

THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST THE TWELFTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

Sun. BEARING THE SWEET YOKE OF CHRIST
June 20 A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

Mon. The Memorial of St. Aloysius Gonzaga
21 **CELEBRATING CHRISTIAN MATURITY**
A reflection by St. Pope John XXIII

Tues. Tuesday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time
22 **LIVING TRADITION**
from Letter From The Heart by Fr John Main OSB

Wed. Wednesday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time
23 **OUR CALL TO SEIZE THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN**
A reflection derived from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Thurs. SOLEMNITY OF THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST
24 **OUR CALL TO SHINE WITH CHRIST'S LIGHT**
A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Bernard

Fri. Friday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time
25 **CAN FEASTS OF THE SAINTS HELP US KEEP VIGIL?**
A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Bernard

Sat. A Memorial of Our Lady
26 **WHAT OUR MOTHER TEACHES & SHARES WITH US**
A reflection derived from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Sunday

BEARING THE SWEET YOKE OF CHRIST

A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

“In my Father’s house there are many mansions”, says Our Lord. There are differences in life styles and degrees of perfection and so many mansions in heaven. One is for those married people whose way of life fits them for heaven. So too there is one for widows and widowers and for all other states of life in the Church. All are saved by living appropriately to their state in life and holding to the law Christ has given them. This is true for monks as well. Their proper way of life is shown in the primitive church that began in Jerusalem. Some are solitaries, and St. John the Baptist shows how they should live.

What of cenobites? The total perfection of a monk is found in giving up one’s own will. But monks, as all who would follow Christ, have to pass through various stages of life. In infancy one must combat ignorance. In adolescence one must war against bad desires. In old age one must battle lassitude. The danger in spiritual infancy is living without caution or foresight. The danger in spiritual adolescence is failing to love virtue and hate vice. The danger in spiritual old age is lack of constancy in seeking knowledge and virtue.

In Scripture we hear that *“it is good for a person to carry the yoke from youth”*. A yoke is mentioned in many places in Scripture. There are yokes of iniquity, yokes of weakness, yokes of misfortune, yokes of fear, and yokes of charity.

The first is a yoke of the devil that is lifted from the shoulders of all who repent and turn to Christ. The yoke of weakness is the burden of being unable begin to amend one’s life because one is unwilling to surrender all one’s self to Christ’s teachings and so rely on his strength rather than one’s own. This is lifted by trust in God. The yoke of misfortune consists in the miseries of this life—labors, sorrows, poverty, death of family members and every sort of illness. We bear this yoke because of the corruption of our nature and unrelenting habits. That is, we find ourselves driven to seek pleasures or similar things whether we want to or not. The yoke of bad habits is particularly hard to bear, and it is one people place upon themselves through lack of wisdom and grace. Only by whole-heartedly turning to Jesus can this yoke be lifted.

The yoke of fear comes from inability to cast off the other bad yokes. One has to place oneself under authority and bear the yoke of discipline and the law of Christ. This is what we do by placing ourselves under the Rule of St. Benedict. Do you find it laborious and experience the fact that *“narrow is the way that leads to life”*? Blessed John the Baptist bore such a yoke from infancy, even from the womb. But the Holy Spirit came to him and gave him the yoke of charity. It is sweet. Even in prison he found it sweet to be silent and sit alone. Sitting indicates stability, silence inner peace, and from this one is raised to the heights of contemplation. These are states we all seek.

Whatever transitions we make in the course of our lives are presided over by love. To raise your mind and heart to God is to rise above oneself. John the Baptist knew and understood all this. He held all earthly things in contempt and raised his entire heart above self to Jesus Christ. May our Lord lead us to the blessedness of bearing his yoke of charity.

Monday

CELEBRATING CHRISTIAN MATURITY

A reflection by St. Pope John XXIII

It is supernatural life, nourished with the wonderful means to holiness at our disposal, that gives one clear ideas, strong convictions and generous energies. Because it is a supernatural life it can mature us even before we attain ordinary human maturity. That is one of the gifts we celebrate as we remember St. Aloysius Gonzaga. It isn't necessary to describe the delicacy of feeling, the gracious manner, the ripeness of judgment, or the clarity and vigor of mind that came to him from God. And all this came to its harvest not in the ways expected but through his providing the humblest of services to the neediest of people.

