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Sunday

WELCOMING CHRIST INTO OUR HOME

A reflection developed from a homily by Origen of Alexandria

“Prepare a way for the Lord!” We hear this cry so often and we think, We too must prepare the way for the coming of Christ. That is how we understand the work of John the Baptist, and of Moses, and of the prophets—especially Isaiah. When we look at the texts of Scripture, we find many calls to turn to God. But the best way to turn to God is to follow Jesus, so all those who call people to God actually are calling them to Jesus.

Think of the person you were before you turned to God. Now renew putting your faith in Jesus. Doing this makes Jesus the foundation of your hopes. Recall Isaiah’s words, “*The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight and every valley will be filled in*”. You were called by Isaiah, and by John the Baptist, but you answered this call when it was repeated by someone you knew. Now you are the one who is to call others. But we all have “ways” that needed to be straightened and leveled. Perhaps we were like deep valleys or even steep-sided pits, and we couldn’t get ourselves out so as to help anyone else. The Lord Jesus came, and filled us with the Holy Spirit, and we found that we had all sorts of ways to help others, and to please God.

The love of God didn’t abandon us, struggling to get out of the dead ends we created as we sought good things. Jesus’ love ended the struggle and filled us with peace, patience, goodness, and all sorts of good works. We became a kind of home where God dwells; we even become mountains of God, so to speak. Once the human race felt blocked, as we did, by many hostile powers. Isaiah pictured these as mountains and hills that needed to be laid low. But they have been overcome and we can now walk on a straight and level path to God’s House, and find that God is right here within us. And we can help others do the same. We have become mountains of God because we show others God’s love and salvation, as a way out of whatever pits of frustration they may have fallen into.

Isaiah’s prophecy continues: “*Every crooked way shall be straightened.*” We were once crooked but we are so no longer. That is due to the grace of Christ. It comes to us often in the form of example. We pray each day to be able to cry out: “*It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me*”. Jesus, our Lord, has come. He has smoothed out the rough places and changed the crooked ways in straight ones. We each have been made into a level path that leads to Christ and so to God. God, the Heavenly Father, now walks in you. Christ, the Lord, now makes a home in you. You have been given the task of leading others to Christ so that they may be made God’s paths, and homes where God dwells and so are able to reveal divine life and love through their deeds.

In us a prophecy has been fulfilled: “*My Father and I will come and make our home in them*”. That is exactly what God has done through our faith in Jesus. It is by living *and* laboring with Jesus that we become revelations of God to one another. Accept these gifts and you will be a light of hope.

Monday

HELPING PEOPLE RECOGNIZE CHRIST

A reflection developed from “The Way of Freedom” by Fr. E. Schillebeeckx

“In Isaiah the prophet it is written: I send my messenger before you to prepare your way” (Mk.1: 8). The stories we hear in the Gospels tell us that people often don’t recognize messengers of God for what they are. The is true for those who make God’s call present to others. The message will be heard through us only if our belief enables us to recognize who is and is not a messenger from God. And to do that our faith has to recognize the message they proclaim as from God. If we do can do all this, why don’t we act on it?

The Scripture texts we hear during Advent present us with a web of reminisces about various messengers of God, and the messages God sent them to proclaim. They all lead to Jesus and his message. Notice that all these messages are about hope. We call these hopes “Messianic expectations”. But that doesn’t mean they are merely historical facts. They are hopes for being set free now! Do you want to be freed of anything? If not, you are unusual. If so how do you expect this will be made actually possible?

Christianity, and Jesus Christ, are about liberation and freedom. Israel was freed from Egypt, and then from various robbers and plunderers, and then from Babylonian exile. But the definitive freedom for all humankind is brought about by and in Jesus Christ. Has he set you free? Can you act out Christ’s message in spite of fear or anxiety?

Have you ever worried that living out Christ’s message would land you in jail? Have you ever worried that following Christ would lead you into a desert where you would be without all your ordinary supports? We are called to be liberators—just as were Moses and the prophets and Jesus. The work of freeing people is not a smooth and triumphal progress that everyone cheers for! We keep finding ourselves in various kinds of wilderness and have to keep going nevertheless. Our task is to bring others to freedom, and we only know freedom in doing this.

