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Sunday

HOW WE SHOULD BE CONVERTED

A reflection by St. Bernard

“Turn to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning, and rend your hearts and not your garments, say the Lord.” The Lord is calling us to a spiritual turning that is accomplished only in the whole of one’s lifetime. Begin by looking carefully at the objects of your love, your fear and the reasons for your joy or sadness. Perhaps you will find a worldly mind hiding under cover of professed religion. If that is so, then you need to turn your love so that you love nothing except the Lord or because of the Lord. You must also turn your fear so that you dread nothing except offending the Lord or those the Lord loves. Likewise, let both your joy and your sadness be turned to the Lord. What could be more perverse than to rejoice in evil? But if you grieve for your sin or your neighbor’s you do well. We rejoice in loving Christ with our brethren, rejoicing in their spiritual success and grieve with them in their spiritual adversities.

Notice that the prophet calls us to fasting. This is a physical turning to the Lord and it is no small help to the spiritual one. But this means not only eating less or drinking less but abstaining from all merely fleshly excesses in longings and desires. We must keep it in mind that there is a bread from which one should not abstain. I am thinking not only of the bread of the altar but of the “bread of tears”. One who doesn’t yet mourn the old ways doesn’t yet mourn sin and time lost; one doesn’t yet know how to rejoice in the new if it isn’t seen in contrast to the old. Only longing for our God with all our heart brings real joy.

Remember too that the prophet called upon us to rend our hearts even more than our worldly garments. Is your heart divided in a good sense? Do you love all the things the Lord asks you to love and do? The Spirit of God is manifold and you can’t follow the many ways in which he would have you walk in his service and that of others unless you allow your heart to be rent. David says in a psalm, *“My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready!”* Be ready for both adversity and prosperity, ready for what is low and what is high, ready for whatever the Spirit commands. If the Lord wants you to be a shepherd let your heart be ready.

If you are afraid then meditate on the Law of the Lord and you will know where you are to lead them. We need to rend our hearts so that we may be as whole as was our Savior’s tunic. We need to receive from the Lord many virtues and make these like a garment. It will be a many-colored garment bound on by the belt of love. In this way we acquire the many-colored beauty of a Godly way of life. From it comes perseverance in the life of virtue. It is a beautiful way of living. Whatever call you have received to serve others and help them find the path to God, it will give you many reasons to meditate on the Lord’s gifts and love, and so to give thanks. This is the way that leads to conversion. If it requires an entire lifetime it is a lifetime of much joy. Rejoice in the Lord always.

Monday

THE BEAUTY OF LIVED CHRISTIAN FAITH

A reflection from The See of Saint Peter by Bishop Jacque Bossuet

What is the principle of the Church's unity and of the Church's beauty? True beauty comes from health. What makes the Church strong makes her lovely. Unity makes her lovely and that unity makes her strong. United from within by the Holy Spirit she has a common bond of outward communion and must remain united with those God has appointed to govern her. This the one unity guards all these realities.

We find in the Gospel that Jesus Christ wills to begin the mystery of unity in his Church by choosing twelve disciples. But to consummate that unity he chose one. The first of them is Simon called Peter. Then he told those he had chosen: "Go, preach; I send you". Jesus Christ, Son of God, speaks to Simon, son of Jonas. It is by him that Christ speaks and in speaking acts and stamps first upon Peter his own immovable loyalty to the Father. He never moved from his confession: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*" The Word of God makes out of nothing what pleases him, and gives strength to a mortal to do what is otherwise impossible. And Peter's confession lives on in his successors.

Jesus Christ pursues his design. He says to Peter: "I will give to you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven". These keys mark the authority of governance. All is subject to these keys; all, my brothers and sisters. We declare this with joy because we love unity and hold obedience to be our glory. It is Peter who is first called to love Jesus before all others. And he, by charity, is to be servant of all.

I have presented this unity in the Holy See. Would you see it in the entire episcopal order? It must appear in St. Peter here too. Jesus said, whatsoever you shall bind shall be bound. These great words have also set up bishops because the force of their ministry consists in binding and loosing those who believe. What was said to Peter was said to all the Apostles. The one who gives the power to Peter gives it also to all the Apostles. So, Christ breathes equally on all, so he sends the Spirit with that breath.

It was, then, clearly the design of Jesus Christ to give to one alone at first what he afterwards meant to give to many. But the sequence doesn't reverse the beginning nor does the first lose its place. The promises of Jesus Christ, as well as his gifts, are without repentance. And what is once given to several carries its restriction in its division. Power given to one alone, however, is without exception and carries with it plenitude. It need not be divided any further and share with any other. It has no bounds except those which its terms convey.

Is this not beautiful? Is this not a path to health and strength for the Church? Do you see in it God and God's beauty? Then follow Christ in the work of building up his Church as an instrument of salvation for the whole world

Tuesday

THE MEANING OF THE GREAT FAST

A reflection by Bishop Kallistos Ware

It is important not to overlook the physical requirements of fasting. It is even more important not to overlook its inward significance. Fasting isn't a mere matter of diet. It is moral as well as physical. True fasting is a conversion of heart and will. It is a return to God; it is a coming home like that of the Prodigal to our Heavenly Father's home.

