

THE CELEBRATION OF THE EPIPHANY

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Sunday

OUR CALLING TO FAITH & SERVICE

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Leo the Great

God saw that the world was on the way to perdition. God determined to rescue it. He has done it in these “latter days” by his merciful providence because God fore-ordained the salvation of all Peoples in Christ. The Peoples I am speaking of are the numberless offspring promised of old to the blessed patriarch Abraham—an offspring he acquired not according to the laws of nature but according to the fruitfulness of faith.

Told that his descendants would be as countless as the stars, the father of all these Peoples was given the hope of a posterity which wouldn’t be of the earth but of heaven. Let the full number of Peoples take their place in the family of the patriarchs. Let the gentiles enter! Let the sons of the promise receive the blessing of Abraham’s race according to flesh and blood, even though it rejected its own flesh and blood in the person of Christ.

In the person of the three sages let all Peoples worship the creator of the universe. Let God be known no longer only in Judea but throughout the world. In every place as well as in Israel, let the Name of the Lord be glorified. That is why we have been instructed by the mysteries of divine grace. We are to celebrate the day of our own first fruits, the initial call of the gentiles. We are to do it with spiritual joy and with great gratitude to the God of all mercies. God has qualified us to share in the lot of the saints in light, as St. Paul has testified. God has “*delivered us from the power of darkness, transferring us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son*”. According to the prophecy of Isaiah, “*the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light! Day has dawned on those who lived in the shadow of death!*”

The prophecy was that “*peoples who never knew you will fly to you for refuge*”. Abraham saw this day and rejoiced to know that in his offspring, that is in Christ, the children of his faith were to be blessed. By their belief he was to become the father of all Peoples. “*He gave glory to God in the firm conviction that God was able to fulfill what he had promised.*” This is the day of which David sang in the psalms: “*All the Peoples you have made will come and adore you, Lord; and they will give glory to your name*”. Again, he said, “*The Lord has made known his salvation; God has displayed his holiness in the sight of all Peoples*”.

We know that all this has come to pass because the three Sages were called from their own far off land and led by a guiding star to recognize and worship the King of Heaven and Earth. Surely, this star’s guidance leads us as well to recognition and worship. We are to imitate the homage of the Sages. We are to respond with all our hearts to the grace that is inviting everyone to follow Christ!

In this effort we must all help one another. Then each and all of us will shine like children of the light in God’s Kingdom. We gain admittance to it by sound faith and good works. It happens through our Lord, Jesus Christ. He lives with God the Heavenly Father and with the Holy Spirit for ever and ever. Amen.

Monday

Making the Most of our Opportunities to Love

A reflection on St. Elizabeth Ann Seton illustrated with a homily of St. Augustine

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton was a convert to the Catholic Church and one of the richest heiresses in the United States. She saw her vocation as one of using her wealth to do charity and, if possible, to institutionalize particular works of charity. She cared much for education and for helping those others ignored. She founded a religious congregation to carry on the various works she had begun, and to expand them as might prove possible. This vocation made use of the gifts God had given her, in her nature and by reason of her family's wealth. She turned wealth into a powerful instrument for helping the marginalized.

To profit from her example consider first what St. Augustine teaches about a Christian's call to live charity. The Lord, he says, has come in the fullness of his love to teach us how to love. Call to mind his two commandments. He summed them up thus: "You must love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind; and you must love your neighbor as yourself." Think on these all the time, act on them, fulfill them. Love of God is first commanded yet love of neighbor is first to be observed. We can't see God, but by loving neighbor we come to be made able to see God. Love of neighbor cleanses our eyes and makes them capable of seeing God.

St. John the Apostle explains this. God is love, he teaches, and anyone who lives in love lives in God. Look within yourself for the power to love God and there, as far as may be, you will see God. So, begin to love your neighbor. If we do this, we are told, our light will break forth like dawn. Our light is our God. By loving and caring for your neighbor, you advance on your journey to the One Lord, your God. We have not yet come into the Lord's presence but our neighbor is with us now. If you travel toward God with your neighbor you will find that neighbor is a support. Together you will reach your common goal.

In many short quotations, St. Elizabeth Seton made it clear that she saw service of neighbor as something that enables one to forget self, and all sorts of discomforts and privations, so as to immerse oneself wholly in practical care for others. If one looks around one will see how many needs there are and how many people who can't help themselves but need others' support. She saw clearly that what she had and what she was came to her from others; they had shaped her and enabled her to become a very competent and loving woman, wife, mother, religious founder, and worker of charity. She was convinced that everything she was and had could be used to love and care for others. She calls us to do likewise, because we see what was true for her is true for us.

Tuesday

The Work of Spreading Knowledge of Christ's Way

A reflection based on a Letter of St. Thomas Becket

If one is solicitous as a bishop in reality and not merely in name one has to understand the meaning of one's call by keeping one's eyes fixed on the One who appointed us, our eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ. On the cross he offered himself for our sake and now from heaven looks down upon our every action and intention. Having undertaken to act as his vicars on earth, bishops have a dignity matching their title. They hold the highest rank in their churches but the purpose of all this is that sin and death be destroyed and the Church built up in faith and by growing in virtue.