The various prophets, right down to John the Baptist, didn’t see themselves as marvelous liberators, but as worthless servants doing barely what they were told to do. When Jesus came, attention was called to him by an eccentrically dressed young man who seemed to live and act in a crazy way. Worse, the one to whom he called attention wasn’t obviously special at all. You wouldn’t notice him in a crowd. Jesus’ coming to and among us is so unobtrusive that he could easily escape notice if someone weren’t constantly pointing to him.

God never comes, so it seems, in a way that meets our expectations. God never comes through people who are obviously “messengers of God”—in Scriptural language ‘angels’. Yet God needs forerunners to announce Jesus Christ as salvation and freedom and you are one. Look for the ways God gives you to do what is asked and begin to do it—it will set you free too.

Tuesday

ABIDING IN THE LOVE OF CHRIST

A reflection from “On Virginity” by St. Ambrose

You are one of God’s people. You belong to God’s family. God has chosen you to be his own. You are as close to Christ as one of your bodily members is for you yourself. God has given you grace and you are beautiful in God’s eyes. What should you do to rest in the love of Christ that drew you to give yourself to him in those early days of your love for your Lord and of your awareness of his love for you?

Let the light of your grace of body and spirit shine out. Let the splendor God has given you be seen by all. When you are in your room at night you think of Christ and you long for his coming at every moment. But this is not something you can only do when alone. Think of the person Christ has loved in loving you. Be that person fully and always. Let yourself be attentive to the Lord’s word. Follow carefully the path God’s providence has given you to walk. Do not be negligent or lukewarm in giving yourself to your Lord and lover in all you do.

The bride in the Song of Songs says, “I sought him, but I didn’t find him; I called him and he didn’t hear me!” Are you not in his presence because you have displeased him? No. He constantly allows our love for him to be tested. If it seems to you that he has left, then go seek him. Seek him with your love.

The Holy Church can teach us how to hold fast to Christ. You have already been taught all you need to know. If you want to hold fast to Christ you must be prepared to follow him wherever he goes. You can only do this if you hold on to Christ by the bonds of love, by spiritual bonds. Suppose you face suffering. You must be fearless in clinging to Christ in the very midst of suffering. It is often easier to find him in the midst of such torments, whoever causes them.

In a brief moment, when you have escaped from the powers of this world without yielding to them, Christ will come to you. Christ will not allow you to be tested for long. Whoever seeks Christ in this way finds him. You will hold fast to him in the secret places of your heart.

What you seek is that your heart becomes his house, his abiding place. So what you have to do is keep this house spotless. Sweep out its secret recesses until it is wholly immaculate and beautiful. It is then a spiritual temple in which God’s holy, high priest offers spiritual sacrifice. Christ is the cornerstone, of his body the Church, and of the holy house that is the heart of each of his members. The Holy Spirit dwells in you, making all you are and do a gift for your lover Lord.

Whoever seeks Christ in these ways, whoever prays to Christ

Wednesday

THE CALL TO BE IMMACULATE

A reflection by Hugo Rahner

Exiled humanity seems to be standing at the outer edge of Paradise; we feel lost. In this state we see two figures, two symbols. The one is Eve and the other Mary. In the first we see the beginning of God's work and that of the Spirit. In the other we see the Church foreshadowed. In this way we see our own love of the Church joined with our devotion to Mary and we see that both receive a new depth of meaning.

The word 'immaculate' sums up the mystery of our spiritual life. We are members of the Church, and in us, the Church's mystery must be accomplished. It begins with Mary the Immaculate. We, in our turn, by the power of the Holy Spirit must become immaculate, as we were intended to be in the beginning of our race. In each of us, the victory over the serpent must be achieved. Each of us must once more find entry to the paradise lost from which Mary was never excluded! We must find entry into the eternal company of God and be presented spotless before the presence of God's glory, and with exceeding joy! The Epistle of Jude tells us as much.

