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Sunday

PREPARING A PLACE FOR THE LORD

A reflection from On the Song of Songs by St. Bernard

“My Father and I will come, and in the holy place will make our home”. This means that the Son of God will seek a holy place in your heart. One of the psalms speaks about God in just this way. Listen, *“You make your dwelling in the holy place, you who are Israel’s praise”*. God dwells in the “heavens”; but we know that these heavens are the hearts of his holy ones. Listen to St. Paul, who says this quite clearly: *“Christ lives in our hearts through faith”*.

We should not be surprised that the Lord Jesus makes a home in such heavens, and does it with joy, for unlike the heavens above he didn’t bring these into being by a simple word of command but descended into the arena that is our world and laid down his life to redeem us and our hearts. Listen to what he said after the battle was over: *“This is my resting place for ever and ever; here I have chosen to dwell”*. Blessed indeed is the person to whom the Lord says, *“Come, my chosen one! I will set up my throne in you!”*

Why, then, are we sorrowful at times? Why are we troubled inwardly? Is it a matter of trying to find a fitting place for the Lord within ourselves? After all, which of us can provide Jesus with a really fitting place—He who is the Lord of Glory? Where is the place that is worthy of his majesty? I would count myself fortunate to be found worthy of worshipping at his footstool and being able to cling to his feet! Maybe I can at least cling to the feet of a saintly person who the Lord has chosen to be his dwelling place!

Yet, the fact is that the Lord only needs to anoint me inwardly with the oil we call his mercy to enable me to cry out: *“I have run the way of your command-ments because you have enlarged my heart”*! I may not be about to usher the Lord into a large place in my heart, one wonderfully furnished, and then invite him to refresh himself there together with his disciples. I only hope that I will be able to offer him a place to lay his head!

One has to grow and be enlarged inwardly to become capable of containing God within oneself. The dimensions of a soul, however, are proportioned to its love. This is what St. Paul reminds us of when he calls upon us to *“widen our hearts in love”*. The soul is, of course, spiritual and can’t be measured in a physical sense. But grace makes possible what nature cannot. We expand spiritually as we make progress toward the perfection of our humanity called *“the full stature of Christ”*, as St. Paul notes. That is why we can grow into a temple sacred to the Lord.

Love is the measure of our inward self, of our soul. Souls who love much are large and those that love little are small. The soul that has no love at all is nothing! St. Paul says it: *“Without love I am nothing!”* By Christ’s grace we attain even to the stature, to the wideness and fullness, of the love that sets apart Jesus Christ. Let Christ grace work this wonder in your heart! Then you will have truly prepared a place for the Lord to dwell.

Monday

ST. DAMIEN OF MOLOKAI **from Catholic Online**

The man who would become St. Damien of Molokai, was born in rural Belgium on January 3, 1840. He was the youngest of seven children. Growing up on the farm he was being prepared to take over for the family, but he did not want to take on the responsibility. Instead, he wanted to follow his older brother and two sisters who took religious vows.

He was baptized Josef and attended school until the age of 13 when his help was needed on the family-run farm fulltime. He aided his family until he was old enough to enter the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. He took the name Damien, after a sixth century martyr.

In 1864, Damien's brother, who was a member of the same order, was ordered to Hawaii. But his brother became ill, so Damien offered to go in his place.

The brothers worried that Damien was too uneducated to become a priest, although he was considered to be intelligent. Damien demonstrated his ability by quickly learning Latin from his brother. He was devoted in prayer, and prayed each day before an icon of St. Francis Xavier. His prayer was that he could become a missionary. Eventually, his religious brothers agreed and had him ordained. The ordination took place on the island of Hawaii. For 9 years he worked on the island as a priest, leading an undistinguished life.

In 1866, Hawaii established a leper colony on Kalaupapa Peninsula. It was still mistakenly believed that leprosy was highly contagious.

Upon arrival he found the colony was poorly maintained. Anarchy reigned among the people living there. Many people required treatment but had nobody to care for them. Others were drinking and became chronic alcoholics. There was no law or order.

Damien understood that leadership was needed, so he provided it. He asked people to come together to build houses and schools and eventually the parish church, St. Philomena. The church still stands today.