This sort of life and maturity are the active fulfillments of the petitions of the Our Father. You know how important meditation on the prayer of Jesus is. The Holy Name of God was the light of Jesus' life; it was the font of his love for all of us. God's Kingdom, extended constantly and enlarged to encompass more and more peoples, is an outpouring of love and joyful enthusiasm for anyone who genuinely knows Jesus.

A superficial observer of the modern world might think that everywhere the absurd and the crazy and the anti-Christian are in the ascendant. But believers have responded with a greater quest for unity with Christ and with one another and have come to grasp the centrality of charity for their living. This strengthens the communion of faith and is a marvelous fruit of supernatural graces.

A Christian is above all a person of faith, prayer, grace and the conviction that fidelity to one's baptismal commitments is the truest foundation for building a better world. Christians are perhaps the only people who know that such a world is really attainable. What will bring it about? The flowering of the sorts of virtues we see in Aloysius Gonzaga.

His name is resplendent in the light which makes every Christian a dedicated worker in the good cause of the Gospel and the Body of Christ. God's Kingdom is the purpose of every apostolic and humanizing endeavor. We have all received from Our Lord a mandate to act and we cannot refuse it. Guard your hearts from the sort of anxious care that drives those who have no faith to despair. Our task is the search for "the one things that is needful".

So let us remember especially the everyday problems of ordinary people, problems whose solutions have been sought in vain by so many nations and their leaders. It is the Lord who enlightens minds and inspires hearts and strengthens wills so that we can accept and carry out our responsibilities of love for God and one another. Let us seek to live in good will, in working to establish friendly relations among those who have been at enmity, and by giving an example of unconditional loyalty to the good of all who live in our world. It is our faith that will always prove to be the secret of success. It is through this faith that we become mature contributors to building up God's Kingdom of love.

Tuesday

LIVING TRADITION

from Letter From The Heart by Fr John Main OSB

The thousands of young Westerners who travel to the East go seeking a living experience of the mystery of God they could not find in another church in the West. Some, no doubt, do find genuine guides and teachers of prayer with whom they can, if they are serious themselves, learn to meditate. But many others do not have such fortune and are left confused and even more alienated than before. It is clear these young people do not reject God. Why have they then rejected the Christian religious structure of the West?

Perhaps the reason is that we in the West have become too religious rather than truly spiritual. What so many today are seeking is a humble yet authoritative witness to the absolute. Our call as monks is always a call to the experience of God in Christ. This experience has to be personal if it is to be real. Our contemporaries in the West will come to monasteries only when they are convinced that this is the primary reason for our existence- that we truly seek God as our very first responsibility.

It is a mysterious sign of our age that the spiritual intuition is accepted without question by so many thousands who seek to find a way outside conventional religion. They have leaped back in a moment of spiritual truth that centuries of organized religion has obscured for so many. Religion without spiritual experience becomes atrophied and futile.

What our encounter with India and the East is teaching us is something we never should have forgotten. The essential Christian experience is beyond the capacity of any cultural or intellectual form to express. It became clear when talking to Fr. Bede Griffiths that this experience has to be restored to the heart of the Church, if she is to face creatively the choices and challenges beyond her, the challenge of the renewal of her contemplative religious life, the challenge of finding unity in the Spirit with all Christian communities, the challenge of embracing the non-Christian religions, the challenge of finding the universal love of Christ present in the hearts of all people. To meet these challenges each one of us must be personally rooted in the experience of God. We have to learn to be still. We have to be silent. We have to learn to meditate. We have to stand silently in the cave of our hearts, the palace of the kingdom of God within us.

Wednesday

OUR CALL TO SEIZE THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

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

Since the days of John the Baptist, Scripture says, the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence and the violent seize it. How is it that the Kingdom of Heaven is open to being seized by people like us who can't merit it? God brought this about through the birth of John. That's why we celebrate it. John shows us the sort of violence by which the Kingdom is seized. It is called repentance.

Think of the Scriptural examples. Didn't the patriarch Jacob do violence in his wrestling with God? Doesn't he teach us we must persevere until true day breaks and until then exert all our strength? That is a good kind of violence and God yields to it and rewards those he vanquishes with the grace of a blessing. Scripture says, "*I have loved wisdom more than health and all beauty*". Can we all make such a sacrifice and receive the reward Jacob received? Don't all of us have as our purpose to win heaven by force? Don't we join ourselves in a community to better wrestle with the angel who guards the way to the Tree of Life? Don't we know that our toil will make it possible to succeed only if God gives us strength and grace?