There are many bishops. At ordination each promises to teach and feed the flock of Christ with earnest and persevering care. They daily profess to do this. John Neumann's deeds conformed to his public profession, especially as he built up his church's schools so that his people might know and love and live their faith. Truly, the harvest was great. A single laborer, or even a small number, is not enough to gather into the Lord's granary all his grace has caused to grow.

That is why John Neumann persuaded so many groups of holy women to work with him in spreading knowledge of Christ's way of life.

Who would doubt that the Roman church is the head of all the churches and a prime source of Catholic teaching? Who doesn't know that the keys of the kingdom of heaven were given to Peter? And all this is to ensure that Christ's church may reach its maturity in a unity of faith and of knowledge of God's Son.

Many are needed to plant and many to water. Now that the word has spread so far and wide and the population has vastly increased, numerous teachers are needed. But no matter how many plant or who waters God gives the increase only to those who plant in the true Petrine faith and accept all the apostolic teachings.

Let us remember how our ancestors worked out their salvation. Let us recall the trials through which the church has had to grow and expand, and what storms it has weathered. John Neumann had to work with many ethnic groups, often in mutual conflict, e.g., each wanted to use their own language. John Neumann (e.g.) could speak six languages but was very hard to understand in English because of his accent. People complained and even rejected his ministry due to this. But the victor's crown is won by those whose faith shines out all the more brightly for their sufferings. No one is crowned who has not really done battle. John Neumann died at the age of 48, collapsing in the street on the way to his rectory. He had worn himself out in labors for Christ and now wears a crown.

He exhorts us to give ourselves without reserve to whatever community of faith needs our support, whether in the form of labor or of prayer.

Wednesday

A NEW BIRTH

A Reflection by Fr Thomas Merton OCSO (Part 1)

One of the most important and characteristic themes of Christianity is that of renewal of the self. This is “the new creation” of the Christian in Christ. The death to the old self and new life in the Spirit sent by Christ from the Father means not only a juridical salvation in heaven and in the hereafter but much more a dimension of one’s present life, a transformation and renewal not only of the Christian as a person but of the community of believers, the brotherhood of those who have received the Spirit of Christ and live in the grace of Christ.

The renewal of life cannot be understood if it is seen merely as a ritual affair, the result of certain formal exterior acts. Nor is it an emotional conversion followed by adherence to a set of new attitudes and convictions, based on a sense of inner liberation.

In the theology of the New Testament, particularly that of Paul and John, the new being of the Christian, his new creatin is the effect of an inner revolution which, in its ultimate and most radical significance, implies complete self-transcendence and transcendence of the norms and attitudes of any given culture, any mere human society. This includes transcendence of religious practices.

There is a dept in our hearts in which we hear a voice telling us “You must be born anew”. It is an obscure but insistent demand of one’s own nature to transcend itself in the freedom of a fully integrated, autonomous, personal identity.

Jesus tells the doctor of the Law, Nicodemus “You must be born again”. He was not only telling him something he could hear, if he listened, in the silence of his own heart. He was also telling him that ordinary answers were not sufficient to meet his demand. The be born again is more than a matter of good moral resolutions, of self-discipline, of adjustment to social demands and requirements, of finding oneself a respected and worthwhile role in society. The summons to be born again does indeed make itself heard in our hearts, but it does not always have the same meaning, because we are not always capable of interpreting it in our true dept. Sometimes it is little more than an expression of weariness, a sense of failure, an awareness of wrong, a half-hopeless wish that one might get another chance, a fresh start in the New Year. One desires to begin a new life because the burden of the old has now become an unbearable accumulation of fatigue, mistakes, betrays, evasions, disappointments. One longs for a new life because the old life is stale, unworthy, uninteresting, cheap. One looks for a new way because all the old familiar ways are a dead end.

Thursday

A NEW BIRTH

A Reflection by Fr Thomas Merton OCSO (Part 1)

Unfortunately, our weariness with the old, our longing for the new, is often just another trap of nature, another variation in the imprisonment we hope to escape. It may inspire us with bright hopes, and it may induce us to believe we have found a new answer: but then, after a while, the same despair regains possession of our hearts. Or simply we fall back into the same old routine. Modern commercial society is largely built on the exploitation of this need for a “new life” in the hearts of men and women. But by exploiting this need, manipulating and intensifying it, the marketing society also aggravates and corrupts it at the same time.

Thus, the need for the new becomes false. It is at the same time insatiable and deceptive. It is tantalized and kept in a state of excitement by all kinds of clever techniques, and it never receives anything but pseudo-satisfactions. We have more and more needs, more and more hopes, and yet we have become more and more suspicious, less and less able to bear the burden of anxieties and half-truths which we carry about in our hearts. We can become depressed and weighed down by the falsity and illusion of our lives. We can lose hope in the possibility of renewal. In the end, we opt for easier forms of escape.

In our quest something tells us that we are trying to recover that which is deepest, most original, most personal in ourselves. To be born again is not to become someone else, but to become ourselves.