The sick were cared for and the dead buried. Damien personally provided much of the care the people needed. The leper colony became his permanent home. Damien grew to love the people.

Only 5% of people can catch leprosy from others. Damien was one of them. He realized he had the disease when he placed his foot into boiling water and felt no pain. He continued his work, despite his illness, which slowly took over his body. He died on April 15, 1889. He was beatified by St. John Paul 2 in Brussels, Belgium in 1995 and canonized by Pope Benedict 16 in 2009.

Tuesday

THE HOLY ABBOTS OF CLUNY

from an audience by Pope Emeritus Benedict

The Order of Cluny at the beginning of the 12th century had almost 1200 monasteries, a truly impressive figure. At the time of the growth of Cluny, Western monasticism was experiencing a severe decline especially because of the dependence of abbeys on the local nobles who controlled all that belonged to the territories under their jurisdiction. In this context, Cluny was at the heart and soul of a profound renewal of monastic life that led it back to its original inspiration.

At Cluny the Rule of St Benedict was restored with several adaptations which had already been introduced by other reformers. The main objective was to guaranteed the central role that the Liturgy must have in Christian life. The Cluniac monks devoted themselves with love and great care to the celebration of the Liturgical Hours, to the singing of the Psalms, to processions as devout as they were solemn, and above all to the celebration of the Holy Mass. They promoted sacred music, they wanted art and architecture to contribute to the beauty and solemnity of the rites; they enriched the liturgical calendar with special celebrations and they intensified the devotion to the Virgin Mary. For the monks of Cluny great attention was given to the Liturgy because they were convinced it was participation in the Liturgy of Heaven. And the monks felt responsible for interceding at the altar of God for the living and the dead, given that large numbers of the faithful were insistently asking them to be remembered in prayer. To preserve and foster this atmosphere of prayer, the Cluniac Rule emphasized the importance of silence, to which discipline the monks readily submitted, convinced that the purity of the virtues to which they aspired demanded deep and constant recollection. Numerous princes and Popes asked the Abbots of Cluny to extend their reform so that in a short time a dense network of monasteries developed that were linked to Cluny. Thus, a spiritual Europe gradually took shape in various regions of France and in Italy, Spain, Germany and Hungary.

Also, of significance were the benefits that monasteries inspired by the Cluniac Reform contributed to society. At a time when church institutions alone provided for the poor, charity was practiced with dedication. In all houses the Almoner was bound to offer hospitality to needy wayfarers and pilgrims, travelling priests and religious and especially the poor, who frequently came asking for food and a roof over their heads for a few days.

The Abbots of Cluny were elected without interference from the civil authorities and thus truly worthy people succeeded one another at the helm in Cluny. I think of Abbot Odo, and other great figures such as Eymard, Majolus, Odilo and especially Hugh the Great, who served for long periods, thereby assuring stability and the spread of the reform. As well as Odo, Majolus, Odilo and Hugh are venerated as saints.

Wednesday

THE GOD-GIVEN UNITY THAT COMES OF LOVE

From a homily on the First Letter of John by St. Augustine

Do you keep God's commandments? This is the test by which we can be sure that we know God, as St. John says. That is, the answer to the above question is, "*in the one who keeps God's word, divine love has reached perfection*". We can infer from this that God's actual commandment is to love. You have only to look in the Gospels to find this confirmed. "*I give you a new commandment, to love one another*". Jesus says that Scripture adds: "*We can know we are abiding in God if we have been made perfect in him*"—i.e., perfect in love.

The perfection of love is to love even enemies, seeking to transform them into brothers and sisters. Our love mustn't be merely natural affection. We must love enemies and with the kind of love that wants to welcome them to our community. This was the love shown by the Lord as he hung on the cross.

Jesus prayed, "*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing*". By his prayer filled with compassion and by his mighty power, Christ was saving them from everlasting death. Many among them believed and received forgiveness for their part in shedding their Messiah's blood.