We must show our perseverance will never give up. For instance, we wrestle with God when God resists our impatient prayers. O Mercy, what unrelenting kindness you show in resisting those you struggle to draw to yourself! You love those who love you and so we mustn't despair but persevere. Be happy that God has come to you so you can wrestle with Him. God loves to suffer violence from you. God forbid that we should forget how the strong God willed to become weak and even die for us! Pierced with so many wounds, how can he find the strength to resist those who ask what is pleasing to him?

God can't resist charity. Wasn't it charity that led him through every kind of weakness and even death on a cross? Love isn't merely as strong as death but stronger than death! So be armed with the power of love if you would force an entry into the Kingdom of Heaven! Be assured that you will easily conquer the King of Heaven himself. If He seems to oppose you, know that he seeks only to give a finer edge to your spirit and to exercise your strength and reveal your constancy. He would multiply your victories and so increase the number of your crowns. Gird yourself, you people of strength! Follow your leader, John.

It was in the days of John the Baptist that Heaven was opened to be seized by force. Like David John became a prince of holy robbers and a leader of devout bandits using a holy and praiseworthy violence. He leads an army of publicans and sinners into the Kingdom of Heaven. His battle cry is: Do penance, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! His standard is red with his own blood. He will commend you by his intercession as he draws you by his example. Among those born of women none is more pleasing to the King of Heaven—except Jesus Christ our Lord. We have every help we could need

Thursday

OUR CALL TO SHINE WITH THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Bernard

Today we celebrate the solemnity of John the Baptizer. Listen to what Scripture says about him. *“He was a burning and shining lamp.”* He was both burning and shining. A genuinely wise person’s inward burning shines out. Such a person is concerned to burn more intensely. That should be our concern too. One who shines is praised but we don’t want human praise; we want God.

It was inspiration rather than teaching that enabled John to burn as he did. He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb. The heavenly flame so possessed him that he perceived Christ’s coming even before he could perceive himself. A new fire from heaven penetrated the Virgin’s ear through Gabriel’s mouth and then entered into a little child through Mary’s voice; the Holy Spirit filled John from then on. He was made a lamp-stand for all those who dwelt in God’s house, and first of all for his own mother. Thus, she perceived that Mary brought the Messiah to her and to John in her womb. When Mary’s greeting entered her ear, it filled her and her child and they rejoiced. Then she was given the gift of recognizing who Mary truly is.

A threefold burning and shining is shown us. John was burning in himself. He burned with the vigor that was to express itself in his way of life. He burned in dedication to Christ. This is shown in the constancy of his calls to his neighbors to repent and in his example of repentance. It is shown by his pointing out Christ. He had been promised by an angelic annunciation, conceived by a miracle and sanctified in the womb.

John made little of all that is merely of this world and so lived Scripture tells us *“neither eating nor drinking and clothed in camel’s hair”*. Do we worry about what we will wear or eat? If so, why are we celebrating John’s birth? John draws us into the desert, but what are we to seek there? It was prophesied that many would rejoice at this birth because he teaches us to seek the Lord and not vanities. Our call is to labor as John did to come to God in whom we can live and rejoice forever. We are to work for food that doesn’t perish but makes us endure unto eternal life. We live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from God’s mouth, most especially The Word who is Christ. If so who can boast about doing penance or grumble over food. Let us examine our consciences. Let us correct ourselves. Let the fervor of a pure confession and of humility supply whatever we lack. God is faithful and God will forgive.

I cannot be a burning lamp unless I love the Lord my God with all my heart and all my mind and all my strength. Charity is kindled for our salvation. Why don’t you approach the Throne of Mercy with total confidence? Give thanks to John and journey toward Christ. As John had to decrease, so must we. It is so that Christ may always and everywhere increase. By God’s grace, may we always have the strength to burn and let Christ shine through us. The more intensely you burn the brighter the light of Christ will shine from you. You will be God’s lamp.

Friday

CAN FEASTS OF THE SAINTS HELP US KEEP VIGIL?

A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Bernard

We ought to carefully consider at least three things when we celebrate feasts for saints. First, they give us help; second, they give us example, and, third, they remind us of our own shame. They can help us because one who is powerful on earth is even more powerful in heaven. If we have compassion on sinners and the miserable here on earth, we will understand these things deeply and more truly in heaven and so pray the more for such people.

Saints give us their example because after turning to the Lord they refused to turn either to the right or to the left of what the Lord commanded them. A saint's way is that of the One who said: "*I am the way, the truth and the life*". A saint may be lowly in work done but speaks authoritatively about the way to God, known by personal experience. As the prophet said: "*The path of justice is straight; straight is the road of the just*".

