

# **THE THIRTY-THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME NEVER ENDING JOY**

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*Sunday*

## **THE FEAST OF UNENDING JOY**

### **Recollection by a Monk of Mepkin**

In November of 1949, twenty-nine monks from Gethsemani Abbey arrived at Mepkin to found the Monastery of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Fifteen were novices, supposedly flexible enough to adapt to the hardships that go with founding a new community. An ancient motto to help us along the path to God says: "Through hardships, to Heaven"! Monastic life provides the hardships and God provides the grace to bear with them and persevere. Brother Boniface summed up the challenge and the grace by pointing to two of Mepkin's huge live oaks: "Those great big oak trees were once just little nuts that held their ground!" Monks are nuts for Christ putting down roots into monastic life and persevering until death, as St. Benedict says, they show the Church and the world the inner beauty that grows in one who walks the monastic way with Jesus. It is a matter of seeking the face of God in prayer, work, and community living. Only 10 of the 29 founders persevered to be buried at Mepkin.

All Christians are called to pray, to work, and to live in a community of mutual love, and monks seek to do this in the most thorough way possible. It is hard. Everything begins and ends with prayer—no matter how hot the summer heat or how hard the drudgery of turning what contained only a summer home into a property able to feed and clothe an entire community. Trappist tradition insists that monks support themselves by the work of their own hands. It took many experiments for the community to find success in raising chickens for their eggs, and then mushrooms.

This makes it difficult not to let prayer slip from the center of who you are and what you do. Besides, you live in silence and a kind of solitude; you rise early so you can get prayer and meditation in before the day's work begins. Many of our human ways of finding encouragement and support are deliberately given up in monastic life. A monastery is a kind of half-open door through which one can glimpse the life and joy of the Kingdom of God. The name 'mepkin' is said to mean "beautiful place". To translate natural into spiritual beauty it is important to have a beautiful church and liturgy. The monastery became the "Abbey of Our Lady of Mepkin"—Our Lady of the Beautiful Place—to show that beauty leads to joy. The present award-winning church was dedicated in 1993 with this in mind.

Mepkin Plantation didn't put prayer first but focused on work, done by slaves. Monks work to become wholly free and make the fruit of their work a free gift to others. It is a life of turning from all that enslaves people and leads them away from the love of God and loving respect for others. This is the path to God's Kingdom and unending joy. The twin blessings that are the Mepkin community and its church remind all of God's call to live now the life of charity that will last forever. Those who have gone into glory remind us who remain to keep death, and God, daily before our eyes. We show that we too can share God's unending joy. The special thing our founders did was love one another in God for an entire lifetime. Deeper than hardships, and even sin, is the joy given us in Christ. It shapes each monk's life as a witness for all to see and an invitation to follow Jesus. It is a response to the call that is faith and our call to celebrate on earth the Day of Unending Joy.

*Monday*

## **KEEPING OUR EYES FIXED ON JESUS**

**A reflection from a book by Anthony Bloom**

“As Jesus was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a sizable crowd, there was a blind beggar, Bartimaeus, sitting beside the road. On hearing that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout: “Jesus, Son of David, have pity on me!” I believe that one of the things which prevent us from being truly ourselves and finding our way in life is that we do not realize the extent to which we are blind. If only we knew that we are blind how eagerly we would seek healing. We might, as Bartimaeus may have done, look to human help—to doctors, priests, healers, and so on—until we gave up, having lost all hope “in the sons of men in whom there is no salvation”, as Scripture puts it. We might then turn to God. But even then we don’t realize what we are blind to.

What we see are visible things that seem to give us joy or prosperity or something like it. We are blinded not by the absence of sight but by the many things that are our visible world. We are blind to the fact that this world can’t fill the emptiness that is within us all. Think of our universe as ever-expanding and yet we can grasp this fact and a great deal about the universe itself. But knowing, seeing, such things don’t fill us within. In fact, when we turn within we find that nothing in the immensity of the universe can fill us. God alone, who has made us for himself, is the only one who can fill us and satisfy us completely.

There is a sense in which the visible universe has no “depth”. We can penetrate and understand everything in the universe, though gradually, but the knowledge doesn’t “fill” the emptiness within us. The center of a sphere is a point from which the sphere radiates in all directions. We know the fact but that is all there is to the matter. If you try to go “within” that center point you just end up back on the surface of the sphere itself. You go in a kind of circle. But there is a “depth” to the human heart and it can’t be measured, or filled, by anything in the visible, knowable universe.

The “depth” within us comes from God. What we need to grasp is the fact that only when we “see” the difference between visible reality and divine reality can we know what to seek—what we need to “see”. We are “blind beggars” painfully aware of our inability to see what we need to see to find salvation. Jesus is passing by. Will we let him go without begging for the ability to “see” divine reality? Are we willing to become blind to the visible in order to see the divine? Can we let Jesus show us where salvation and the fullness that ends our seeking really lie? We must lead one another to Jesus and to the sight we need. Only when we fix our gaze on Jesus do we become able to see. The gift he gives is faith and a faith that sets us free to seek help where it really is to be found.

