

THE TWENTY-NINTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

TURNING ORDINARY VALUES UPSIDE DOWN

A reflection by Fr. Alonso de Orozco

Listen to our Lord: “*Whoever wants to be greater among you should be servant to you all, and whoever wants to be first among you should be your slave*” (Mk.10:33f). What heavenly wisdom! What a marvelous teaching! Would that ecclesiastics, and all people, wrote this deep in their hearts! Does a free person ever long to become a slave? Does anyone strive with all their might to become one? Yet there are people who strive to be over others and don’t stop to think of what the Lord has commanded.

I recall that St. Paul said, “*Whoever wants to be a bishop wants something good*”. But those who want it don’t notice that the episcopate is a burden and not an honor. Both St. Augustine and St. Thomas explain this and St. John Chrysostom, followed by St. Basil, tell us that it is good to want a good work but is pure emptiness to seek to occupy the first place. Isn’t this implicit in the fact that the Pope gives himself the title “servant of the servants of God”?

So that his disciples might learn this serious lesson even better, Jesus offers himself as a wonderful example. Listen to him: “*The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many*”. This is like the clearest of all possible mirrors in which to see yourself. Those who have a pastoral office in the Church ought to keep this always and everywhere before their eyes. Then they can be humble and poor in spirit. Jesus knew well how tyrannical the ambitious can become and what great damage this can cause—not only to human beings but to angels. Jesus came humbly from heaven in order to tear down the tower of Babel by the strength of humility.

“*Though the Son was in the form of God, he didn’t think that equality with God was something to be clung to, but he emptied himself and took the form of a slave.*” He did this in order to bring us from earth to a heavenly state. That is why I plead with you to contemplate the humiliating death of Christ with the entire power of your mind. Follow in his steps. Don’t long for the first place in this life, as the two apostles did. Like the wild grass, it withers quickly and is gone. Isaiah warns us of this.

What we should do is drink the Lord’s cup and freely carry the cross. We need to cry out with David: “*What return am I to make to the Lord for all he has given me? I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord. Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his holy ones.*” What does it mean to drink the cup of the Lord? St. Jerome tells us that it means dying to our personal longings and wants, and to this world’s, and leading an innocent life with Christ and like Christ.

Listen to Christ’s promise. “*To the one who overcomes as I have overcome, I will give a place on my throne just as I have a place on my Father’s throne*”. To God and to his Christ be glory and honor through endless ages. Following Christ

and giving God glory is our task. That is how we turn the world upside down so all can be the Kingdom of God.

Monday

THE HUMILITY OF AN EVANGELIST

A reflection developed from a homily by St. Bernard

How better can one celebrate the love for Christ, shown by one who dedicated his life to the spread of the Gospel, than by contemplating the way St. Luke lived the words he preached? In his Gospel (14:1f) we read: "*All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves shall be exalted*". These words were first lived and only then written down so that we might live them too.

If one reflects on the life of a human person, a sinner but one saved by Christ, one can discern two types of happiness and two types of misery. There, on the one hand, is perfect happiness in Heaven, and also earthly happiness in Paradise. On the other hand, there is the misery sinful humankind experiences in this world and there is the complete and utter misery that is hell. This can be summed up by saying that there is fullness of life and a shadow of life, and there is a shadow of unhappiness and extreme and utter unhappiness. We find ourselves naturally in the shadow of unhappiness and fear lest we fall further. In Christ, we have the hope of a more than natural happiness and hope that we will receive the grace to climb the ladder that leads to it. That ladder is one of humility.

St. Luke, as a physician, knew full well the shadowland of human misery in which we dwell, all too often and too long. As a believer, he knew also of the happiness we humans all lost in our first parents. But as a believer in Jesus Christ, and a fellow evangelist with the Apostle Paul, he gloried in the hope of the perfect and everlasting happiness we are offered. But he knew that we ascend to such happiness only by humility. What seems a descent actually is an ascent.

We see this in the way he effaced himself and his evangelizing work by pointing always to Jesus Christ and to St. Paul as his herald to the gentile world, in which he himself had lived. His pride is simply in the fact that he was a humble servant of St. Paul, especially in his various illnesses.