In the words of St. John Chrysostom, it means abstinence not only from food but from sin. The fast, he insists, should be kept not only by the mouth but by the eyes, the ears, the feet, the hands and all the other members of the body. It is useless to fast from food, says St. Basil, while indulging in cruel criticisms or slander of others. "You don't eat meat, but you devour your brother or sister".

The inner significance of fasting is summed up in the triad: prayer, fasting, almsgiving. Divorced from prayer and reception of the sacraments, unaccompanied by acts of compassion, our fasting becomes hypocritical, even demonic. It doesn't lead to contrition and joyfulness but to pride and irritability. Fasting is valueless or harmful if not combined with prayer. In the Gospels the devil is cast out by "prayer and fasting". These should be accompanied by love for others expressed in practical ways—that's what almsgiving is. It requires works of compassion and forgiveness. Without love toward others there can be no genuine fast. This love should not be limited to formal gestures or sentiments. We have to give our time and what we are and not just things.

The primary aim of fasting is to make us conscious of our dependence on God. If practiced seriously, the Lenten abstinence from food—particularly in the opening days—involves a considerable measure of real hunger, and also a feeling of tiredness and physical exhaustion. The purpose of this is to lead us in turn to a sense of inward brokenness and contrition: to bring us to the point where we appreciate the full force of Christ's statement, "*Without me you can do nothing!*" (Jn.15:5) If we always take our fill of food and drink we easily grow over-confident in our own abilities, acquiring a false sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency. The observance of a physical fast undermines this sinful complacency. Lenten abstinence gives us the saving self-dissatisfaction of the Publican, making us poor in spirit.

Yet it would be misleading to speak only of this element. Abstinence leads also to a sense of lightness, wakefulness, freedom and joy. We find that it enables us to sleep less, to think more clearly, and to work more decisively. Fasting doesn't seek to do violence to our body but rather to restore it to health and equilibrium. Fasting liberates our body from the burden of excessive weight and makes it a willing partner in the task of prayer, alert and responsive to the voice of the Spirit.

Wednesday

LONG AGO I FELL IN LOVE WITH THE EARTH from Cosmic Dance by Sr Joyce Rupp

The poet John O Donoghue puts it beautifully “At its heart, the journey of each life is a pilgrimage, through unforeseen and sacred places that enlarge and enrich our soul”.

Tears come easily when something of the earth’s beauty surprises or astounds me. The inherent mystery and unspoken magnificence of the simplest things can move me deeply. It is humbling to experience Earth’s treasures. In being so awed I realize what a gift it was that I could be privy to such loveliness.

The tears arise because of the intimacy inherent in the experience. At time Earth’s beauty unites me with a presence that is as near as my own soul, yet enormously more expansive. It is as if, in that experience of recognition, I leave my “self” and travel into the beauty that is before me. At times like this, Earth draws my being towards the Great Being and invites me into dynamic dance that is always in cosmic motion.

Long ago I fell in love with Earth and am deeply grateful for all I have come to know and experience of this incredible planet. Earth is a precious part of my life, a wonderful nurturing mother to me, always providing for my needs. Every day she offers me food to eat, air to breathe, and beauty to behold. I recreate in her parks, hike her mountains, and swim in her seas. I find delight in her colors, shapes and sounds. I receive teachings through her creatures and her seasons. No wonder I have a strong and enduring love for the many aspects of this immense and lovely globe of life.

This closeness can take some time to develop for people. I know a woman who was in her fifties before she fell in love with the hills and the trees. Others find it more difficult. I once heard a man say, to my great dismay, “Oh, if you have seen one mountain, you have seen them all”.

My own relationship with the Earth continues to grow and strengthen as I make a deliberate effort to spend time with the many facets of our planet. There have been situations where, however, there was little of nature to behold for a good portion of my day, like when I am in a windowless office or conference room, but even then, I try to connect with Earth by noticing the food I eat and the water I drink. I have used photos of nature on the covers of my journals and for bookmarks so that I can easily be reminded of Earth’s goodness.

As I aged, it occurs to me that one of the most difficult things about dying will be leaving this amazing planet. Yet, I trust-like the unborn babe who swims in the beauty of life within the womb-that beyond what I know here is something else equally as beautiful and it will claim my heart fully.

Thursday

ON PRAYER

from Revelations of Divine Love by Julian of Norwich

After this our Lord showed regarding prayer and in this showing two applications of our Lord's meaning: one is rightful prayer, the other is sure trust.

And yet frequently our trust is not complete., for we are certain that God hears us, because of our unworthiness, as it seems to us, and because we feel absolutely nothing. For we are frequently as barren and dry after our prayers as we were before.

And, thus, it is our feeling, our foolishness, that the cause of our weakness is telling lies. I have experienced this in myself.