## **SEEKING GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART**

### **A reflection from Spiritual Exercises by St. Gertrude the Great**

O My Love, what fulfillment to be one with You. The joining of the Word and a soul is the most worthy and marvelous of all unions. It achieves perfect union with God. It is a way of being intertwined in God. To enjoy you, O Word of God, is to be one with God.

You, Lord, are the peace which surpasses all understanding. You are the road by which a person comes into the inner chamber, the bridal chamber. Oh, if only someone like me, someone who seems so miserable as I do, could rest just for a moment wrapped in your cloak, as Ruth was in that of Boaz. Yours is a cloak of cherishing love. You wrap us in it so our hearts might become bold beyond measure in your love.

What a consolation it would be to hear one word from you, a word of your Living Word. Oh! that I might hear from you the good and wondrously pleasant word: I am your salvation! Behold, now the bedchamber of my heart is open to you!

Don't let me be disappointed in what I hope for. Grant that I may find rest for my soul in you! I know of nothing that is more desirable than you! I can't think of anything that is more lovable than your embrace. I want to rest under the wings of my Jesus! I want to dwell and abide in the tent that is your divine love.

Oh, love! O radiant noonday of love! I would die a thousand deaths to be able to rest in you in this way. Please, bend down, look down, bring your wonderful face close to me. Oh, give me the experience of your cherishing love. You are indeed my dearest one.

Grant me to come so close to you that nothing closer is possible. I don't want just to be near to you but to be within you. Then all sorts of virtues and spiritual flowers could spring up in me, for you are the Sun of Justice. Even though I am only dust and ashes, where you are every sort of life springs up and abounds.

If you are my husband, my Lord, what fruitfulness would enter my soul? Oh, that I might bear the offspring of total perfection! Grant that it be born in me! Then, indeed, I would be snatched out of this valley of misery! Then I would be able to glory in you forever. I would be right there in front of your so marvelous face!

Grant that I may glory in you forever! You are a mirror without defect and you haven't scorned to be united with a sinner like me! Let me be wholly yours!

*Wednesday*

## **THE RADIANT WITNESS OF OUR DEAD**

**A reflection developed from a text by St. Pope John XXIII**

The Church is always called to bear witness to Jesus Christ. This is a call to help others become all that God would have them be for others, as well as for oneself. It is only in Christ that we discover ourselves fully and recognize what wonderful gifts God has given us. God has created us to become persons who will radiate the beauty and love he gives us continually.

Each Christian is called to share in this vocation of the Church. It is not a vocation that ends at death. Rather, it only begins to assume its true dimensions when one enters fully into the Kingdom of God. It is only then that we enter fully into the beauty and goodness that God wishes to share with each of us. Think of the flowering of the vocation of the Mother of God which began when Jesus gave her to us all on the Cross!

In the immense field of activities which opens before the Church, and all who are her members, all people are embraced. All are invited into God's redeeming and perfecting love. Do we want to persuade all to accept this message and the vocation that goes with it? If we do we have accepted a direction for our living and one which continues even beyond the grave.

You know how many gifts you received from your parents, and from your brothers and sisters, and from the many others who reached out to you over the years of your growth as your full humanity began to flower. These gifts have not ceased to form and enrich us. Their influence will continue as long as our life lasts! We have been created for everlasting life, so how long will these gifts continue to enrich us and shape our own sharing with others?

The Church doesn't claim that it daily brings about the sort of transformation that the apostles experienced after Christ's resurrection or on the day of Pentecost. But the Church doesn't deny that God continues to work such transformations in individuals, and does it through the love and kindness of every one of those Christ has called to redemption. This is what he has called our dead to do for us, not only before but after their deaths.

How long has it taken you to begin to appreciate the gift of life that you received so many years ago? Those who are with God in God's Kingdom are only now beginning to fully appreciate the wonderful things God means to do through them. That means we too have not yet fully appreciated or entered into the love and gentleness and kindness, and sternness, which have been part of our upbringing and our lives. Let us ask these friends who have gone before us to teach us more and more deeply the lessons our departed have given us. Let us ask God to fully open our hearts to the love of those who gave us life and taught us how to live it in Christ! What better way can we find to honor them and to work with them in loving and sharing Christ with others.

Thursday

## TRUST IN GOD'S CONSOLATIONS

From a sermon by St. Bernard

The holy city of Jerusalem was once exiled and its people reduced to utter poverty. The prophet consoled them with the words: *“Do not weep, for your salvation will come quickly”*. They sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept. Babylon means “confusion”. Even if those to whom the prophet spoke were not confused in their deeds they were in their thoughts. They needed to turn their mental eye toward God but could not because they were assailed by futile and unwanted and distracting feelings and thoughts.

We may interpret the rivers of Babylon as bad habits which are sweet in the memory. They sweep those whom they seduce along into the sea that is this world. But thanks be to God who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, for even if bad habits press upon us, we make no response to the allurements of a worldly life, we are deaf to its call and hardened against its blandishments. Impeded by such follies, it is no wonder that we weep when we remember Zion and call to mind the delight of which we had a foretaste there, and of the fact that we will one day be found worthy to gaze upon the glory of God with unveiled face.

