

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME AND THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR HOLY FATHER BENEDICT

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Sunday

WHAT SANCTIFIES A PERSON

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

“*God sanctified him through faith and meekness*”, says the Book of Wisdom. The actual subject of this verse is Moses but it is fitting to apply it to our Holy Father Benedict because he too was for so many a teacher and guide to salvation. Both Moses and Benedict are our teachers because neither lived otherwise than he taught. This wouldn’t have been possible if both hadn’t had the two virtues of faith and meekness. Consider their examples.

What could be more notable than a faith that scorned wealth and power, even as a youth? Both preferred to suffer the hardships of the world for the sake of God rather than live for personal gain or pleasure. What could be holier than their meekness. Benedict refused to be provoked even with those who tried to kill him with poisoned wine, and Moses was said to be the meekest of all on earth. I remember reading that Benedict’s gentleness held even for those who spoke against him or tried to do him harm.

This didn’t mean that either lacked a burning zeal to overcome sin. If this had been absent they would have sunk into tepidity. They realized that the meekness of peacefulness must be sprinkled with the salt of zeal for justice and right. We must seek meekness but at the same time burns with faith and zeal for right.

Apply these lessons to yourself. We too will be sanctified through faith and meekness. Our meekness, however, will remain unblemished only if faith leads it. Faith too must be true and unblemished, then, and it is so only if it is living and vigorous. Benedict and Moses weren’t afraid even of kings. The reason is that they considered ordinary things as nothing compared with the things of God. Faith gives two special gifts. It speaks penetratingly of the future and gives a keen perception of present things. It does the first through hope and the second by reason of trust in God’s providence.

Faith sees what is not yet present and what for now is invisible because it lays hold of the good things to come as if they were already present. It makes them exist in every heart that is faith-filled. For instance, it discloses the presence of God in all things and places. This is what Scripture means when it says, “*The just one lives by faith*”. But let us be mindful that this is “*faith which is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things that are not apparent*”.

If we push God behind our backs, as if we had no faith, we put aside fear of God. Then we are left with our attention fixed on empty things. But how terrible that will make the Last Day! Living faith stands before God anxious only to see God’s will. It stands at Judgment with serenity and beholds God’s glory with joy. Let us be watchful, then, and stand firm in faith. The person whom faith arouses through fear of the Lord isn’t able to slumber due to negligence. The one who faith establishes in hope can’t falter through lack of confidence.

But everything must be done in love. Then indeed will it be said that faith and meekness sanctify us, as it did our Father Benedict. Our faith engenders love. It is by our love that we will be meek and holy like Jesus and we will stand in the presence of God with him forever!

Monday

WHY NOT BELIEVE AND LIVE IN JESUS?

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Public opinion is generally favorable to the figure of Jesus. Everyone knows, at least vaguely, the nobility of his message, his preference for the poor and humble, the way his life matches his words, and this from the simplicity of the stable in Bethlehem to the drama of the cross. If you don't limit yourself to vague recollections of catechism classes but read and re-read the Gospels themselves, you meet an unforgettable person. He utters strong and profound words on some of life's most important problems, and beyond this, He reaches out to every man and woman in the world, from the greatest to the least. He does it with an impressive authority, tenderness and clarity.

A careful reading of the Gospels, moreover, obliges us to go even further. Through many words and many incidents Jesus openly allows us to grasp that special intensity with which he sees and lives his existence as one among others. And all this, we learn, flows from a profound relationship with God the Heavenly Father, who is his father in a very intimate way. More, he tells us this relationship can be ours as well.

Jesus said stupendous things about the love of his merciful and exacting Father in Heaven! Jesus proclaimed that he wanted nothing more intensely than to do what this Father wills. In the terrible moments of agony in Gethsemane Jesus asks the Father to give him courage to give his all, his entire life, for the salvation of our race. Dying on the cross Jesus entrusted his life to the Heavenly Father and waited for the resurrection and the fullness of life and joy, but only as the Father might will to give all this to him.

