

THE THIRTY-SECOND WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

GIVING EVERYTHING TO GOD

A reflection by Paulinus of Nola

We have all heard the story of the poor widow who gave to God everything she had to live on. What does this mean to us? Listen to St. Paul: "*What do you have that you have not received as a gift*"? The giver of that gift is God and everything we possess is part of God's gift. In effect, all we have has been entrusted to us as to administrators charged with using it for the common good. What we have isn't given us only so we can please ourselves. We can see this clearly from the fact that nothing has been given to us as a permanent possession, as "private" property. If we accept and live according to these truths it will be possible for us to obtain something everlasting.

Recall once again the widow who forgot herself in her concern for God and God's poor. Perhaps she was thinking only of the life to come when she gave away all her means of subsistence. The one who will judge us all witnessed this gift and testified that she had given more than anyone else. Others gave what they could do without while she gave herself, placing her very life in God's hands.

Aren't we called to give all we have and so open ourselves to receive spiritual riches? Those who are rich spiritually have more than all the wealthy of this world. Where our heart is shows where our treasure is. A poor widow cared only for heavenly treasure and showed it by giving her heart to God. Let's each of us invest what we have with the Lord! Let's invest our very selves. We are actually dependent on God for our existence. What's more we are in debt, so to speak, to God, not only for creating us but redeeming us. We were slaves of sin and God bought us freedom and so made us members of his own household.

We ought to rejoice beyond measure. We are not only God's but God bought us at a price greater than was ever before spent to buy a person's freedom. We are purchased with the Lord's own blood. What is more, we weren't purchased into slavery but out of it. We were once worthless slaves because we didn't care about anything but ourselves and our pleasures. Now we have the opportunity to live in a freedom that enables us to dedicate ourselves to something more wonderful than self—to justice. Our freedom is not from justice but to justice. If we are gifts by our creation, we have become gifts in a new and greater way by redemption. We need to give back to the Lord the gifts we have been given. This doesn't deprive us of those gifts but makes them even more our own.

This is the same thing that happens when we give ourselves and give of what we have to help and love others. What's more, by doing this we come to possess the greatest of all rewards. Can you possibly turn away from all this? Only a crazy person would do that! Let us, then, turn to God and God's wisdom—not to lose anything but to find everything!

Monday

CELEBRATING CHURCH

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Bernard

Today we celebrate Church. We celebrate a glorious feast. But what is it that we celebrate when we do this? We say that we are celebrating God's Temple. We say we are celebrating the City of the Eternal God. We say that we are celebrating the Bride of Christ. But if we think carefully that means we celebrate ourselves. I say this with both awe and reverence. We are Christ's Bride, God's Temple, and the City of the Eternal God. But we are all these things in the heart of our God. We are all this in God's grace and by God's election.

We aren't celebrating anything we have made ourselves or anything we deserve to be. We must beware of appropriating for ourselves anything that belongs to God. We can't take any glory that is God's as though it were our own. If we exalt ourselves God will only humble us and bring us down to the level on which we belong—we have to be lowly to be what we celebrate today!

The proper celebration of the Church, and of ourselves as Church, is a humble acknowledgement of our weakness and sickness and of all that arouses God's compassion. We are celebrating what we are to grow into; you see, in our helplessness God will feed us as a mother feeds an infant. Because of who God is we will have all we need in abundance; in God's house nothing is ever lacking.

Bear it in mind, however, that God's House is described as a house of prayer. Holiness befits such a house. It is a house filled with tears of repentance and with the purity of self-restraint. "*Be holy, says the Lord, because I am holy.*" St. Paul says this very nicely: "*Don't you realize that your bodies are Temples of the Holy Spirit and that the Holy Spirit dwells in you?*" Yet even this isn't enough. According to St. Paul peace is also necessary. "*Strive to be at peace with everyone, and so achieve the holiness without which no one can see God!*" It is peace that makes us children of one family, brothers and sisters to one another.

Dwelling in unity builds the true Kingdom of peace, the new Jerusalem.

