

PALM SUNDAY & HOLY WEEK

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From Poverty of Spirit by Fr. Johannes Baptist Metz

Sunday

HOW DO WE RECEIVE JESUS DAILY?

A reflection taken from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

When Jesus entered Jerusalem like a triumphant conqueror and many were astonished at the majesty of his bearing. But when, only a short time after this, he entered his passion his appearance was ignoble and he was an object of derision. If today's procession is considered together with the Lord's passion, we see Jesus as sublime and glorious and simultaneously as lowly and suffering. The procession makes us think of the honor a king receives, whereas the passion reminds us of the punishments inflicted on criminals.

Apply this to your own ways of receiving Jesus. At one time we want to follow and be like him; but at another we flee from what we see and hope that it will never befall us. We do the first when we practice virtue and the second when we prefer to sin rather than to follow our Savior.

In the procession Jesus is surrounded by glory and honor, but in his passion, we see neither dignity nor beauty. In the first Jesus is everyone's joy, the people's glory, but in the second he is treated as the butt of taunts and seen as a laughing stock. In our procession we meet Jesus with palm branches but in his passion we as sinners join in slapping him in the face and hitting him in the head with a stick. In the one we extol him with praises but in the other we heap insults on his teaching and his way of behaving. In the first people competed to lay their cloths in his path but then people stripped him for whipping and crucifixion. At one time we welcomed him as our just king and savior and then we threw him out of our lives and homes though a criminal and an imposter.

What makes it so difficult to follow our genuine leader? Perhaps it is a love for prosperity and a fear of hard or bad times. Can't we keep our eyes upon him as we see him in the procession and so honor him and seek to imitate and be close to him? Do we have to flee from the sight of his ignominy and suffering for fear we might share in it? He was unshakably steadfast in all changes and trials and that is what we need to pray to be.

Lord Jesus, you are the joy and salvation of the entire world. Whether we see you sitting on an ass, as the sign that you come in peace and bring good times, or see you hanging on the cross for our sins because we have connived at injustice and oppression in its many forms, let us now seek to be with you and at least begin to imitate you. Help us to pray, and long for, your reign on earth as on high and help us be changed so that we always praise you and seek to belong to you whatever that may cost. To you be glory and praise forever!

Monday

LOVING WHAT CHRIST LOVES

A reflection by Fr. Alonzo de Orozco

We should rejoice that we can see how deceitful the world's honor and praise are when we participate both in this commemoration of our Lord's entry into Jerusalem and his passion. Six days after honoring Jesus with all their might some of the same people treated him as a criminal. What a difference between the cry "Blessed is the one who comes" and "Away with him! Crucify him!" What a difference between crying hail to Jesus as "King of Israel" and shouting out "We have no king but Caesar! Give us Barabbas!" What a difference between the green olive branches and the wood of the cross! Even today, first people place flowers on Christ's head and then crown him with the thorns of sin!

On Palm Sunday we too are ready to place our garments before him, so how can it be that so soon afterwards we are ready to strip him and scourge him? This is what we do this to his Body, the Church, in our treatment of his poor ones. Such is the strangeness of this world and the shortness of our dedication. Joy ends in grief, as the Book of Proverbs says, and laughter is counted as a mistake. No wonder our Lord wept over Jerusalem. "When he saw the city, he wept over it"; so we are told.

Jesus knew well the inconstancy of those who honored him with all sorts of garments and festive branches and songs. He knew well how many were being dragged down by poverty, or by world honors. Think of the cases of Antiochus and Herod and even Saul. A prophet said, "a thousand may fall at your side; that refers to those who fall away due to tribulation. "And ten thousand may fall at your right hand"; this is the case with those who are ruined by unlimited seeking of honor or prosperity that leads them to fall into sin.

What about you and me? We are the children of Zion and we dwell, as it were, in a watch tower close to the ark of faith. But do we find our joy in Christ, our King, or in worldly things that vanish like smoke even as we grasp at them? Isaiah cries to us: "Behold, our King, and his rewards are with him!" Our king comes for our sake and not for his own. He longs to enrich us with spiritual treasures. He comes in gentleness. Do we want him to roar like a lion and slay sinners with the sword and fire or cause the earth to open and swallow them up? But aren't we sinners and would this befall us?

