

THE THIRTY-THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME NEVER ENDING JOY

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Sunday

THE FEAST OF UNENDING JOY

Recollection by a Monk of Mepkin

In November of 1949 twenty-nine monks from Gethsemani Abbey arrived at Mepkin to found the Monastery of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Fifteen were novices, supposedly flexible enough to adapt to the hardships that go with founding a new community. An ancient motto to help us along the path to God says: “Through hardships, to Heaven”! Monastic life provides the hardships and God provides the grace to bear with them and persevere. Brother Boniface summed up the challenge and the grace by pointing to two of Mepkin’s huge live oaks: “Those great big oak trees were once just little nuts that held their ground!” Monks are nuts for Christ putting down roots into monastic life and persevering until death, as St. Benedict says, they show the Church and the world the inner beauty that grows in one who walks the monastic way with Jesus. It is a matter of seeking the face of God in prayer, work and community living. Only 10 of the 29 founders persevered to be buried at Mepkin.

All Christians are called to pray, to work, and to live in a community of mutual love, and monks seek to do this in the most thorough way possible. It is hard. Everything begins and ends with prayer—no matter how hot the summer heat or how hard the drudgery of turning what contained only a summer home into a property able to feed and cloth an entire community. Trappist tradition insists that monks support themselves by the work of their own hands. It took many experiments for the community to find success in raising chickens for their eggs, and then mushrooms.

This makes it difficult not to let prayer slip from the center of who you are and what you do. Besides, you live in silence and a kind of solitude; you rise early so you can get prayer and meditation in before the day’s work begins. Many of our human ways of finding encouragement and support are deliberately given up in monastic life. A monastery is a kind of half-open door through which one can glimpse the life and joy of the Kingdom of God. The name ‘mepkin’ is said to mean “beautiful place”. To translate natural into spiritual beauty it is important to have a beautiful church and liturgy. The monastery became the “Abbey of Our Lady of Mepkin”—Our Lady of the Beautiful Place—to show that beauty leads to joy. The present award-winning church was dedicated in 1993 with this in mind.

Mepkin Plantation didn’t put prayer first but focused on work, done by slaves. Monks work to become wholly free and make the fruit of their work a free gift to others. It is a life of turning from all that enslaves people and leads them away from love of God and loving respect for others. This is the path to God’s Kingdom and unending joy. The twin blessings that are the Mepkin community and its church remind all of God’s call to live now the life of charity that will last forever. Those who have gone into glory remind us who remain to keep death, and God, daily before our eyes. We show that we too can share God’s unending joy. The special thing our founders did was love one another in God for an entire lifetime. Deeper than hardships, and even sin, is the joy given us in Christ. It shapes each monk’s life as a witness for all to see and an invitation to follow Jesus. It is a response to the call that is faith and our call to celebrate on earth the Day of Unending Joy.

Monday

SEEKING GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART

A reflection from Spiritual Exercises by St. Gertrude the Great

O My Love, what fulfillment to be one with You. The joining of the Word and a soul is the most worthy and marvelous of all unions. It achieves perfect union with God. It is a way of being intertwined in God. To enjoy you, O Word of God, is to be one with God.

You, Lord, are the peace which surpasses all understanding. You are the road by which a person comes into the inner chamber, the bridal chamber. Oh, if only someone like me, someone who seems so miserable as I do, could rest just for a moment wrapped in your cloak, as Ruth was in that of Boaz. Yours is a cloak of cherishing love. You wrap us in it so our hearts might become bold beyond measure in your love.

What a consolation it would be to hear one word from you, a word of your Living Word. Oh! that I might hear from you the good and wondrously pleasant word: I am your salvation! Behold, now the bedchamber of my heart is open to you!

Don't let me be disappointed in what I hope for. Grant that I may find rest for my soul in you! I know of nothing that is more desirable than you! I can't think of anything that is more lovable than your embrace. I want to rest under the wings of my Jesus! I want to dwell and abide in the tent that is your divine love.

Oh love! O radiant noonday of love! I would die a thousand deaths to be able to rest in you in this way. Please, bend down, look down, bring your wonderful face close to me. Oh, give me the experience of your cherishing love. You are indeed my dearest one.

Grant me to come so close to you that nothing closer is possible. I don't want just to be near to you but to be within you. Then all sorts of virtues and spiritual flowers could spring up in me, for you are the Sun of Justice. Even though I am only dust and ashes, where you are every sort of life springs up and abounds.

If you are my husband, my Lord, what fruitfulness would enter my soul. Oh that I might bear the offspring of total perfection! Grant that it be born in me! Then, indeed, I would be snatched out of this valley of misery! Then I would be able to glory in you forever. I would be right there in front of your so marvelous face!

Grant that I may glory in you forever! You are a mirror without defect and you haven't scorned to be united with a sinner like me! Let me be wholly yours!