There is a mystery in what we celebrate. How can the greatest king become our bridegroom? How can a city become a bride? All this is possible only for divine love. It is stronger than death and can do everything. Lack of love brought us down but divine love can raise us up again. If abundance of everything children need shows that we are in our Father's house, if holiness shows us to be God's Temple, if the sharing of a common life shows us to be the city of the Great King, if divine love shows us to be the bride of the immortal bride-groom, then we can say without hesitation that today's feast is our feast.

Don't be surprised that we are celebrating on earth. The celebration takes place in heaven too! There is joy in heaven and among God's angels when a single sinner repents, so today's joy must be many times as great since so many sinners are repenting as they celebrate it. Our repentance is our joy! Share this joy with one another as you do with God and with God's angels. That is how we can celebrate filled with thankful repentance. The more whole-heartedly we celebrate, the more we make the repentance our joy. What better way to glorify our God and Savior.

Tuesday

HOW WE MUST CELEBRATE GOD'S GRACE & GIFTS

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

The sublimity of God's grace lies in this, that daily in our hearts all our longings are transferred from what is earthbound to what is heavenly. And yet it remains true that our present life is part of God's providence and bounty and is lived only with our Creator's help and care. It is one and the same Lord who gives us present blessings and who promises eternal life. There is a bond and a unity between what we do here and what we are invited to do forever with God. The mere fact that we are promised such a fulfillment of life carries us along. Hope gives speed and fervor to what we do, both for God and for one another. Clearly, we must honor and praise God for all the good things we are given through the fruitfulness with which he has endowed our earth.

Whatever benefits flow from the harvests are for the use and benefit of all. Everything flows to us from God's goodness. In his delicate way God helps the hesitant and the bold, God encourages the farmers and enables them to sustain us all. He does the like for everyone in whatever occupation they contribute to building up their community. The wind and rain, the cold and heat, day and night, all these serve our needs. If the Lord doesn't give growth by divine planting and watering human effort and forethought wouldn't be able to care for each and all. That is why it is so right and just that we help one another, and do it using the things our Heavenly Father mercifully bestows on us.

There are many who have no share in fields, vines, olive groves and much else. It is worth remembering the poverty of these people so that out of the plenty God gives those who have such goods the poor too may bless God. All are intended to rejoice at having been given a share of what God has given for the good of all. These things are the common good that God's has designed for rich and poor, for pilgrims and for the sick so that all may have what they need and be satisfied.

God's justice arranges for those who labor under various disabilities to find what they need through the love and generosity of others. God blesses them through their patient and trusting hope, and blesses those who help them through their very kindness and mercy. God blesses all by their contribution to the common well-being, and for the way each helps build up a community of mutual love and concern.

The most effective way of praying for forgiveness is sharing. Almsgiving and fasting and prayer must be united. What we ask of God in these ways is certainly heard, and especially if we ask only that all be blessed and come to the eternal joy and life God calls us and try to help this happen. As it is written: The merciful do good to themselves. Nothing does greater good than the good of sharing with neighbors in need. That transfers what was only earthly into heaven and makes it an eternal wealth. The merciful, as the Lord teaches, have mercy shown them by God. God is the highest of all rewards and God's gift of self is for those who give themselves as God does.

Wednesday

FEARLESSNESS IN PUTTING CHRIST FIRST

A reflection from The Life of St. Martin by Septimus Severus

The barbarians were making incursions into Gaul and the Caesar Julian concentrated his army at Worms. There he began to distribute a bonus to the soldiers. They were called up one by one in the usual way. When Martin's turn came he decided it would be a good time to apply for his discharge, for he didn't think it would be honest to take the bonus if he wasn't going to fight.

He said to Julian: *"I have been your soldier up to now. Let me now be God's soldier. Let someone who is going to fight have your bonus. I am Christ's soldier; I am not allowed to fight."* These words put Julian in a rage and he said that it was fear of the battle to be fought the next day that Martin wanted to quit the service, not from religious motives.

Martin was undaunted. In fact, he stood all the firmer because of this effort to frighten him. *"If it is put down to cowardice and not to faith, I will stand unarmed in the front of the battle line tomorrow and I will walk unharmed through the enemy's columns in the name of the Lord Jesus, protected by the sign of the Cross instead of by shield and helmet"*.