It was Mary's privilege to receive this gift—not as returned because it was never lost—but given in virtue of the redeeming blood of her son, in order that in her a place be prepared for Him. And so to us, the heirs of Adam, the same gift is "returned", in virtue of the same blood. Thus St. Paul never tires of reminding his friends that Christ has reconciled them in the body of his flesh through death, to present us holy and unspotted and blameless before God. (cf. Col.1:22) He says that God chose them in Christ before the foundation of the world, so that all might be holy and unspotted in his sight. (cf. Eph.1:4)

God, in love and mercy, from all eternity made the choice to look past all the sins of the world to the death of the Beloved Son, "who by the Holy Spirit offered himself unspotted (immaculate) to God". (Heb.9:14) In this glance from eternity, God also saw the one woman, immaculate through the blood of the Son, and in her and with her saw all who belong to her. Hers is the victory over the serpent of error and sin. Hers it is to bring the symbols to fulfillment—both that of Eve and of herself. Thus it is that the Immaculate Conception of the Mother of God is in the deepest sense the consummation and the reality, the pledge and the beginning, of our own personal salvation.

What began in Mary, in the flesh, is in the Spirit fulfilled in the Church. Here perhaps is another reason why the Church celebrates so near the beginning of her liturgical year the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, for the Church thus celebrates her own mystery, the mystery of our personal sanctification, and being made spotless before our God. As we surrender our very selves into the hands of God the Spirit causes us to leave behind all that spotted us and left us exiles on the edge of Paradise. We are called to something much greater than Paradise.

Thursday

WHY WE CAN TRUST GOD'S ENDLESS MERCY

Inspired by a text from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

One day a Native American catechumen, named "Juan Diego" when baptized and called due to what is about to be described as Cuatitlan-tonanatzin by his own people, was headed past Tepeyac hill going to Mexico City proper. But he saw a marvelous sight and stopped. A beautiful woman, surrounded by a glob of light as bright as the sun, spoke to him in Nahuatl, his native tongue. She said:

"My dear son, I love you. I want you to know who I am. I am the Ever-Virgin Mary, Mother of the True God who gives life and keeps creation in existence. He created all things and is in all places. He is Lord of Heaven and Earth. I want a church built here, where your people may experience my compassion. All who sincerely ask my help in their work and in their sorrows will experience my mother's heart in this place. So go quickly now to Tenochtitlan (Mexico City) and tell the bishop what you have seen and heard."

This is a masterpiece of acculturated Christian faith and psychological subtlety. "Tonanatzin" means "Our-Mother-Foundation of Life". It is the name of the personage Europeans call the Earth-Mother and Mary wore the "uniform" proper to this role. Christian faith is presented as an Aztec could understand it.

"Juan Diego" was an "Eagle Knight"—one who had captured many enemy warriors so their blood could be offered to ensure creation would continue. Mary says Jesus does this; there is no need to keep offering human blood sacrifices. Everything made perfect sense; he obeyed.

Juan de Zumarraga, the bishop, didn't believe the message and asked for a sign. Since Mary, it seems, had been waiting all these hours, she promised a sign for the next day. But an uncle seemed to be dying that day so Juan Diego headed to Mexico City for a priest to anoint the man. But Mary met him anyway. He was worried he had offended her. She replied: "Don't worry, my son. I'm your mother aren't I, and I'm here with you. Aren't you under my shadow and protection? Your uncle won't die at this time so you don't have to find a priest; he health is restored as of this moment. Go to the top of the hill, cut the flowers that are growing there, and bring them to me."

In the picture-writing of Central America, a flower is the pictograph for 'word'. Mary was sending a word to the bishop, and in Castilian roses, not yet brought to the Americas, since she was speaking to a Spanish bishop. Besides, it was freezing cold and not a time when roses bloom. Further, she sent a picture of herself—a word as the Nahuatl (Aztec) understood it.

Mary shows herself as a master evangelist. Seeing her "word" the bishop fell on his knees and believed. Juan Diego spent the rest of his life as guardian of the picture, hung in the chapel built on Tepeyac hill. We see how far our God goes to show love and compassion. There are no clear limits and love, we say, always finds a way. God showed Mary exactly how to speak to the hearts of the Native Americans of Mexico and shares love, compassion and mercy. We are to imitate her. The gift is life in Christ. We are to put no bounds on sharing it.

