

TWENTY-FOURTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

WHAT WE HAVE TO DO TO FOLLOW CHRIST

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Caesarius of Arles

The Lord tells us that whoever wants to be Christ's follower must renounce self. Does this command sound harsh to you? Do you think the Lord is imposing a burden on us? But pause and ask: Where do we have to go to follow Christ? We have to go where he has gone? He has gone to Heaven. He rose and ascended to the Heavenly Father. Do you think it is a burden to follow the Lord to Heaven?

Ordinarily, an order isn't a real burden when the one who gives it helps you fulfill it. How much more when Jesus is with us to help us follow him to Heaven.

If left to ourselves we couldn't do anything. But we have Christ's promise to be with us. There is no reason to despair; he is with us!

Heaven was beyond our reach before the Head of the body, whose members we are, went there. If we are members of Christ then we will surely get to Heaven. Is there any reason to lose hope? Many are afraid of afflictions and trials that confront us in this world. But if we follow Christ we will end up in a place of perfect happiness, perfect peace, and everlasting freedom from all fear. Let's look at Christ's command in terms of our own anxieties. St. Paul reminds us that "one who claims to abide in Christ ought to walk as Christ walked". Now human sin made the path to heaven rough but when Christ himself walked it he transformed the narrowest of tracks into a royal highway. You need two feet!

The first foot is humility. If you want to follow Christ be humble as he was. Don't despise his lowliness or fear it. Everyone wants to get to the top. Good, the first step is humility. Why try to take strides that are too big for you? Do you want to fall flat on your face instead of climbing higher? Lowliness and humility are steps to exaltation. Begin with humility and you have already begun to climb.

The second foot is charity. Perhaps that seems very difficult because it involves renouncing self and taking up our cross. What does it mean to take up one's cross? It means bearing every annoyance patiently. If you begin to follow Christ's way of life and God's commandments some will resist you or mock you or even persecute you. They may be people who claim to be Christians, but are that only in name. Nevertheless, you need not be afraid. When one learns patience, one learns how to endure trials without being overwhelmed by them.

You want to follow Christ. Good, then take up the cross without delay. Endure injuries without being overcome by them. The first thing to remember is a word of St. Paul's: "As long as we have food and clothing, let this be enough for us". One who seeks all kinds of property or much wealth or wants to be rich will have to face many temptations. Many such things are actually useless or even harmful. We flee from such temptations by loving the Lord more and more. We have enough if we have Christ. Loving Christ is the charity that teams up with humility to enable us to run the way of God's commandments, as Jesus did. Remember Jesus' word to Martha: "*Only one thing is necessary!*" That one thing is God revealed to us in Jesus. If we have Jesus we have God, and if we have God we have everything we truly need.

Monday

GOD HAS ADOPTED US AS CHILDREN

A reflection from a homily by St. John Chrysostom

In great love our Heavenly Father has “*predestined us to be adopted as children; such was God’s will and pleasure*”. This is what St. Paul tells us. Why did God do this? Because God wants to be praised for what and who God really is. And why should God do this if not to lead us to love more and more in the way God loves? What is more, this is not a longing for praise or service or for the glory we might give God, but for our salvation. For this God made our world.

Imagine a person suffering from a disgusting and infectious disease. Imagine that person is also old, decrepit, hungry, poor and with every sort of problem. What if such a person were suddenly transformed into the healthy and most attractive young person, surpassingly lovely to look at and endowed with not only the bloom of youth but every sort of possession and free from every sort of problem, both within and without? Do you think something like this is impossible? But isn’t that exactly what God has done for us spiritually?

There is no one among the angels or archangels or the powers of heaven that has any greater spiritual beauty! Our Lord and Savior has made you and me desirable beyond anything we could have imagined.

Now consider the hurtful things we used to say and do. Consider how filled with grace and beauty we now are. Consider the words we use now to express our gratitude for all we have been given. Could any declaration be more wonderful than that by which the newly baptized renounce the devil and swear allegiance to Christ? Could any speech be more gracious than the declaration of faith we make before baptism? But then how is it that so many have been unfaithful to baptism? This can only fill us with sorrow and lead us to pray with all our heart that those who have fallen away be renewed and restored.

It is in the Beloved of our Heavenly Father that we have redemption and restoration. The wonder is not only that God has given us his only Son, but that God gave this Beloved Son to be killed by his enemies! And out of this God has worked our redemption! See how much our God loves us! God has given what he values above everything else to gain our freedom and give us fullness of life.

That is what we mean when we say we have been reconciled through grace. God has given us so much and given it freely and without regret, and because we are so beloved! St. Paul has much to say about our adoption into God’s own family, about our sanctification and our purity of heart, but then he seems to pass from the heights to the depths and speaks also of suffering.

It isn’t that Paul thinks suffering is of no importance but the reverse. Nothing is more astonishing, or more important, than the fact that God’s blood has been shed for us. As wonderful as our adoption is, even more wonderful is God’s love that didn’t spare an Only Son in order to give us everything God has. We have been reconciled through the blood of our Lord. We have been reconciled simply because we are loved. Can you possibly know more completely how much you are loved personally and treasured? Every day let our living be an expression of joy and gratitude for the truth our God has shown us.