So he was ordered to be placed in custody so that he could prove his words and face the barbarians unarmed. The next day the enemy sent envoys to ask for peace, surrendering themselves and all they had. Who could doubt that this victory was due to Martin's blessing and granted so he would not be sent unarmed into a battle! Christ could not have granted any victory for the benefit of his own soldier greater than one in which the enemy was beaten bloodlessly and no one had to die.

On another occasion, many years later, bishops from various parts of the world had been assembled to meet the Emperor Maximus. Many were fawning on him, lowering the dignity of their priesthood. Martin alone retained his Apostolic authority.

Invitations had been sent to a great feast and to persons of the very highest rank. Martin himself occupied a stool next to the emperor and one of his priests was placed nearby, between two very important counts. Toward the middle of the meal a servant, as was customary, offered a cup to the emperor. He ordered it to be given instead to Martin first and waited, expecting that Bishop Martin would then hand it to him. But after drinking, Martin passed the cup to his priest, affirming that no one had a better right to drink after him and that it would be dishonest to give preference to any other than the Lord's priest, even to the emperor.

The emperor, and all who were present, were so struck by this action that the very gesture by which they had been humbled became for them a source of good feeling. The news went around the palace that Martin had done at the emperor's table what no other bishop had dared to do even when eating with the least of the emperor's magistrates. Martin never hesitated to put Christ and Christ's honor above every human rank and sign of prestige.

Thursday

LISTENING: THE KEY TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH **from Wisdom Distilled From The Daily by Sr Joan Chittister OSB**

The bells that ring over every Benedictine monastery are an archaic way to get a group's attention to the order of the day, and, if that were their only purpose, there are surely better ways to do it. Public address announcements and blinking lights, would certainly do a better, more efficient job. But Benedictine bell towers are designed to call the attention of the world to the fragility of the axis on which it turns. Benedictine bell towers require us to listen even when we would not hear... And listening is what Benedictine spirituality is all about in a culture that watches but very seldom hears.

Benedictine spirituality is about listening to four things: the Gospels, the Rule, one another, and the world around us. Most of us listen easily to one or two of these realities, but only with difficulty do we listen to all four. We read the Scriptures faithfully but fail to apply them. We listen to the needs of the poor but forget to read the Gospel. We go for spiritual direction but ignore or overlook the insights of the people with whom we live. We prefer to hear ourselves than to listen to wiser hearts for fear they might call us beyond ourselves. Benedictine spirituality requires a medley....

But the Benedictine spirituality of listening puts us in dangerous territory. If we really listened to the Gospels, we would question a lifestyle that endlessly consumes and hoards, is blind to the homeless, and uninterested in the unprepared.

The Rule teaches us to listen to the circumstances of our own lives. We have to begin to face what our own life patterns might be saying to us. When we are afraid, what message lurks under that fear: a horror of failure, a rejection of weakness, panic at the thought of public embarrassment, a sense of no value that comes with the loss of approval? When we find ourselves having the same struggles over and over again, what does that pattern say: That I began a thing with great enthusiasm only to abandon it before it is finished? That I am always reluctant to change, no matter how good the changes might be for me and my community? That I keep imposing unsatisfactory relationships with people from my past on every new person I meet?

Unless I learn to listen- to the Gospels, to those around me, to my own life, to the wisdom of those who have already maneuvered successfully around life's dangers- I will really have nothing to say about life itself. To live without listening is not to live at all.

Friday

CELEBRATING THE SAINTS OF THE BENEDICTINE ORDER

A reflection by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

We often celebrate feast days in honor of saints. These celebrations mustn't be without fruit. They don't benefit those we honor, so the benefit must be ours. If (e.g.) we live our life badly the celebration awakens shame and even fear. If we are weak, do we let desire for what is only of this earth drive us? If so, how do you react to hearing about St. Benedict's struggles, and how he cast himself into a thorn bush rather than give in to sin? Why should he be able to do what you can't, and even as a young man? Do you remember, then, what it means to walk in the Spirit—not your own spirit but the Holy Spirit. The Spirit creates good desires to overpower those of the flesh. Listen to what St. Paul says: "*The fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy, and peace*". By the Holy Spirit we desire charity, chastity, peace and so on, and by the flesh we desire fornication, uncleanness and other like evils. Who hasn't felt both sorts of desires within?