Scripture says "*In your truth, you have humbled me.*" (Ps 118). God humbles us by convincing us of the truth of our situation and our total dependence on God. Those who are humbled by truth are truly humbled. Fortunately, the Lord didn't say that those who exalt themselves shall be exalted, but "*Those who humble themselves shall be exalted*" (Matt.23:12).

However, many are humiliated but not humble. They are people who ignore the slippery paths they walk and the darkness that blinds them. They bear a heavy yoke and a heavier conscience and a weight of condemnation. Such people have loved vanity rather than truth. And this shows us how we can be exalted! We must cling to the truth, even when it humbles us! We can avoid the hardness of heart if we cling voluntarily to the truth. This is a heavy cure to bear for our sin, but not as heavy a burden as pride. We need to be cured of this that we may be healed by Christ. St. Luke points always to Christ as our true physician whom he can only imitate so imperfectly. Did Luke, like Paul, kick against the goad before he surrendered to the thorn of truth that humbled him? We know only that he teaches us to do just that and we know he sought always to practice what he preached. Daily we have the opportunity to imitate this humility.

Tuesday

THE HUMILITY OF A MARTYR

A reflection from one of St. Isaac's letters to his provincial

During my captivity I often recalled my past life, so blameworthy because of my sins and infidelity to God. I groaned at being stopped in the middle of my course, and because I had no good works to send before me to God. I felt rejected by God and was without the sacraments. In this situation, I wanted to live but dreaded death, and I moaned in my distress: "*When shall there be an end to this misery and grief?*" I wanted God to bring calm after the storm and fill us with joy and exultation instead of tears. If those days hadn't been shortened, I would have perished.

I turned to Holy Scripture, my usual refuge. I kept certain passages in memory. These taught me to "*think of the Lord's goodness*" (Wisdom 1:1). Even if I felt no sensible devotion I could recall that "*the holy one shall live by faith*" (Heb. 10:38). I would explore these passages and prob for the smallest streams of devotion in my efforts to quench my constant spiritual thirst. I would "*consider God's law by day and by night*" and remind myself "*were it not that your law is my great delight I should by now have perished in my grief*". I spent two months in that quasi-retreat and became, like St. Bernard, the disciple of the beech trees; I thought of nothing but God.

Because the natives hated me and could no longer stand me, they sent me back to my village before the usual time. The trip took eight days and I was loaded with the enormous weight of the food that I had to carry. I had become a beast of burden before my God. Still, I tried to remain with God always, not knowing what awaited me in the next village. Some who had preceded us spread all sorts of rumors. On the road, I was almost naked and spent most of the night outdoors. I suffered very much from the cold. The wounds on my fingers which had only closed up toward the middle of January weren't yet completely healed.

In the village, they gave me a thin skin to use in addition to the old coat I was wearing. In these clothes, I went through the streets begging our Lord to let me join the saints who had served him "*dressed in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, distressed, mistreated*". Every day I observed the natives wearing the woolens and vestments that had been in our baggage, while day and night I was stiff from cold. That was not as important as was seeing them use vestments for secular purposes. One had taken to humeral veils and fashioned leg coverings, a sort of stocking.

Throughout the entire period, which lasted until about the middle of January, I could say before God: "*To this very hour we are victims of hunger and thirst; we are poorly clad and knocked around; we are vagabonds and wear ourselves out with manual labor. When they call us ugly names we speak well of them. When they persecute us, we bear it with patience; when they insult us we speak gently. We have practically become the world's scum, the scapegoat of society.*"

Wednesday

HOW DOES ONE WAIT FOR THE LORD?

A reflection taken from a homily by St. Macarius of Egypt

We have heard very often that those who wish to be found worthy of eternal life must become a dwelling place for Christ and be filled with the Holy Spirit. We are told that such people must produce the fruits of the Spirit and keep the commandments of Christ purely and blamelessly. But one begins all this by first believing steadfastly in the Lord and by devoting oneself as entirely as possible to obeying the commandments and to renouncing worldly interests; i.e., one must free the mind from immersion in secular affairs.

But when we hear this, even we monks tremble for we know we are sinners and that all of the things we have listed are beyond our unaided human powers. But then we recall, by God's gift, that none of this depends simply upon us. It is all a gift of God. But how, then, are we to know we have received this gift?