When the Lord told us, "*Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect*", he was calling us to the perfection which consist in loving even enemies. We also love one another. "*One who loves a brother or sister dwells in light and gives no reason for anyone to stumble*". People who stumble or cause others to stumble are those who are scandalized by Christ and by the Church. If you hold fast to charity you will find no stumbling block in either and you won't abandon them! If one doesn't want to be in Christ's Church one doesn't want to be part of his Body.

Perhaps someone is feeling hurt. Perhaps that person feels like someone being cauterized. Such a one cries out, "I can't bear it! I won't put up with it!" Then that person walks out.

Those who are scandalized and can't put up with certain things in the Church, and so no longer profess themselves Christians. They truly stumble. Remember how scandalized those were who couldn't bear Christ's words about eating the flesh of the Son of Man. About seventy disciples found this an intolerable teaching. They withdrew from Jesus' company. Were they doing Jesus a favor?

Remember what Peter said in behalf of all the twelve. "*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life!*" To leave Christ is the worst imaginable thing.

How are we to overcome occasions of stumbling? We are to show love. There is no occasion for stumbling in a person who loves. Such a person endures all things for the sake of unity. Our love for one another consists in our being united in charity.

How can we overcome stumbling except by bearing with one another patiently? St. Paul speaks to us in the Letter to the Galatians: "*Bear one another's burdens and you will be fulfilling the law of Christ*". Again, he says, "*spare no effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*". This is what we are called to do when we are called to Christ. We must never give up.

Thursday

GOD IN THE FLESH

from **Between** by **Dorothee Soelle**

A Christian understanding of the Incarnation contradicts any purely idealistic interpretation of it. For incarnation means that God has entered into sensuous and social reality. God can't be experienced apart from corporeality and society.

The Judeo-Christian tradition takes a path, a path that leads through history. It experiences meaning and happiness in history, and historical events are the ones it celebrates, interprets, and repeats. The events by which it lives can be dated: the Exodus of the Jewish people from Egyptian slavery, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. By "historical experiences" I mean here experiences having to do with the body and society. They have a physical, public relevance. Despite widespread tendencies to spiritualization, this basic materialist thrust of Christianity can be neither denied or eliminated. A certain fidelity to the earth and to the real experiences of the inhabitants causes the development of certain hopes that appeal to the biblical tradition.

Jesus stripped himself of the divine attributes, he willed not to be omniscient, or omnipotent, he plunged totally into the conditions set by the world; he experienced hunger and thirst, cold and pain, loneliness and sadness, love and friendship.

The cross is the climactic and clearest symbol of this unique occurrence in the history of religion. It was an atrocious instrument of torture that stripped death of any dignity and reduced sacrifice to torment. We understand the cross only if we have a material understanding of what it meant in physical and social terms.

Every Good Friday in many of our churches we sing "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Actually, this is a spiritual, the religious song of black slaves. Those who originally sang it had to reckon with the real possibility of being lynched, of hanging on a real tree themselves. "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" they sang, in order to achieve self-identity and see their own lives mirrored in the same story. "Were you there when the sun refused to shine?" . Christianity has always been a religion of slaves. We are called to be faithful to the earth, and to history, because God is to be found in the very flesh of each of us, living, loving and dying. That is the mystery of the Incarnation.

Friday

WHAT MATTHIAS AS APOSTLE TEACHES US

A reflection developed from a text by Fr. Romano Guardini

What makes one an apostle? It isn't a matter of having special talents, even special spiritual capacities! It isn't a matter of being what is described as "a great religious personality". Personal giftedness, spiritual creativity, dynamic faith and all such things are not the decisive marks of an apostle. People often think of St. Paul or St. John as exceptional individuals in various senses, but that didn't make them apostles. If it were what would we make of the fact that Judas was an apostle?

If you consider all these facts in the light of what we know about Matthias it becomes clear that being an apostle is simply a matter of being called. What counts is that Jesus Christ has called and, in some way, placed the seal that is his choice upon a person. "*You have not chosen me but I have chosen you, and I have appointed you to go and bear fruit*". An apostle is one who is sent by God!