*“Even if I should walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I would fear no evil ... because you are with me.”* How dare I entertain this hope? Because the rod of correction and the staff of support both comfort me. Even though my God corrects me and checks my pride by reducing me almost to the dust of death, he still sustains my life and supports me so that I do not sink into the place of the dead. I will not turn away from the correction of the Lord, nor take it as a bad thing when he reproves me. For *“I know that all things work together for the good of those who love God.”*

Am I impatient? No, I bear all patiently. Why? *“Because of Him who made creation subject in hope. For creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious freedom of the children of God”*. Do not weep, then, city of Jerusalem, *“for your salvation will come quickly”*. If in your eyes God seems to delay, in God's eyes there is no delay. *“To him a thousand years are yesterday, come and gone.”* Hope in the Lord today and each day; you will know joy without end.

*Friday*

## **THE RADIANCE OF A MONASTIC LIFE**

**A reflection developed from an article in the Catholic Encyclopedia**

Mechtilde fell in love with the monastic life when she was taken to see her older sister, Abbess Gertrude, when very young. Eventually, she was permitted to live in her sister's monastery and be educated there. After she made vows, she was appointed Choir Mistress, both because of her beautiful voice and because she considered worship and praise the most important tasks she could do to please God.

Even as a girl, Mechtilde had the gift of respecting and caring for others. She liked people and they liked her. She loved to share what she experienced in seeking God, not only with her sisters in monastic life but with the girls who were sent to the monastery to be educated. One of these is with the future St. Gertrude the Great.

This Gertrude, together with another nun who was close to Mechtilde, collected her stories about her experiences of God in prayer. When this became known it disturbed Mechtilde, who was eminently humble and wanted to live a kind of hidden life. So, she took the problem to Jesus in prayer. She heard him say in reply: "It is by my will that all this has been committed to writing. You have no good reason to be concerned about it." In fact, the Lord told her that the book was to be entitled, "The Book of Special Graces" and that reading it would move many to seek to love the Lord more deeply. When she realized that the book would be for God's glory she began to cooperate with its authors and even proofread what they had written down.

Mechtilde was very enthusiastic about liturgical music and singing and loved to make the community's worship more solemn and beautiful. The schola under her direction practiced a great deal but no one complained about this because she was very good at communicating her own enthusiasm and dedication. She was constantly sick but she never let this make her sharp or unpleasant. Her sisters nicknamed her "God's nightingale" and supported her consistently even when she held many choir practices.

Although she never advertised herself, she had a great reputation as a guide to those who needed consolation or help to find light amid puzzlement and spiritual darkness. She was especially sought out by learned Dominicans and they saw to the translation of her book and promoted her teaching. Thus, it became famous in Italy and in Florence people copied her ways of addressing the saints and praising them. She was quickly recognized as one of God's saints after her death and her death day (November 11th) became her feast day. She shows how dedication to God and joy in worship and prayer can make the Christian and the monastic life radiant and attractive.

*Saturday*

## **'APOSTOLATE' MEANS BRINGING CHRIST TO THE WORLD** **Developed from homilies by St. Pope John XXIII**

In its deepest meaning, the word 'apostolate' means something beautiful; it means bringing Christ to a world ignorant of its deepest and most delight-filled meaning. That is what Blessed Mary did, as a virgin and as a mother; she brings a hope which had been unknown and not even imagined. It is a hope that no one had known was real, and one about everyday life as well as life beyond death. Perhaps she can teach us about our call to this apostolate and show our hope can be realized in previously unimagined ways.

What is it like to bring Christ to places where he has been unknown, or even to places where he has been despised or rejected or thrown out? We bring Christ as a small seed and often have to find a way to plant it in very unwelcoming ground. At times Christ seems like an arrow that causes a tiny wound that goes unnoticed but can lead to a life and death crisis. But often the arrow misses every mark and seems to have been shot in vain. This is not a helpful metaphor.

So let's present Christ as though he were a tiny newborn child that everyone wants to pick up and hold and hug and love. Every mother knows what that is like. But she also knows that the baby will grow up and then not everyone will respond with the same enthusiasm and tenderness.

Yet the words and example of Christ have become our rule of life and inspiration and the result is generosity and even tenderness. To bring Christ to others is to bring them the truth, including the truth about themselves. Do you want this truth more than any other thing? Don't fear; in Jesus, the truth is also love. A mother shows us this, and loves even without seeking any personal benefit, except perhaps that of self-respect and a sense of duty done.

This warns us that an apostolate of love has to be one of discretion, prudence, and patience. It is rooted in a profound love of Jesus and a robust spiritual life based on that love. This transforms us into loving and caring and respect-filled persons much like Mary. That is what first makes the message and gift we offer welcome and even attractive. We show what faith and love of Christ do to a person and how it makes that person beautiful and good.

What was special about Mary before God called her to virgin motherhood? She loved God and sought to obey God in every moment of her living. Read history and see how filled Mary's world was with violence and every sort of horrible attempt to use others to gain personal advantage. Her son has given all a new ideal that leads away from this. Whether or not individuals adopt that ideal as their own, it never goes away.

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