Tuesday

TO BE SAVED BY THE CROSS IS TO CARRY IT

A reflection from a meditation by Bishop Anthony Bloom

“No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from there—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that all who believe may have eternal life in Him” (Jn 3:13ff). The Lord himself has taken upon his shoulders the first cross, the heaviest and most appalling cross. But after him, thousands and thousands of people, even children, have taken their own crosses upon themselves. These crosses, which seem lesser than Christ’s, remain so frightening for those who have to carry them.

Such innumerable crowds have lovingly, obediently, walked in the footsteps of Christ, treading a long tragic way which leads from earth to the very throne of God and into God’s Kingdom. They walk on, following Jesus, crowd after crowd and with innumerable kinds of crosses—some of them fashioned by the sin or malice of fellow Christians. In this way, the disciples of Christ are crucified.

However far we look backwards we see crosses and more crosses, one after the other. We see the bodies of martyrs and other heroes of the spirit, we see monks and nuns, we see priests and pastors, and we see many, many ordinary, simple, humble people of God who have willingly taken upon themselves crosses made by others as well as by themselves. They walk through the centuries knowing Christ foretold the sorrow all share on this earth. Yet the Kingdom of God belongs to them!

They walk with heavy crosses, rejected, hated because of truth, because of the name of Christ. They walk as pure victims—of God and one another. They are old and young, children and grown-ups. And where are you and I? Are we standing and looking, watching this long procession, this throng of people with shining eyes and with hope unquenched and yet with unfaltering love, or are we joining them? They seem to have an unbelievable joy in their hearts as they pass by us, by why?

Isn’t it our turn to join all these and find the answer? Aren’t we to take up our cross and follow Christ and all those who love him? Christ has commanded us to follow him. He is inviting us to the celebration, the party of parties, that is his Kingdom. Is this a nightmare? How can flesh and blood endure what seems a tragedy, and is? We can because Christ is Risen! We don’t see the Christ who walks before us as his tormentors saw him, as a defeated prophet. We know him even now to be in glory. We know his every word and promise is true. We know that the Kingdom of God is ours if we simply follow him. Each day we are given the grace to make that decision.

Wednesday

REMEMBERING HOW MARY CARRIED THE CROSS

A reflection taken from homilies by St. Pope John XXIII

The Gospels and the Church and the liturgy teach us to meditate on the sorrows of Mary. We turn, then, to a memory of sadness, an example of patient endurance. We remind ourselves, for our own good, that all of life here below is beset with trials and difficulties. It is a life of hardships but in the end, we glimpse an everlasting joy.

Jesus, Mary, Joseph! Give us the certain hope of future triumph. Help us to have courage in every moment of our earthly lives. Jesus, Mary and Joseph each knew sorrow, privations and suffering. Yet each continually reflected the eternal splendor of Heaven and of a life lived with and in God.

The Fathers of the Church warn us that in every age and place there are and will be temptations. If we fail to stay alert and hope in God we may fall victim to some of them. Our longings for various things can wound us. The more wealth one has the more one wants. But using wealth wrongly leads us into wretchedness. The same may be said of the longing for power, even the power to put things right. Then there is pride which breaks the bonds of love and mutual concern and ignores justice in its search for things like power or wealth.

Mary never forgot the gift she had given to the world, to us. It is our Lord Jesus the Christ. He has taken up our crosses and by that means purifies us, strengthens and transforms our energies and frees us from using them in hurtful ways. God uses these crosses to further our spiritual lives and train us in self-control, and above all in loving like Jesus. Mary lived immersed in Jesus' love, and she tried daily to follow him in that love. It led her, as it leads us, to take up various crosses and follow him.

The lessons we can learn from such wonderful examples as Mary gives us are to be the sources of never-failing encouragement and strength. By these means, we rise again after every fall. We correct the faults that come to us from our formation as children and young adults. We shape our own temperaments so we want most of all to seek peace without self-seeking and so seeking mutual love like Christ's. We strain forward toward the day and place where such wonders become our daily prayer and thanksgiving.

At the end of life, a door stands open. None can pass through except those who carry a cross. The Lord has kept us company and has shared with us the care of His Blessed Mother, and so many other holy persons. In this company our hope finds good soil, the soil it needs to put down roots and transform us. What challenges need we fear? What can frighten us away from that door at life's end? Those we love most have passed through and stand there with hands outstretched to take ours and guide us these last few steps. We can even now see them and their eyes of love. In trust we walk forward carrying the cross and that is what makes us supremely like Jesus.

Thursday

FACING PERSECUTION WITH STS. CYPRIAN & CORNELIUS

A reflection taken from two letters by St. Cyprian

Cyprian greets his brother Cornelius. We have heard of your glorious witness and courageous faith and were filled with joy because we felt ourselves sharers with you. You led the way and gained many companions in glory. We remember that the martyrdom of children marked the beginning of Christ's life. For his name's sake, the innocent who were too young to struggle bore witness and shed their blood. What a shameful thing it would be, then, for Christ's servants to refuse to endure something with and for Christ's sake.