Throughout his entire human life, Jesus revealed the mysterious unity existing between him and the Heavenly Father. Does this, and all the rest, provide us with good reasons to entrust ourselves to this honest, wise and generous human being—rather in the way he entrusted himself to the Father in Heaven? He was able to heal the sick, and even to raise the dead!

Why shouldn't we believe that the totally human life Jesus who lived among us reveals the designs—the longings and projects—of God for all of us? Why should anyone hesitate to believe that God, in immense love, has come among us in Jesus and genuinely lived our life with us here on this earth?

Tuesday

WHAT IT MEANS TO LIVE IN THE SPIRIT

A reflection from Against Heresies by St. Irenaeus of Lyon

Jesus told his disciples: “*Go and teach all nations and baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*” When he said this, he gave all of us the power of giving new life in God to people everywhere. God had promised through the prophets that in the last days he would pour out the Spirit on his servants, both men and women, and that they would prophesy. To prophesy in the Spirit is to proclaim a new hope and the life that fulfills it.

When the Son of God became the Son of Man the Spirit descended upon him, became—as it were—accustomed to dwelling with the human race. The Spirit lives in us human beings and inhabits God’s creation. More, the Spirit accomplishes the Heavenly Father’s will by cleansing us from sin and giving us new life in Christ. Luke describes this as happening at Pentecost. Symbolically, people of every language joined in singing one song of praise to God and those who had been scattered and divided were shown the path to unity.

The Lord had promised to send the Spirit, calling it the Advocate, in order to prepare us all to be an offering to God. We had been like so much dry flour which needed to be moistened so it could be a single loaf of bread to feed and thus give new life to all. The Spirit brought us a dew of grace to make us one in Christ and so made unity for our entire race possible. We were all like so many trees without the water needed for them to bear fruit. That is symbolized, and made real, by baptism. It liberates and changes us so we become One Body in the One Spirit. And what has been given us we are to share, under the Spirit, with others.

We have received what Scripture calls the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and strength, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of God. This Spirit came down on the Lord Jesus and he, in turn, has given it to the Church. He has sent the Advocate from Heaven and into the world, for into it had fallen the devil “like lightening”, as Jesus put it. Lightening could scorch us and make us again unfruitful. That is what the devil accuses us all of being. But we have an Advocate that realizes truth in us.

The Lord has had pity on us all. We were like persons who had fallen into the hands of robbers and he has rescued us, bound up our wounds and left what is needed to pay for our care. He left two coins bearing God’s own image and the inscription of the Heavenly Father’s name. Through the Spirit those images of the Father and the Son are given us. We are to live in the image of Father and Son as having come to us in the Spirit. How does that image reveal itself? It does this by love—the love of the Father and the love of the Son lived and revealed in Jesus. The coin is now given to us as well. We must use it by loving others as Jesus has loved us.

Wednesday

WHAT EVERY CHRISTIAN HAS TO SHARE

Adapted from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

What does it mean to be a “witness”? It means you don’t express your own opinion or communicate your own beliefs but that you share what you have experienced of Another. If that Other is Jesus or God they you share what you have experienced as explaining why you are wholly dedicated to that Other. A witness to Jesus is one who has encountered Jesus personally and testifies to that fact and what it has meant practically. That is the way Kateri Tekakwitha witnessed to Jesus.

Though Kateri wasn’t officially a catechist she had the qualifications. She had opened her heart to Christian faith and had encountered Jesus personally. The missionaries who taught her had said nothing about how women might live a life wholly consecrated to serving God and their people. Kateri, because of her experience of Jesus’ love, and because of the love she gave him in response, created a form of consecrated life for the women of her people. She even moved to a totally Christian village where she could live such a way of life completely and fully.

A person who meets Jesus superficially, by tradition or family-based habit, has no really exact and practical idea of Him. Such a person doesn’t know Jesus as a power of salvation who transforms every aspect of one’s life. Such a person needs to know Jesus as the reply to life’s practical questions, as a genuine “bread of life” and a medicine healing wounds and giving new meaning to suffering. Jesus, genuinely and personally experienced, is the fulfillment of our longings and dreams. He transforms our longings and dreams!