The Lord Jesus came in humble and peaceful guise. He loves poverty and doesn't require any tribute. His goal is to be our Savior and not to rule like the mighty ones of our earth. So, let's immediately get up and honor him as he deserves. Let's take the garments and the signs of honor and use them to help the poor. He is saving us from the tyranny of Satan and his minions. He grants us freedom and grace, even now. He will bestow heavenly glory. Let us begin to praise him by our lives of love and grace and by deeds that save and lift up the lowly and fallen.

Tuesday

CONFORM YOUR LIFE TO CHRIST'S

A reflection from Being Christian by Pope Benedict XVI

The promise of the Passover Feast is fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus. One goes out, as in an exodus, leaving behind possessions and the life one has been accustomed to lead. This began with Abraham and is the foundational law of all Sacred History. We move from a purely selfish existence to one of following Christ. He himself explains this as the “law of the grain of wheat”. “I tell you most solemnly, unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies it can yield a rich harvest!”

Christ, by his death and resurrection, fulfilled this law. In the Eucharist, the Bread of God, he truly becomes the hundred-fold fruit and the life of all of us—now and forever. In this mystery of the Eucharist, in which truly and fully Christ who lives for us, he asks us day after day to fulfill that law with him. It is the definitive expression of the essence of true love.

The essential meaning of love can only be realized by abandoning our narrow and selfish aims and coming out of ourselves to live for others. The fundamental movement that is Christian faith can't be grasped by thinking of individual faith. Think rather of the vital position that we all occupy in relation to the whole Body of Christ. It is true that we aren't Christians for ourselves. We are Christians because God wants and needs our service in the great project that is salvation history. If we remember this we will not fall into the error of thinking that the individual is nothing more than a small cog in a great machine. It is truth that God doesn't love merely the individual but loves everyone as joined together in mutual help and harmony. Yet it is true that God knows and loves each one of us. Jesus is a concrete individual, born of an individual mother and living a particular life, with its own destiny, and died his own death.

The scandal and the greatness of the Christian message is that the destiny of all history depends on an individual, Jesus of Nazareth. Seeing him as he is, it becomes clear that we are called to live for others and with their help, even while God knows and loves each particular person with an unchanging love. Both these facts should profoundly impress us. On the one hand, we should see our Christianity as a way of living for the sake of others. But, on the other hand, we should live in the tremendous security and joy springing from the fact that God loves “me”, this person here and now.

God loves everyone who has a human face, however disfigured and unrecognizable it may be. When we say, “God loves me!” we should also feel the danger of making ourselves unworthy of that love by refusing our responsibilities toward one another. So, we should accept that love and that grace in all its fullness and purity by living for others.

Wednesday

CHRIST CALLS US TO BE A BREAD OF LIFE FOR OTHERS

A reflection from The Names of Christ by Fr. Luis de Leon

Jesus is the Bread of Life. This bread has been made out of two ingredients, holiness, which makes us strong, and hard work, which purges our vices. This bread has been kneaded with poverty, with humility, suffering, anguish, insults, blows, thorns, the cross, and death. Each of these makes this Bread medicine to heal us of vice. And, besides these, there are grace, heavenly wisdom, holy justice, moral values and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Through all these there is cooked a medicine that is supernaturally powerful, at least when eaten with faith.

Think how our vices are destroyed and replaced by virtues so that our life is steadily enhanced and made more Christ-like. The thorns we face purge us of pride. The beatings cleanse us of excessive softness and love of pleasure. The cross destroys selfishness. Christ's death puts an end to vice through all these experiences and then it begins to build virtue. When we eat in this Bread God's justice and love for justice and Christ's own justice grow spiritually within us. Holiness and grace act upon even our bodies. A portion of Heaven, in effect, is born within us as we become able to act like children of God by eating and then living the very being of God become human. We become like him, and so we end up dead to sin and living for justice and true life, the life of the saved. Jesus grows within us because he comes to us in his Living Bread.