What, then, of our shame? Reflect on the fact that human persons like us are capable of suffering with Christ. Fashioned out of the same clay as a saint we too must follow the Lord no matter the cost. We rejoice because we have advocates in Heaven, but we feel shame because we haven't followed in their footsteps. Yet perhaps this very shame may bring us glory, since perhaps even our fear may engender an openness to grace. How could it be that the saints travelled the same roads we do but so wonderfully well? You can see why we rejoice in the feasts of saints but also feel shame. Our joy in this valley of tears is the result of our longing for what the saints have attained. Our bread here below needs to be salted by the water of our tears. In this way we may turn not only toward the end we seek but return to the beginning of the way that leads to that end.

These are things we should ponder when we keep the vigil of a saint. We need to do this especially on solemn feasts such as those of martyrs and of the Lord's Apostles. The excitement of a special feast should help you stay awake and alert during the praying of Vigils. Do you think of comparing your way of using the night with the way worldly people use it—to engage in drunkenness and like things? They find a joy in doing evil things and so they very much want to stay awake for them, even if they later pass out. What does it take to cause us, who want to do holy things, to be excited enough about what we are doing to stay alert like that of people who want to do something evil?

Oughtn't we seek to enter fully enough into what we long for so that we can rejoice in the means that bring us to our goal? We know of the weakness of Peter and the bitter zeal that drove Paul to work violence on those who believed in Christ. Once Peter had been forced to face the weakness of his love and repeatedly reaffirm it, and once Paul had been forced to recognize he was persecuting the one sent to be his savior, both devoted them-selves to service, even when very tired. Haven't we experienced Christ's love for us and turned away from worldly forms of excitement and to sharing our repentant love of Christ with others? Let's remember this as we keep vigils and let grace build us up in a spiritual joy that refreshes better than sleep.

Saturday

WHAT OUR MOTHER TEACHES & SHARES WITH US

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

When Martha tried to call Mary from the feet of Jesus, he told her: “*Mary has chosen the better part!*” What Jesus said of Mary of Bethany he equivalently said to Mary of Nazareth. The Blessed Virgin Mary chose the better part and now she, as well as the other Mary, has entered into the unending possession of it. Both have entered into the closest of closenesses with the Lord. Mary of Bethany welcomes the Lord under the shelter of her roof and the Blessed Virgin welcomed him to the bridal chamber of her womb. “*He who created me*”, we read, “*has rested in my tent.*” The one sat at his feet and listened and the Blessed Virgin treasured up all that concerned Jesus and pondered it in her heart.

It seems that when Jesus went around the towns and villages Mary accompanied him. She followed him to the Cross and stood there beside him. How could she be frightened of death when her love was stronger than death? There he acknowledged her as mother and entrusted her to a suitable protector. Loving her as he did, Jesus loved her to the end; he spoke almost his last words for her benefit. Mary was to rejoice in all she remembered of Jesus and it was not to be taken away from her but brought to perfection.

I say these things so that if anyone feels a longing for that “best part”, which Jesus praised, such a one may know that this is the reward of those who can’t be blamed for failing to do Martha’s part—as Mary had done in all the years she spent with Jesus in Nazareth. Let it be known that this too is a gift and a grace. The toil involved in work and its anxieties are the seeds of justice, through which joys are reaped from the fruits of consoling mercy. One who sows sparingly will reap sparingly and Mary sowed without stint or hesitation. She reminds us that those who sow with a blessing will also reap a blessing. Who can miss this truth who know the one “blessed among women.”

The Virgin Mary was graced with a life that is essentially like ours. We too are called to allow Jesus to enter into us and to grow there until he is ready to come forth for the salvation of many. We too are given the opportunity to keep our gaze fixed steadily on Jesus and on all that has to do with Jesus. And if we accept this gift how could we fail to contemplate all that we come to know? How could we fail to store it up in our hearts and even to share it with those God calls into closeness with us, as God called St. John into intimacy with Blessed Mary?

We too share his passion, as we will share his resurrection and glorification. In following Mary’s lead, we too will be blessed, and all nations will be blessed in and through us. She has been filled and yet had enough left to give us little ones much of what filled her table. The gifts of God are enriched by being shared, that is their nature. Who would not be glad to be a dog under her table? Where do we find her, and all these marvelous things? We find them at the table of the sacrament of the altar. May these gifts lead us to the table of everlasting joy!