Christian witness, then, is an intense and lived relationship with Jesus as this is shared with others. This should encourage us. Jesus offers such a relationship to each of us. It isn’t something given in an “official” way by an official of the Christian Church: it is a gift from Jesus to each person. We don’t become agents of the Church but witnesses to Jesus and to what he does to humanity and human history, starting with “you”. That is what brought Kateri Tekakwitha to holiness, and one day to official recognition as a saint. She listened to Jesus, she loved Jesus, she sought Jesus—e.g., through a private vow of virginity for the sake of the Kingdom—and she loved him with all her heart and all her life.

Kateri’s Mohawk culture and society had not been Christianized, as we say. But she used it to love Jesus with all her heart and soul and strength, and that was what mattered most. She made of her way of living a witness to this and a way of sharing her faith with others. She sought to help others understand, as best she could, what the Christian message is and to help it open their hearts to the mystery of God’s love for all human persons. She shows that we can all do that no matter what our cultural or social contexts may be, and how open or closed these may be in respect to Jesus and his message. That is our way to holiness and to sanctity too. We only have to say “Yes” to Jesus’ offer of his love and friendship and then respond with our own offer to Him.

Thursday

HOW MARVELOUS IT IS TO HOPE IN THE LORD

Developed from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

We have been told that “*God foreordained that those he had chosen should be conformed to the likeness of his Son*”. St. Paul says this and challenges us to notice what a sublime thing it is. What God’s only Son is by nature we are to become by grace! To underline this St. Paul adds that God wills that his firstborn be one of many brothers and sisters. That’s who we are. If we have received such wondrous gifts how can we doubt about our future? All that we have received, Paul notes, was ordained by God from before the beginning of the world. From eternity God has loved us and chosen us. What should we fear?

We know God has called us since he has justified us through the baptism of regeneration. But those whom God justifies are also glorified! This is assured to us because God has made us his own children through grace. Grace is gift and if God is determined to give us such wondrous gifts how can we doubt? It is as though God had said: Let me hear no more about dangers or about being surrounded by plotters. Even those who choose to doubt about the things to come can’t deny the graces already given. God’s love brings about graces and justification and will bring about glory.

God made use of his own seemingly disastrous sufferings to free and save our entire race. Did the scourging, the cross, the bonds and the shame inflicted on Jesus prevent the triumph of God’s love in him? If God is with us who can be against us? No human being, no devil, nothing at all can withstand those who observe and live by God’s law. If people take away our money they only obtain a reward for us. If people speak ill of us the slander only brings glory upon us. If someone inflicts hunger on us we rejoice because our reward will be the greater. If someone kills you they only prepare you for a martyr’s crown. What should we fear when everything works for our good and glory?

Having recalled all this, Paul goes on to speak of the greatest sign of God’s love for us—Jesus’ crucifixion, the sacrifice of God’s own Son. God has not only justified us and glorified us. God has conformed us to the likeness of his Son. Is it possible that one who didn’t even spare his own Son in order to love us will not give us all we need to join his Son in glory and joy? Reflect on the goodness of the One who didn’t even spare his Son but gave him up and gave him up for everyone—the worthless and the ungrateful, the hostile and blasphemous included. How then can our God fail to give us everything we truly need? If God has done so much for us, why should we fail to trust God? Why worry about what we have or haven’t got? We have our God for our possession! That is all we need!

Friday

OUR LADY'S UNNOTICED GIFTS

A reflection developed from a sermon by St. Bernard

"Hail, Mary, full of grace", said the angel. He said to a virgin but her fullness of grace didn't consist only in her virginity. Not everyone receives the gift of remaining a virgin and the Lord shows us in Mary that He has more than one blessing. Even if one has not preserved virginity one can still come to Mary and plead with her that the Lord may share with us her other gifts.

The angel came to a most humble young woman of Nazareth and her beauty was the result of her humility as much as of her virginity. Many are virgins but not all are humble and their virginity will count for nothing if they don't learn humility. We come to Mary as Abraham's servant came to Rebecca when he was seeking a wife for Isaac. He came to her at a well and found her drawing water. When he asked her for a drink, without hesitation she lowered her jar and shared her water with him, and then gave water to his beasts as well. She was most humble and delighted to serve even in lowly ways.