Do you find you persevere in prayer and do so as ceaselessly as you can? Are you always waiting in expectant faith for the Lord to visit and assist you? Do you keep this goal constantly in view? But we know that sin is within us and that all our efforts don't seem to be sufficient. But this very thought is a beginning. For example, we are to make every effort to do good and do it by showing humility. Isn't our sense of our sin an expression of humility? Of course, we are not to seek honors or praise or special distinctions or special treatment from anyone—just as the Gospel teaches. But if we present ourselves as sinners how can we fall into any of these faults?

What is the most important thing? It is to have the Lord always before our eyes. It is to wish above all to please God. Is God not pleased in a special way by humility? Have you not felt humbled continuously by the failure that follows every effort to depend simply on yourself? Jesus said, "*Learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart, and then you will find your rest*". We need not seek to do all the things we have mentioned as though we had the strength for that. We do not. What makes us more humble than this reflection?

The Lord has taught us to be on the lookout for opportunities to be merciful, to be kind, to be compassionate. These are the good works that make us good according to the Lord's teaching. "*If you love me enter through the narrow gate.*" What is this gate if not the small and humble deeds of mercy and kindness and compassion? We don't have to wait for opportunities to show these virtues in great and extraordinary ways.

We should never forget how humble the Lord's ways in the way he lived and in the gentle things he did to help others. Take this as a pattern for yourself. If you help others pray you are helping yourself pray and becoming like the Lord. And this happens in many other ways as well. One day the things you now have to force yourself to do, and that you do with a reluctant heart, you will find yourself doing willingly. You will have made a habit of invariably doing what is humble and merciful and kind and so of doing what is right. You will have become ever-mindful of the

Lord and are a person who is always waiting for him by doing what he commands you.

Thursday

CLINGING TO GOD IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

From the Spiritual Exercises by St. Ignatius of Loyola

I call an interior movement aroused in the soul and by it which is set on fire with the love of its Creator and Lord a consolation. As a consequence of it, one can love no creature on the face of the earth for its own sake alone, but only in the Creator of them all. It is also a consolation when one sheds tears that move one to love God, whether that be caused by sorrow for sin or the thought of the sufferings of Christ our Lord, or for any other reason that is pointed directly to the praise and service of God. Finally, I call every increase of faith, hope and love, and all interior joy which invites and attracts one to what is heavenly and to the salvation of one's soul by filling it with peace and rest in its Creator and Lord, consolation.

Whatever is wholly opposite to what I have just described I call a desolation. It is darkness of soul, turmoil of spirit, inclination to what is low and earthly; it is restlessness resulting from many disturbances and temptations. It leads to diminished faith, lack of hope, an absence of love. The soul is wholly lazy, lukewarm, sad, as though it were separated from its Creator and Lord.

Just as consolation is the opposite of desolation, so the thoughts that spring from consolation are the opposite of those that spring from desolation. In a time of desolation, one should never change but hold firm and constant in the resolutions and decisions which guided us the day before the desolation came, or in the decision to which we clung in our preceding consolation. Just as in consolation the good Spirit guides and counsels us, so in desolation the evil spirit guide and counsels. Following his counsels, one can never find the way to a right decision.

Though in desolation one must never change former resolutions, it is to one's advantage to intensify activities directed against desolation. We can make ourselves pray more; we can meditate; we can examine ourselves intensely. We can make an effort to do some penance in a suitable way. When we experience desolation we should keep it in mind that God has left us to our natural powers in resisting the different agitations and temptations of the enemy; he does this in order to test us.

We can resist, with the help of God. That always remains, though we may not perceive the fact clearly. For even if God has taken from us the abundance of fervor and overflowing love and the intense feeling of his favors, still we have sufficient grace for eternal salvation. When one is experiencing desolation one should strive in patience to persevere. This acts against the annoyances that have overtaken one. Let such a person consider, too, that consolation will soon return. In the meantime, one must diligently use the means just described to combat the desolation.