Our deepest spiritual instinct is that urge of inner truth which demands that we be faithful to ourselves. We need to be open to our deepest and most original potentialities. Yet, at the same time to become one's true self, one must die. That is to say the false self must die.

In the Gospel of John, the scholar Nicodemus asks Jesus in bewilderment how is it possible for a grown man to be born again. We cannot reverse our course. He thinks it is not possible to change. But Jesus has another idea. He talks of an entirely different kind of birth. To be born again in this way is to be born beyond egoism, beyond selfishness, beyond individualism, in Christ. We are to be born beyond hatred, beyond struggles, in peace, love, joy, self-sacrifice, service, gentleness and humility. This rebirth is not a single event but a continuous dynamic of inner renewal.

Friday

The Daily Renewal of Christ's Presence among Us

A reflection based on a text by St. Maximus the Confessor

The Word of God, born once for all in Bethlehem, according to the flesh, is born anew at every instant according to the Spirit. He is born anew to all those who long for him. You see, he delights in goodness and humaneness and so he became a little child to clothe himself in just these qualities. He knows that all can accept one who is good and humane and thus seeks to free us from every trace of ill-will or aversion. He is taking the measure of those who long for Him.

This is why St. John, with truly wise insight into the meaning of the mystery of the Incarnation, exclaimed: "Jesus Christ, yesterday and today and the same forever!" He perceives that the mystery is always new and never grows old in the understanding of those who give themselves to Him. Christ our God is born. The one who created all things out of nothing takes flesh and a human soul and is made a human being. A star guided Magi to the place where the Word made flesh lay. The Truth confounds the evidence of the senses and guides all nations toward the fullest light of understanding. The Law and the prophets mysteriously direct us to the Word, if we interpret them with reverence. Then they are like a star leading those called by the power of the grace of the incarnate Word.

God has become a perfect human being. Nothing of human nature is changed but sin is no part of his living. In the beginning, after all, sin was no part of what is genuinely human. God makes his human body a kind of bait to lure the dragon. When this evil one attempts to devour Jesus the very assault on his flesh proves that dragon's undoing. By the power of the Godhead within it, this flesh brings the devil to utter destruction. At the same time, it is the sovereign medicine that restores to mankind the grace that was offered it in the beginning.

The serpent infused the poison of disobedience into the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and so ruined those who tasted it. But when he tried to repeat this stratagem with Jesus, he ruined himself. The power of Godhead within Jesus brought this about. The great mystery of the divine incarnation remains a mystery forever.

How can the Word truly and substantially exist in human flesh, while at the same time his whole being is with the Father? How can that same Word, who is wholly divine by nature, have become completely human without in any way disowning either his divine nature, in which he subsists as God, or our nature, in which he was made human? Only faith can perceive the truth of these mysteries. They themselves are indeed the essence and foundation of truths which surpass what the mind can either see or understand. And this faith has been given us! And from this gift springs that love which binds us to our God and leads us to serve and love one another. What a marvelous exchange!

Saturday

AT THE TIME OF EPIPHANY

Sermon 31 of Aelred of Rievaulx

When I contemplate the works the Lord made when he created the world, I reflect on the beauty of the sun and the moon, the disposition of the stars, the dept and width of the sea, the fruitfulness of the earth. All such things delight me, and I say with the prophet “How magnificent are your works, O Lord. You have made all things in wisdom.” But, that meditation and contemplation do not ravish my whole soul, because in all these things I do not see my Lord with respect to the whole. I can see something of God’s power in these things, something of God’s wisdom, something of God’s beauty, but still, I do not see that which has a greater savor, that which delights more.

When, however, I turn my eyes to the work of his mercy and contemplate that ineffable grace he provides for the wretched, those for whom he wished to become miserable himself, that contemplation indeed draws me in, to the very marrow and guts of my soul. I begin to say with the prophet, “What return shall I make to the Lord for all his mercies?”. This memory, dear brothers and sisters, ought to be sweet to you but in a special way after we celebrate the feast of Epiphany. As we hear “Grace has appeared, the very grace of God our savior”. Up till now, the grace of God was as if hidden, but now it has appeared.

This grace was hidden in the deeds of the patriarchs, in the words of the prophets, in the observances of the Jewish people. Finally, from the thigh of God came the flesh of holy Mary, from whose flesh the God of heaven was born.

Today, true fire shone out from true flesh, when the Son of God appeared in our moral substance. Although there was no sin in that flesh, there was nevertheless the likeness of sinful flesh.

He does not come in sinful flesh, therefore, but in the likeness of sinful flesh. This is grace, and a great grace indeed. Hidden up to now, this grace has appeared in these days. Grace has appeared. The grace came into the world, but only at the Epiphany, it was made known to the world. The grace of God, our Savior, appeared. Up to this He was only known by some but now His great name is made known among the nations. They follow a star. The star signifies faith.

That star must shine in the darkness. Because we walk in darkness we often fail in good works. A brother might rebuke another brother, for instance, but not knowing his brother’s weakness, he acts according to his own zeal and accuses his brother with excessive severity. The brother collapses into a worse state because of the rebuke. Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, walk in faith lead by the star. The star is the light of the holy Gospel.