Mary, if I come to you and ask you for a drink will you share with me that humility which was among your principle beauties and adornments? Give me to drink from the water which gives strength to serve and to love. Give me the water of life which comes to us from the fruit of your womb. For you are not only a virgin, you are not only humble, but you are also fruitful.

God always looks upon the humble with love and lifts them up by many graces to rejoice with him and in his Kingdom. Lift me up, Lord, and give me the strength I need not only to be humble but to love and serve as did your lowly handmaiden. The water that Mary draws has been given her by the Son after he turned it into wine. That is what happens when humility is joined to the strength that is from God and that flows forth to give joy to every human heart that will receive it. You, O Lord, have invited us to your very own wedding banquet as you join yourself with our race and take on all that comes with our humanity—including weakness and lowliness. You changed these seemingly insignificant things into strength and joy at the prayer of your servant, virgin and mother.

The fruitfulness of Mary, the unexpected and marvelous fruitfulness of one who was a virgin and knew no man, was made fruitful for the entire world when you made her virginal womb fruitful by the incarnation of you only Son. Who could be stronger than he? Who could lavish greater and more wondrous gifts on all who are lowly and give a "Yes" in response to every request?

Mary, lower your jar that I may drink! Let me drink of the blood of your Holy Son, our Lord Jesus. Let me draw strength from him that I too may be twice humble, because I was not strong enough to be like you as a virgin. It is in that humility that I answer with my "Yes" to the call by which you send me to love others even as you Son and our brother has loved them. Let the water of the Holy Spirit's grace cause me to conceive in my heart the Lord Jesus and let me share the water of life that flows from him even as you do. O Virgin, humble and fruitful may I too become fruitful by imitating your humility and turning with you to God so my every moment shall be a "Yes". Let all be done in me according to your will!

Saturday

THE ONE THING NECESSARY

A reflection from a homily by St. Augustine

“My command to you is to love one another.” That is what the Lord says to us. This is the fruit we are asked to bear. We bear it by love. *“I have chosen you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last”*. And after he says this the Lord adds, *“so that the Father may give you whatever you ask in my name”*. This means that the Father will readily grant our requests provided that we love one another as Jesus loves us. But surely this love is God’s own gift to us.

God chose us while we were lacking in the fruit that is love. Remember that it was God who chose us and not we who chose God. God has made it possible for us to bear fruit. In other words, God has made it possible for us to love one another. We can never hope to bear such fruit unless God helps us with grace—just as a branch can’t bear fruit unless it forms part of a living vine.

What, then, is our fruit? It is love. St. Paul describes it as springing from a pure heart and a sincere faith. Such is the source of our love for one another, the source of our love for God. Only if we love God, can our love for one another be true love. If we love God then we shall also love our neighbor as ourselves. Anyone who has no love for God has none for self or others.

On keeping the twofold precept of charity—for God and for neighbor—depends the keeping of the whole of the law and the prophets. This love is the fruit the Lord has in mind when he says to us: *“My command to you is to love one another”*. That is why the apostle Paul, contrasting the fruits of the Spirit with the works of the flesh, begins by saying: *“The fruit of the Spirit is love”*. Then Paul enumerates all the rest, as though they flowed from love and looked to love as their source. What are they? They are joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control.

Who can truly rejoice without loving some good in which they seek their joy? Who can experience true peace except by being at peace with their beloved? Who will have the patience to persevere in doing good unless constantly urged on by love’s promptings? Who will show kindness without loving those they set out to benefit? Who will be good if not made so by loving? Whose faith will profit them if that faith doesn’t work through love?

How wise our Good Master was when he so persistently recommended love to us as the one thing necessary! It is a treasure without which all other good things and virtues avail us not at all. They can’t be had except in company with love. With the other good qualities listed, it is love that makes us perfect in virtue.

Do we seek perfect virtue? We would give ourselves to our Beloved in as perfect a condition as possible. We want to return God’s gift to us, the gift which we are, in its most perfect condition and development. Begin always from love. When God gave us this gift God gave us all else besides. We have only to claim those gifts by using them to love.