Friday

THE GRACE OF THE LORD'S PRESENT COMING

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

Behold the King is coming! Let us hurry to go and meet our Savior. One who announces the Savior's coming certainly brings good news! The world is being reconciled and the good things to come are assured! And then there are so many who announce him—many yet having but one mind. From the land of the living, the prophets were sent, and the angels too. And our soul is heard to reply with Elizabeth, "*How is this that my Lord should come to me? The spirit in my heart leaps for joy.*" Yes, we really should go to meet the coming Christ with joy in our hearts. Let us adore him and cry out, Deliver us, Lord! Deliver us!

Holy Scripture seems to insist that we have such joy so that our spirit may run to meet Christ, straining forward impatiently and striving to come into the future even now. Indeed, before his actual second coming may the Lord come to us as on a friendly visit. This will be hidden only in that the Lord will come secretly. That is why the soul is filled with glory and exults to have this secret right now as a light to soul and mind. The inconceivable is understood!

Into what sweet and happy state of absorbed admiration does Christ plunge and keep our souls as we contemplate him? Our inward person exclaims, "Lord, who is like you?" Those who have experienced this, know of what I speak. Would that all experience it, and really desire that childlike love might be strengthened in them by this grace. The Lord lifts up the meek and brings the wicked down to the dust, but gives grace to the humble.

Since the first coming brought grace, and the last will bring glory, this one partakes of both. Through the consolation of grace, we are given a foretaste of future glory. In the first, the God of majesty is seen as one despised, and in the last, he will be seen in awe-inspiring might, but in this one, he is wonderful and lovable. It is utterly wonderful and lovable when God, the love of all lovers, is grasped even by the senses, and when the Bridegroom embraces the Bride and they become one in spirit. The bride is transformed into the same image in which, as in a mirror, she sees the glory of the Lord. How blessed are they, who, because of their burning love, have already merited to receive this privilege?

Blessed too are they whose holy simplicity leads them to hope for it. The first already enjoy a relief from labor and a fruit of their love. The others, whose merit is perhaps the greater as their relief is less, bear the burden of the day and its heat. They await the coming reward.

And so, my dearest ones, we who have not had an experience of such a wonderful consolation are in the meantime encouraged by firm faith and a pure conscience to wait patiently for the coming of the Lord. That faith cries out, with as much joy as fidelity, in St. Paul's words, "*I know whom I have believed and I am certain he is able to keep that which I have committed to him against that day.*" We await the coming of the glory of the Great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ. To the Three be glory forever!

Saturday

LET US STIR UP OUR HOPE FOR SALVATION

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

Let's reflect for a moment on the time God chose for sending us our Savior. We are told that it was at the "end of the ages". God had determined in his wisdom to bring help to our race only when the need was greatest. God knows how prone we are to ingratitude. So, it was when the sun of justice was giving diminished light and warmth to our earth that he came.

The light which is the knowledge of God seemed feeble and, as sin increased, so charity grew cold. Angels no longer appeared and no prophet raised a voice to lead us back to God. It seemed as though all had been overcome by hardness and obstinacy and all had ceased to intervene in our affairs. It was just at this point that the Son of God cried out, Here I am! Eternity broke in upon the world.

Temporal prosperity was at its height. There was peace between nations so that at one person's word a census of the whole world could be taken. It seems we know when the Savior came and why. Yet we still have to get to know how he makes his approach. You see, we need to go out to meet him. We know that he has already come in the visible flesh, so as to work at saving each individual person.

Now he comes in a daily, but hidden and spiritual way to further our individual salvation. As Scripture says, "*The Lord's anointed is the breath of life for us*". Surely, even if a sick person can't go far to meet a great physician yet one can at least make an effort to lift up one's head and raise oneself up just a little to greet him as he draws near. It isn't necessary for you to cross the seas, nor to pierce the clouds, not to climb high mountains so as to meet your God. It is not a lengthy road that is set before you. You only have to enter into yourself to find your Savior. As Scripture says, "*His word is very near you. It is on your lips and in your heart*".

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