compassion in its purest sense- in Mary the sensibilities are in any case all the sharper, and there has never been anything to blunt their edge. Her sympathy for the sinner is not less human than ours but actually more human; not theoretical or notional but actual and real.

Thus, Mary is our Mother; the Mother of Sorrows and the Mother of Compassion, and we as sinners can turn to her.