The Son of God suffered to make us God's children. Will we children of the world refuse to persevere in our adoption due to suffering? If we have to bear with the world's hatred, we can remember that Christ bore it before we did. We may have to endure insults, exile, and torture in this world but the Creator and Lord of the world knew them first and in harsher form: "If the world hates you, remember that it hated me first." You are not of the world for Christ chose you out of the world and so it hates you. The servant is not greater than the master.

Our Lord and God practiced all he taught, so what excuse is there for a disciple to hear the Master's teaching and not act on it? Let none be so intimidated by the fear of future persecution or of things like the coming of the Antichrist as to drop the arms given us in the Gospel and its precepts. The Antichrist may come but Christ also comes and cares for us and our wounds. He is the one who can deliver from the hands of all enemies. It is God we must fear for none can escape his anger or his love. Don't fear those who kill the body but can't touch the soul.

Divine Providence has prepared us. The day of our struggle may be at hand. Let us all give ourselves to fasting, vigils, and prayer in common. Let us remember one another, united in mind and heart. By the love, we share we shall relieve the strain of great trials and find the strength to stand firm and endure. Each day we can overcome every adversary, within and without. Each day we can strengthen mutual love and support. This is what prepares us for every eventuality. We look beyond all our fears to God's grace triumphant in all God's witnesses in the common service of love and life.

Friday

THE REAL MEANING OF JESUS

A reflection by Kim Nataraja

We have often heard about the importance of the historical Jesus and rightly so, but he is much more than that. Seeing him only from the historical perspective can result in our not seeing his true nature at all—we only see an image of him, colored by our own cultural, psychological and theological filters. Not only that, but we are convinced that our own image is the right one. All that does is causes conflict about who he is, why he has come, what his meaning is, as we can see from present-day arguments and those in the early centuries of Christianity. Every interpretation and account of the life of Jesus has an individual bias often saying more about the one speaking or writing than about the actual person of Jesus.

On the whole we don't really think much about who Jesus truly is. For many Christians, this is a question they have never really listened to or taken seriously or personally. The only way we can discover his true being and meaning is by entering the silence through deep, silent prayer. Discovering the identity of Jesus for us is not achieved through intellectual or historical inquiry. It happens in the opening to our intuitive depths, to deeper and more subtle ways of knowing and seeing than we are accustomed to. This is prayer, an entry into the inner space of silence, where we are content to be without answers, judgments and images. It is the silence at the heart of the mystery of Jesus that ultimately communicates his true identity to those who encounter it. For Christians who follow the path of deep prayer and meditation, will find this practice will have a profound effect on their self-understanding as well as on their sense of who Jesus is.

For the early Christians the understanding that we cannot know God without knowing ourselves was paramount. This is one of the aspects of meditation that we so often ignore. I believe that meditation as well as being the work of pure prayer is also the whole life-field of self-knowledge which it drives. In the same way that we ignore who Jesus is we can ignore who we are. We have an illusory image, the ego, our surface self, built up of our own thoughts and images and those of others. Fr John Main has written, "Ego is essentially the image we have of ourselves, the image of ourselves that we try to project". Thus, not only who Jesus is but also who we truly are can only be discovered in the silence of deep contemplative prayer.

Saturday

Our Prayers for the Dead

A Reflection by Karl Adam

The Church has faithfully guarded, from the earliest times, the words of Scripture: "*It is a holy and a wholesome thing to pray for the dead that they may be released from their sins*" (II Maccabees 12: 43). The suppliant cry uttered in the Liturgy—"*Eternal rest give to them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them*"—can be heard already in the Acts of the Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicity (203 CE). It is repeated by many tomb inscriptions from the earliest days of the Church as well as by theologians and Fathers of the Church, beginning with Tertullian.

So fundamental and so natural is the human hope and longing born of love for those who have died! Historians of religion have found something very like it in almost all non-Christian peoples. This is a striking illustration of Tertullian's declaration that the human soul is "naturally Christian".

The Catholic Church is jealous in offerings for those who have died and in uniting sufferings and expiatory self-denial with the sufferings of Christ on behalf of those who have gone before us, and especially by offering the Eucharistic sacrifice. It is by this that the infinite expiation for sins effected by Christ on the Cross is sacramentally re-presented and so stimulates us to join ourselves with it in this way of being wholly one with our God through loving our brothers and sisters.

In the Eucharist, God passes on to the Church the filling up of what is lacking in the sufferings of the whole Christ. So the saying of St. Paul that the members of the Body of Christ mutually care for one another is nowhere more comprehensively and luminously fulfilled than in the Church's prayers and suffrages for her dead. When at Mass, when we are before the sacred Offering of our Lord and, so to speak, under the gaze of the Church Triumphant, we cry out: "*Be mindful, O Lord, of your servants .. who have gone before us with the sign of faith and rest in the sleep of peace*", then truly heaven and earth greet each other, the "whole" Christ, with all the members of his body, celebrates a blessed "love feast", a memorial of the communion of all in love and pain and joy.