Tuesday

CHARITY

from To Be A Pilgrim by George Cardinal Basil Hume OSB

The commandment of God to love is clear. We must channel all our energies and selves into that love. It is easy enough to give notional assent to this proposition, translated into a program of action, that is quite another thing. We can see our neighbor, but how can we love someone we do not see? The answer is given by St John in his first letter when he writes that it all starts with our realizing that God loves us first. When that becomes clear, then we begin to want to love God in return. He comes to us in our nothingness, in our sins, and has loved us to the utmost limit. He suffered and died while we were still rebels against Him.

I sometimes think that it is harder for many people to believe that God loves them, than to believe that He exists. The claim that the Almighty loves me seems arrogant. Our behavior and our constant neglect of Him is calculated to confirm our doubt. But it is good to remember that to forgive is one of the characteristics of true love. One of its joys is to want to help another in his or her frailty and weakness. To read the story of the wayward youth whom we call the prodigal son is to learn much about the attitude of God towards each one of us. God waits and waits, and always, for our return.

I am thinking of the commandment to love God in response to the love which has first been lavished on us. We must understand clearly what is meant. We so often distort the concept of love. We caricature the reality; we deface it; we think of it as a weak, rather insipid emotion. But the love of which Our Lord speaks is demanding. It is a giving experience, selfless and generous. Love wants to give, as much as it wants to receive, and its model and prototype is the love that is in God.

We learn the power and the urgency of this love of God by looking at the actions and attitudes of His Divine Son, the revelation in human terms of divine realities. He did not spare himself in the service of other people. He went so far as to forgive his executioners. Jesus Christ reveals the love which God has for every single one of us.

The love of God and the love of neighbor, that is the heart of it all. It is the secret which all persons must discover for themselves. Our prayer can be "I believe Lord; please help my unbelief". But I know another prayer, the prayer of Peter "You know all things, Lord. You know that I love you ". This makes good sense when I say "I believe".

Wednesday

THE RADIANT WITNESS OF OUR DEAD

A reflection developed from a text by St. Pope John XXIII

The Church is always called to bear witness to Jesus Christ. This is a call to help others become all that God would have them be for others, as well as for oneself. It is only in Christ that we discover ourselves fully and recognize what wonderful gifts God has given us. God has created us to become persons who will radiate the beauty and love he gives us continually.

Each Christian is called to share in this vocation of the Church. It is not a vocation which ends at death. Rather, it only begins to assume its true dimensions when one enters fully into the Kingdom of God. It is only then that we enter fully into the beauty and goodness that God wishes to share with each of us. Think of the flowering of the vocation of the Mother of God which began when Jesus gave her to us all on the Cross!

In the immense field of activities which opens before the Church, and all who are her members, all people are embraced. All are invited into God's redeeming and perfecting love. Do we want to persuade all to accept this message and the vocation that goes with it? If we do we have accepted a direction for our living and one which continues even beyond the grave.

You know how many gifts you received from your parents, and from your brothers and sisters, and from the many others who reached out to you over the years of your growth as your full humanity began to flower. These gifts have not ceased to form and enrich us. Their influence will continue as long as our life lasts! We have been created for everlasting life, so how long will these gifts continue to enrich us and shape our own sharing with others?

The Church doesn't claim that it daily brings about the sort of transformation that the apostles experienced after Christ's resurrection or on the day of Pentecost. But the Church doesn't deny that God continues to work such transformations in individuals, and does it through the love and kindness of every one of those Christ has called to redemption. This is what he has called our dead to do for us, not only before but after their deaths.

How long has it taken you to begin to appreciate the gift of life that you received so many years ago? Those who are with God in God's Kingdom are only now beginning to fully appreciate the wonderful things God means to do through them. That means we too have not yet fully appreciated or entered into the love and gentleness and kindness, and sternness, which have been part of our upbringing and our lives. Let us ask these friends who have gone before us to teach us more and more deeply the lessons our departed have given us. Let us ask God to fully open our hearts to the love of those who gave us life and taught us how to live it in Christ! What better way can we find to honor them and to work with them in loving and sharing Christ with others.

Thursday

THE RADIANCE OF A MONASTIC LIFE

A reflection developed from an article in the Catholic Encyclopedia

Mechtilde fell in love with the monastic life when she was taken to see her older sister, Abbess Gertrude, when very young. Eventually, she was permitted to live in her sister's monastery and be educated there. After she made vows, she was appointed Choir Mistress, both because of her beautiful voice and because she considered worship and praise the most important tasks she could do to please God.

Even as a girl, Mechtilde had the gift of respecting and caring for others. She liked people and they liked her. She loved to share what she experienced in seeking God, not only with her sisters in monastic life but with the girls who were sent to the monastery to be educated. One of these was the future St. Gertrude the Great.

This Gertrude, together with another nun who was close to Mechtilde, collected her stories about her experiences of God in prayer. When this became known it disturbed Mechtilde, who was eminently humble and wanted to live a kind of hidden life. So, she took the problem to Jesus in prayer. She heard him say in reply: "It is by my will that all this has been committed to writing. You have no good reason to be concerned about it." In fact, the Lord told her that the book was to be entitled, "The Book of Special Graces" and that reading it would move many to seek to love the Lord more deeply. When she realized that the book would be for God's glory she began to cooperate with its authors and even proof read what they had written down.