The name 'Jesus' means every sort of salvation. He is substantial salvation. His words and example increase our health as we take them in. This is especially true of his works as we copy them. What he did, what he thought, what he suffered, and even his afterlife and everything connected with him—these give us health and make us salvation for ourselves and others. We are called to share ourselves as a bread of life produced by the eucharistic Bread of Life working within us. Jesus heals us by his life experience: He gives health and salvation through his experience of death. His grief and pain teach us to let our become healing for others'. His blisters are like a spiritual ointment for all. His blood outpoured makes our love for living-rightly stronger, his example wakes us up to purity and so to health and survival. He is like the ark described in the Book of Revelation. He is like the trees planted on both sides of the river of life flowing from God's House. It comes from the Throne of God and of the Lamb.

Jesus bears fruit and green leaves for the healing of the nations. He is a source of life for me, for you, for us, for the nations, and for the entire world. The Tree of Life described by St. John bears twelve kinds of fruit and yields one every month. The parallel with Jesus is clear. Jesus doesn't heal just one illness or help us during just part of the year but protects us continually from all spiritual illness. He heals pride by making the stick that struck him a scepter. He heals ambition by making a purple cloak an insult. He heals love of pleasures by making painful thorns a crown. He heals greed by making nakedness a sign of self-gift. His endurance calls forth ours. This is how you become a bread of life.

Thursday

WASHING AND EATING LIKE THE LORD

A reflection taken from a sermon by Fr. Alonso de Orozco

How faithful a friend we have in Jesus Christ! He is never unmindful of those whom he has chosen to be his own. Because he loves them so, and because he loves them to the very end, as he prepared to die he gave the uttermost proof of his love. Falling down before his disciples he washed their feet so as to give them, and to all who would choose to follow him, a supreme example of loving humility. That is why he told them, "I have given you this example so that you too may deal with others as I have dealt with you!"

Once we have seen and understood this, we have no good reason to take pride in what we do or are. We are poor creatures of the earth, dust and ashes. But God put aside his eternal majesty and so emptied himself as to perform the duty of a slave for us. But He gave a yet greater sign of his love: He instituted the wonderful sacrament of his Body and Blood and told us to repeat it as a memorial of his sacred death. "Take this! This is my body, which will be delivered up for you. Do it in memory of me!"

These are burning words. Think what charity breathes on us through them! We are to do this in memory of Jesus' entire life—his shining purity, his laborious passion and all they required of him. God has engraved each of us on his human hands in Christ. More than that, the lance that pierced his side engraved us upon his heart. He longs ever to carry us in his inmost being, as a mother carries her child in her womb. Respond to me, he calls. Go celebrate this memorial of me and receive my sacred body and blood.

What are we asked to do? We are to make haste to wash our own feet with tears of repentance and cleanse away all the stains from our hearts. This is what repentance does. In this way we will become worthy to approach the Table of the King of Kings, Jesus Christ, Our Lord. A living bread has come down from heaven to us. May we be capable of drawing from this bread the life of heaven. As we eat it he makes us able to draw from it the richest of benefits. This bread has come down from heaven and by it Jesus makes us fit to draw from it the richest of benefits. Jesus Christ has promised that whoever eats this bread and drinks this blood will live for ever. God grant that we may open ourselves to this life by the Heavenly Fathers' mercy. Then we will be able to wash one another's feet just as Jesus has washed ours and give heavenly nourishment to others from that which has been given to us.

Friday

HOW SACRIFICE HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED

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

When our Lord was handed over to the will of his cruel enemies, they ordered his royal dignity to be mocked and forced him to carry the instrument of his torture and death. It was done to fulfill a prophecy of Isaiah. To the wicked the sight of the Lord carrying his cross was a motive for deriding him. But to the faithful that sight reveals a great mystery. The cross was to be made the instrument of his power and the tool by which he overthrew all the power of his enemies. It became a supreme trophy of his victory!

On the shoulders of his unconquerable patience, he carried the sign of salvation for everyone. It became something all nations of the earth would worship. It would be used to strengthen all Christ's disciples in their work for God's Kingdom. He said: "Anyone who doesn't take up a cross and follow me isn't worthy of me!"