Friday

LITTLE THINGS THAT ARE IMPORTANT

A reflection taken from talks by St. Pope John Paul II

God keeps especially in mind those who are in need and those who suffer. The Son of God was born poor and lived among the poor in order by his poverty to make us rich spiritually. This is how God's plan of redemption works. We are not, then, merely God's servants; we are God's children. Can we doubt that our Heavenly Father gives good things to his children? God's greatest gift is Christ. Christ is always there for us; Christ relieves and refreshes us when we are weary and burdened and suffer. Yes, with all his strength Christ calls upon those who have the means to help others and who believe in Him to work for greater justice and to share with those who are in want and need. No one needs to lack food, clothing, housing, work, or the goods of culture. All can share in that which gives dignity to the human person.

Sharing with others freely, in imitation of God and Christ, is part of what gives us dignity. This sharing shouldn't be simply physical but spiritual as well. Christ's is a pressing appeal to spend our lives putting ourselves at the service of those in need of physical and spiritual help. It is a charity that is generous and does not sympathize with injustice. It seeks truth. More, it doesn't fear spiritual poverty but reaches out to it.

The divine economy of salvation, as revealed by Christ, isn't manifested in the freeing of human persons immediately from all that is evil. It begins as an interior transformation of what is spiritually evil into something good; it is accomplished by imitating Jesus. We are called to become new persons, like Christ. What is good builds people up in the image of Christ. Did any of those with Christ at Gethsemane suffer? Were they scourged and crowned with thorns? Did they walk the way to the Cross and die on it? Christ drained the cup of human suffering to show how it can be transformed individually and interiorly.

Jesus says to each of us: Come, follow me! It is an invitation to take part in this process of transformation. In my flesh, says St. Paul, I complete what is still lacking in Christ's sufferings—those of Christ's Body. This is itself a transformation of what caused his sufferings. We can each and all make these words our own. Then, again like St. Paul, we can share this with others by showing them how even suffering can be made good for the one who suffers. We can show it because we have experienced it.

The suffering need not be great or prolonged. It need not be physical, for suffering as such is primarily spiritual. But suffering is transformed. We become different persons spiritually, more capable of helping and sharing. Jesus wants love and its solidarity to grow from sufferings and around them, however small they may be. This is a good possible only for human persons. It is a good which never passes away. We do little things but doing them is no little thing! Are you ready to accept this gift today in whatever it may be, little or great, that may cause you suffering and distress? Mary our spiritual mother did many wondrous little things like this. Now she shows us how. She does little things with a love that makes them tremendously

Saturday

LEARNING TO TRUST IN GOD'S MERCY

A reflection taken from a talk by St. Pope John Paul II

O Mary, Mother of Mercy, watch over all people that the cross of Christ may not be emptied of its power, that our race may not stray from the path of good or become blind to its sin but may put all hope ever more firmly in God who is so rich in mercy. May God carry out the good works prepared from of old so that all may live wholly for God's praise and glory.

Mary is the one who has the deepest knowledge of the mystery of God's mercy. She knows the price that has been paid because her son paid it. She knows her son's compassionate love. We call her our Lady of Mercy and Mother of Divine Mercy. Each title expresses the special gifts given to her for the sake of her vocation, not only in bringing Jesus to birth but as mother of us all. God prepared her entire personality for these roles and so she became able to perceive through the complex of events that were her life, the grace of God to Israel and to every individual human person from generation to generation.

I want to proclaim to you a joy announced by the prophet Isaiah and lived by Mary. It is the joy of God's salvific gift which comes to you through a personal vocation as the unrepeatable expression of God's confidence in you and love for you. Remember that the power of Christ's Paschal Mystery supplies for your weakness and fills your hearts with empowering love.

When we come to communion we come to a renewed commitment. "*Come, follow me!*" is what Christ says to each of us. These words came to Mary through the Angel Gabriel. God enabled Mary to accept his call with all her heart. As one who had obtained mercy in this marvelous way, she becomes the model of mercy given to us through Jesus Christ.

Mercy accompanied her throughout her life, and most especially at the foot of the cross. In that cross, Jesus reveals God's mercy to Mary as she shared in that cross in a special way. Thus, she can bring to us a deeper appreciation of that mercy. Each of us, in each deed done, is an instrument of Divine Mercy shown in love. If that thought accompanies you then grace accompanies you. You too can be filled with grace. Walking in that grace is one of the ways Mary shows forth God's mercy. She shows us how to be bearers of that mercy, day by day and throughout each day until we enter the never-ending day of God's eternity.

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