If we follow the counsels and desires of the Spirit then we walk in the Spirit.

The flesh counsels us to seek fine foods and eat to satiation; it counsels us to seek more sleep, warmer blankets and softer clothing. The Spirit counsels us never to be lazy or wander about, not to talk a lot but to move always toward good works like seriousness, love of silence and inner quietness, to spurn gossip, mere hanging around with people, and to prefer to mortify ourselves by vigils, by abstinence, manual labor, prayers, compunction, devotion, and the like.

Today we celebrate a vast crowd of those who have walked in the Spirit and even now pray for us to walk in the Spirit as well. By remembering, and by celebrating, these holy ones we are aroused to the warmth of charity. Looking to them we can make progress first in hope and then in love. If you visualize yourself doing what these saints did you begin to long to make progress by means of such spiritual exercises as I have described.

What St. Benedict did he taught to others, and they are teaching us right now. The Holy Spirit instituted the Rule through St. Benedict and so its counsels are those of the Holy Spirit for us. Think of how many dangers we avoid by following these teachings. See how useful that is for celebrating today's feast. It takes away every excuse for not living them and shows us how they can lead us to love for God and for one another. To see you living these counsels will enkindle hope in many others.

We are like pieces of wood on an altar waiting to be burnt up in sacrifice. The fire that will make the sacrifice complete is love. Let us take that fire to our wood. There is a certain fire we call tribulation but it is not as great as that of love. Both cleans us and destroys what is bad and imperfect in us. All these saints we now remember were cleansed in this way. If we too want to be cleansed then we must submit patiently to the fire of tribulation and ask God to help us burn as hot as we can with the fire of love. The fire of tribulation is a beginning and the fire of love perfection. Listen to St. Paul: "*Tribulation works to produce patience, patience enables us to undergo testing, and testing brings us hope. Hope will never be discredited because the charity of God is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit*".

Saturday

THE CHURCH AND RENEWAL

from Living The Gospel Without Compromise by Catherine De Hueck Doherty

There is an immense cry for leadership in the Church today. We seem to be giving our children stones instead of bread. There is a great clamor for the Bread and Waters of Life in the inarticulate cry of the multitudes. That drives me on, ever on, and yet who am I? Just an ordinary woman who sees and hears. But the burden of all this breaks my back, and my prayers are like tears that seem to fall on the ground and be swallowed up by all the beasts of prey prowling around.

In certain Catholic circles, there is deep unrest regarding the structure of the Church. It seems that the word cannot be used any longer without negative connotations. Granted, structures need to be changed. But the process must be based on the folly of the cross, not on the sand of human intelligence and human wisdom. This means crucifixion, but also resurrection. If we build on any other foundation, what guarantee do we have that these new structures will be the right ones?

The Church calls for conversion of every individual to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the deepest thing Christians can give to the world around them. What it hungers for most is God. The new catechetical methods, the new pastoral approaches, the new levels of involvement in the secular world and in our parishes and religious communities will remain sterile without a personal confrontation with God.

With the help of God, we can solve the crises of faith. Unless this personal dimension is straightened out, squarely faced, and lived by each Christian, nothing will really make sense.

Then the problem of authority will disappear, because Christian's will become Christ's team. On a team there is mutual respect, even reverence, since all work for the same goal and have the same motivation. Those engaged in specific ministries in the Church are called to take on the vision of the whole. Without conversion to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we will not obtain the tranquility of God's order but only the confusion of Babel. Before we can offer leadership to the men and women of our time, we need to be one with God and with ourselves. There has never been a more effective program for renewal and change than to proclaim the Gospel with one's life.

For people today, renewal involves a breaking up of the old and a rebuilding of the new. Both processes are painful to the soul, mind, and heart. This is a time for mutual love. This is a time for building without destroying. To follow the spirit of the Gospel is to deal lovingly with things old and new. Let us go lovingly together on the path of renewal, hand in hand and guided by prayer.