The Jerusalem temple was built to be a place of sacrifice. But that meant in practice that people went there to offer something of their own—ideally something that cost them dear—in symbol of offering themselves to God. Now symbols have been replaced by realities. Christ shows the whole world the new and authentic sacrifice that reconciles all peoples—if they will accept it—to God and God's rule over our world.

O marvelous power of the cross, the glory of the Lord's passion. No tongue can fittingly or fully describe this. Here is the judgment seat of the Lord. All now come before him and all have seen how they have or have not offered themselves really with Christ to God. Christ's example of love is the sovereign judgment passed on the entire non-loving world. Here the sovereignty of the Crucified is revealed.

You drew all things to yourself, Lord, when you stretched out your hands all the day long to a people that denied and opposed you. And now, at last, the whole world is brought to proclaim your majesty. You have drawn all things to yourself, to your love, and shown them the new world created according to God and God's will. The veil of the Temple was torn in two and the Holy of Holies given to a worthy priest who knew how to offer sacrifice in spirit and in truth.

You drew all things to yourself so that the whole human race could worship you in spirit and in truth, a worship celebrated everywhere in sacramental form, a worship that fulfills and proclaims what you enacted by offering your own body and blood. No other victim is needed. We are to offer our hearts and our lives as Christ bids us. As there is now a single sacrifice so now there is a single Kingdom formed of all the peoples of the earth. Now we know clearly and fully all that we need to do to please our God. Now we see the path into his eternal peace and joy. It is eternal love with all our hearts, and minds and strength.

Saturday

ACCEPTING HUMAN WEAKNESS WITH JESUS

A reflection from Poverty of Spirit by Fr. Johannes Baptist Metz

Have we really understood the impoverishment that Christ endured? All was taken from him during the passion, even including the love that drove him to the cross. No longer did he savor his own love of God, no longer did he feel any spark of enthusiasm. His heart gave out, and a feeling of utter helplessness came over him. Truly he emptied himself. God's merciful hand no longer sustained him. God's countenance was hidden during the passion.

Christ gaped into the darkness of nothingness and abandonment where God seem to be no longer present. The Son of Man reached his destiny, stretched taut between a despising earth that had rejected him and a faceless heaven thundering God's "No!" to sinful humankind. Jesus paid the price of human futility; he became utterly poor. In this total renunciation Jesus perfected and proclaimed in action what had taken place in the depths of his being. He professed and accepted our humanity; he took on and endured our lot; he stepped down from his divinity. He came to us where we really are—with our broken dreams and lost hopes, with the meaning of existence slipping through our fingers. He came and stood with us. He came struggling with his whole heart to help us say "Yes!" to our innate human poverty.

God's fidelity to us is what gives us the courage to be true to ourselves! The legacy of God's total commitment to humankind, the proof of God's fidelity to our poverty, is the cross. The cross is the sacrament of poverty of spirit, and so the sacrament of authentic humanness in a sinful world. It is a sign that one human remained true to his humanity, that one person accepted his humanity in full and did so in obedience to God.

Hanging in utter weakness on the cross, Christ revealed the divine meaning of human existence. It says something for everyone. We hear that some Jews and some pagans find the cross scandalous and foolish. Today too, for enlightened humanitarians the cross often provokes only irony or weary skepticism. Such advocates of another kind of "humanity" are indifferent to the cross, too much so even to find it a scandal. What, then, is the cross you to and me?

The Cross reveals that no one is exempted from the poverty lived there. That we don't like this was true even for Jesus' disciples: "You will all fall away because of me this night." Judas' betrayal may have been the result of frenzied impatience with Jesus' poverty, or a futile attempt to pressure Jesus into using his divine resources instead of accepting human impotence. In any case, it is not an isolated thing. Poverty of spirit is always being betrayed by disciples in the Church when they criticize and subvert it to avoid living it. Perhaps that is why Jesus gave us the parable of the grain of wheat. "Unless a grain of wheat (like you) falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit." Will you accept the call to die so you can live such poverty?