And all this brought our Lord suddenly to my mind and He showed me these words and said,

"I am the ground of thy praying. First, it is my will that thou have something, and next I make thee to want it, and afterward I cause thee to pray for it. If thou prayest for it, how, then, could it be that thou would not get what thou asked for?"

And thus, in this first proposition, our good Lord shows us a powerful encouragement, as can be seen in the above words.

Our prayer is there before God with his holy saints, constantly acceptable, always assisting our needs; and when we shall receive our bliss, our prayer shall be given to us as an award for joy with endless honor-filled favor from Him.

More glad and happy is our Lord about our prayer, and He watches for it and He wishes to enjoy it, because with his grace it makes us like Himself in character as we are in nature.

And this is His, blessed will, for He says this "Pray inwardly, even though it seems to give thee no pleasure, for it is beneficial enough that thou perceivest not.

Pray inwardly, though thou sensest nothing, though thou seest nothing, yea, though thou thinkest thou can achieve nothing, for in dryness and barrenness, in sickness and in feebleness, then is thy prayer completely pleasing to me, though it seems to give thee but little pleasure. And thus, all thy living is prayer in my eyes.

Because then, of the reward and endless favor that He wishes to give us for it, He desires simply that we pray continually in His sight. God accepts the good intention and the toil of His servants, no matter how we feel.

Friday

ATTAINING TO THE BLESSINGS GIVEN IN CHRIST

A reflection from a commentary on the Psalms by St. Hilary of Poitiers

Scripture says, “Blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways.” Notice that when it speaks of the fear of the Lord Scripture always explains that fear by itself alone can’t perfect our faith and bring us faith’s entire blessing. No, many things are presupposed as Proverbs tells us: *“If you cry out for wisdom and raise your voice for understanding, if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord”*. Here we see how many steps one must take to attain fear of the Lord.

We must begin by crying out for wisdom, then hand over to our intellect the duty of making decisions. Only wisdom shows us how to understand what the fear of the Lord is and how different it is from what is ordinarily meant by fear. That fear is an alarm that fills us when faced by a suffering from which our whole being recoils, or surges up from a guilty conscience, or arises because of the demands of one more powerful or stronger than we are, or is due to sickness or the danger of an attack by a wild beast or any similar calamity. This fear doesn’t need to be taught but springs from natural frailty.

By contrast, about “fear of the Lord” we read: *“Come, my children, listen to me and I will teach you the fear of the Lord”*. The fear of the Lord has to be learned.

Such fear springs not from our nature but obedience to God’s commandments. It is the fruit of uprightness of life and knowledge of the truth. This fear comes entirely from love and perfect love brings it to perfection. It is our love, after all, that makes us listen to God’s counsels, obey God’s laws, and trust in God’s promises. *“Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord and follow all God’s ways, loving God and keeping God’s commandments with your whole heart and soul, so that it may be well with you!”*

Our Lord is The Way to fear of the Lord and shows us how to turn the many goals life presents into ways of loving the Lord. Many teachers are available. Think of the Law, the prophets, the Gospels, the writings of the apostles, and the many good works we are commanded to perform. If we follow these teachers and never give up, we shall come to the fear of the Lord because we shall come to perfect love of our God. And in this we shall possess the blessing that Christ brings for all peoples.

Saturday

LIBERATION AND JOY

from **A Theology of Liberation** by Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez

At Lenten time, in particular, we reflect on conversion. Conversion to one's neighbors, and in them to the Lord, the gratuitousness that allows me to encounter others fully, is the source of Christian joy. This joy is born of the gift already received yet still awaited and is expressed in the present despite the difficulties and tensions of the struggle for the construction of a just society. Every prophetic proclamation of total liberation is accompanied by an invitation to participate in eschatological joy. This joy ought to fill our entire existence, making us attentive both to the gift of integral human liberation and history as well as to the detail of our lives and the lives of others.

This joy ought not to lessen our commitment to those who live in an unjust world, nor should it lead us to a facile, low-cost spirituality. On the contrary our joy is paschal, guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. It passes through conflict with the great ones of this world and enters through the cross in order to enter life. This is why we celebrate our joy in the present by recalling the Passover of the Lord on Holy Thursday. To recall Christ is to believe in him. And this celebration is a feast. It is a feast of the Christian community, those who explicitly confess Christ to be the Lord of history, the liberator of the poor and the oppressed. This community has been referred to as a small temple in contradistinction to a large temple of human history. Without community support neither the emergence nor the continued existence of a new spirituality is possible.

The Magnificat of Mary speaks well this spirituality of liberation. It is a song of thanksgiving for the gifts of the Lord and it expresses humbly the joy of being loved by him. But, at the same time it is one of the New Testament texts that contains great implications both as regards liberation and the political sphere. This thanksgiving and joy are closely linked to the action of God who "brought down the mighty from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; who filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1 :47-49). The future of history belongs to the poor and the exploited. True liberation will be the work of the oppressed themselves; in them the Lord saves history. The spirituality of liberation will have as its basis the spirituality of the little ones. That is why at Lent we can look forward to the liberating force of Easter joy.