What is an apostle's task? It is to bear witness to Christ. As St. Paul says, it won't be the apostle who speaks through deeds and words but Christ in the apostle. One has to be as much like Christ as possible—otherwise one becomes like Judas. One becomes like Christ by seeking only what Christ seeks. St. Paul makes a clear distinction between Christ's message and his own advice. The Lord's words constrain us to follow them, but an apostle's advice or even commands are only his own and don't *require* following them as we do Christ's.

To be nothing in oneself but everything in Christ, to be obliged to contain such tremendous contents in so small a vessel, to be a constant herald of a life that is not one's own is difficult. Something of the trials such a life involves dawns on us when we read about an apostle's work in the Acts of the Apostles.

Listen to Paul and apply the words to Matthias and to yourself. "*I think God has sent forth us apostles as though doomed to death and as a spectacle to the world, to angels and to humans. We are fools for Christ, we are weak, ...we are without honor, to this very hour we hunger and thirst and are naked and knocked about and have no fixed place to live. We work hard and with our own hands. If bad mouthed we bless those who do it, if we are persecuted, we put up with it. When put down we ask for help gently. Indeed, we are the refuse of the world and its throw-aways, right up to the present.*"

Would you want to be an apostle? You would need to love God and Christ far above self to want, let alone fulfill, the requirements of such a call. But, then, you are not asked. You are appointed an apostle. You are chosen even though you did not choose on your own.

The only appropriate response to God's calls is to trust in God and God's grace. That alone can enable one to show the living Christ in one's own living. That is how Christ draws people to himself through you. That is what we are reminded of when we gather to celebrate the choice of Matthias as an apostle. He teaches us what Christ has called each of us to do in a way that matches the life God gives us.

Saturday

THE MONK'S WAY TO GOD

A reflection from The Instructions of St. Pachomius

My child, turn to God and love him. Flee the enemy and despise him. May the graces of God come your way and may you inherit the blessings of Judah, son of Jacob that your brethren may praise you. Keep away from pride, for it is the beginning of every evil. The beginning of pride is keeping your distance from God and hardening your heart follows this. If the Lord loves you and gives you glory persevere in humility. Blessed is the one who is found watching for that one will enter the kingdom with gladness. The friends of the bridegroom will love him because they have found him keeping watch over his vineyard.

My child, be merciful in all things. Approach God as one who sows and into whose barn God's goods will be gathered. Don't pray for show but give up your whims and do what you do simply for God. If a passion arouses you, whether it is love of money or jealousy or hatred or any other passion, watch out. Fight against these passions. May Jesus fight for you. Do not be fainthearted. Faintheartedness fills you with pretexts for laziness, mistrust and negligence until you are destroyed.

If you are in the desert, do battle by prayers, fasting, and mortification. If you are with people, be wise as a serpent and simple as a dove; if someone curses you put up with it cheerfully, hoping that God will bring about what is best for you. Do not yourself curse the image of God in others. If, on the other hand, someone praises you don't take delight in it but put your hope in the glory of Heaven.

My child, shun the satisfactions of this age so as to be happy in the age to come. Don't be negligent, letting the days pass until you arrive at the door to a dark place and in danger of death. Be sad only when you sin. Scorn vainglory. Vanity is the devil's own weapon. That was how Eve was fooled. No one wrote to her to warn her of this battle before she was tempted but that is why the Word became flesh of the Virgin. You have been warned by the saints who have gone before you. Become guileless like a sheep whose wool is sheared without it saying a thing. Don't go from one place to another thinking you will find God better there than where you are. God has said, "*I fill the earth and the heavens*". Be aware, then, that God is within you. Wherever you are you dwell in God's law and commandments. Look, a thief was on the cross and entered paradise, but Judas was among the apostles and betrayed the Lord. In every place, then, seek out God and at every moment seek God's strength.

My child, as long as you are negligent there will be no progress for you. You stand where God's battle is being fought. Don't fall asleep because the devil lays ambushes. He whispers not to be concerned but if you listen you become weak and without strength. Watch out, then, and keep your promises in mind and don't let the devil cause you to neglect the counsels of the Spirit. You might forget the way to the City of God. Watch yourself, put up cheerfully with one who insults you, be merciful to all and don't fear the sufferings of the flesh. Flee to God, for it is God who created you and suffered for you. He will grant your requests if you carry your cross and follow your Lord.