Mechtilde was very enthusiastic about liturgical music and singing and loved to make the community's worship more solemn and beautiful. The schola under her direction practiced a great deal but no one complained about this because she was very good at communicating her own enthusiasm and dedication. She was constantly sick but she never let this make her sharp or unpleasant. Her sisters nicknamed her "God's nightingale" and supported her consistently even when she held many choir practices.

Although she never advertised herself, she had a great reputation as a guide to those who needed consolation or help to find light amid puzzlement and spiritual darkness. She was especially sought out by learned Dominicans and they saw to the translation of her book and promoted her teaching. Thus, it became famous in Italy and in Florence people copied her ways of addressing the saints and praising them. She was quickly recognized as one of God's saints after her death and her death day (November 11th) became her feast day. She shows how dedication to God and joy in worship and prayer can make the Christian and the monastic life radiant and attractive.

Friday

THE CALL TO PATIENT ENDURANCE

A reflection developed from a Letter by St. Nilus of Ancyra

We undergo many times of trial. In such times it is of great advantage for us to endure them patiently relying on the help of the Lord. Scripture says, “By patient endurance you will win life”. It did not say that you will win life by fasting, or by solitude or by silence or by singing psalms; yes, these things are very helpful in finding life with the Lord. But Scripture actually said: “by patient endurance” in every trial that overtakes you will find life.

We have many afflictions. They may come from being treated contemptuously or even insolently. They may involve all sorts of disgrace, either minor or major. They may be bodily and due to physical weakness or they may be spiritual and due to the inimical attacks of Satan. It doesn't matter whether they are trials caused by other people or by evil spirits. What matters is that “by patient endurance you will win life”.

Of course, we must also be prepared to give wholehearted thanks to God for trials. We must turn to God in prayer. This is part of being humble. God is our benefactor, God is our Savior—and the Savior of the world, and it is God who disposes all things in such a way as to bring about what is good, or certainly what is for our benefit.

St. Paul has written: “With patient endurance we run the race of faith that is set before us”. What has greater power than virtue? And what virtue has greater firmness and strength than patient endurance? Of course, I am speaking of endurance for God's sake.

Enduring for God's sake is the queen of virtues and even the foundation of virtue. It is for us a haven of tranquility. It is peace in time of war. It is calm in rough waters. It is safety even amidst treachery or danger. It makes those who practice it stronger than steel! No weapon, no bow or arrow, no troop of worked up soldiers, no siege engine, no flying spear, no enemy advance can harm such a person.

Do you fear an entire army of evil spirits? Do you fear the organization that promotes Satan's ends and sees you as an enemy? Do you fear the devil himself, even when he stands in front of you backed up by all his armies and devices? Do not be afraid. None of these things have power to injure a man or a woman who knows how to be patient and endure everything for the sake of God. This is your daily task. It is your task this very day. Be confident and trust in the Lord.

Saturday

LEARNING FROM MARY TO LOVE GOD WHOLLY

A reflection from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

St. Paul knows full well that mere flesh is of no help in accomplishing anything truly good without the Spirit that gives life. At a certain point he refused to be content with knowing Christ in the flesh. What was his goal? He sought to give himself wholly and with ever greater zeal to that Spirit which gives life.

Mary too seems to have had a deep understanding of the need to do this. She wants everyone to love the beloved Fruit of her Womb according to the Spirit. He is the object of her love and her prayer. So, she describes him according to the Spirit. It is as though she were repeating St. Paul's words: "*Even though I once knew Christ according to the flesh yet now that's not how I know Him!*"

Mary wishes to form her only begotten son in all her adopted children. Through the Word of Truth, they have already been begotten and brought forth. That is true. Yet in loving and very real longing she wants to bring them forth daily and surround them with loving care. She wants them to attain to the perfection of their human nature by bringing them to a maturity measured only in relation to the fullness that her Son by God has.

This is a kind of fulfillment of some words spoken long ago by Isaiah: "*Before she came to labor, she gave birth!*" This is a childbirth which brings with it none of the ordinary labor pains. Indeed, what she brings forth is an eternal joy that is to be shared with all.

Mary commends to us this fruit when she says, "*I am the mother of fair love and of fear, and of knowledge, and of holy hope*". Is this, then, your Son, O Virgin of Virgins? Is this you Beloved, O fairest of women? Yes, such is my Beloved, such is my Son, O daughters of Jerusalem (cf. Song of Songs, 5:16).

Mary's Son is not only the object of our love, our fear, our knowledge and our hope. He is the one who makes all of these exist and live within us. It is through these virtues that we live like members of a single body. As we grow in this way that one body takes substance in us. Christ will be perfectly formed in you!

This will begin in this life. It is only partly possible now but in the Kingdom his truth will at last find full expression in each and all of us. Of course, we must first learn to recognize Him as The Truth. We must begin by glorifying Him in reverential fear and hope.

So that this hope isn't disappointed the charity of God has to be poured into our hearts. That is what forms Christ fully in us. We learn to love as The Lord loves. That is what Mary prays most fervently for. That is what brought her to the perfection of her Son. We are invited to imitate her.