

SECOND WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

SUN. THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Jan. 16 **DO YOU LONG TO BE TRANSFORMED?**
A reflection from a homily by St. Maximus of Turin

MON. Memorial of St. Anthony the Great

17 **THE STRUGGLE TO LOVE GOD WHOLLY**
A reflection from The Life of Anthony by St. Athanasius

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity Begins (Jan 18-25)

TUES. Tuesday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

18 **WE SAW THE STAR IN THE EAST, AND WE CAME TO WORSHIP HIM**
Excerpts from the Introduction to the Theme for the Year 2022 (part 1)

WED. Wednesday of the Second Week in Ordinary Time

19 **WE SAW THE STAR IN THE EAST, AND WE CAME TO WORSHIP HIM**
Excerpts from the Introduction to the Theme for the Year 2022 (part 2)

THURS. Memorial of Blessed Cyprian Michael Tansi

20 **THE TASK OF RECONCILIATION**
A reflection developed from a Homily by St. Pope John Paul II

Monastic Desert Day

FRI. Memorial of St. Agnes

21 **REMEMBERING THE POWER OF GOD'S GRACE**
A reflection developed from Butler's Lives of the Saints

Day of Prayer for Legal Protection of the Unborn

SAT. Memorial of Our Lady

22 **THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON**
A reflection taken from Mary for Today by Hans Urs Von Balthasar

Sunday

DO YOU LONG TO BE TRANSFORMED?

A reflection taken from a sermon by Bishop Maximus of Turin

The Son of God went to a wedding. He went so that his presence would sanctify the institution of marriage which He had founded. It was a wedding done according to the “old order” of things but he went to begin a New Order. He had come into the world in order to take as a bride the Church, drawn into one from all nations. He didn’t go to the wedding to enjoy the banquet or to drink wine but he went to show by the miracle of transforming water into wine what being one with him means. He no doubt enjoyed the wedding supper and the wine but he came to give a New Wine because the old wine was giving out.

So it was that, when the feast was well underway, the most blessed Mary came and said to him, “They have no wine”. Jesus answered as though he were displeased. “Mam”, he said, “how is that my concern, or yours?” However, the displeasure was only that his mother was thinking of earthly things and he was thinking of transformative grace. So, he replied: “My hour has not yet come.” He foresaw the glorious hour of his passion and then his resurrection, from which was to spring the grace of our redemption—the redemption of all. Why worry about ordinary wine when he was soon to give all the opportunity to drink the New Wine that would bring everlasting life and eternal redemption?

Holy Mary, however, since she was truly Mother of God, in her spirit realized what her son and Lord was thinking and knew he could give us both that spiritual wine and ordinary wine. She advised the servants, as she advises us, to do whatever Jesus might command. He showed immediately that he wasn’t really angry and said: “Fill the jars with water”. The servants obeyed immediately and suddenly a marvel began to take place. Water began to acquire a new color, a new fragrance, a new flavor—all at once it was completely transformed.

Of course, this transformation witnessed to the powerful presence of the Creator. Only he who had made water out of nothing could make it something new. No doubt, God thickens water so that it becomes snow, and hardens it so it becomes ice, and cause a rock in the wilderness to produce it, and turned it into blood in Egypt. But this sign was not about God’s power over water but God’s power to transform us.

Scripture says that this sign at Cana in Galilee was the first that Jesus performed, and so manifested his glory. More important yet, his disciples began to believe in Him. It was not what they saw happening to the water that they believed but that an ordinary human being was the Son of the Most High. Let’s believe this too, and believe it wholeheartedly.

He whom we confess to be the Son of Man is also Son of God. We believe not only that he shared our nature but that he had a divine nature. If such is our faith then we should believe as well that his is the power to transform us as completely and wonderfully as he did the water into wine. But we mustn’t only believe. We must act out the transformation. This means living divine-human loving, just as Jesus loved. That is the point of the transformation. It requires too that we share Jesus’

cross, however. Are you longing for this transformation, and will welcome it no matter what the cost?

Monday

THE STRUGGLE TO LOVE GOD WHOLLY

A reflection from The Life of Anthony by St. Athanasius

After Anthony's conversion temptations came to plague him. The Devil, the hater, and envier of good, couldn't bear to see a young man make a resolution to love God above all things. So, he began by deploying his ordinary tactics against him.

First, the devil tried to cause him to desert the life of training in the love of God by reminding him of the property he had, his responsibility to care for his younger sister, the bonds of kinship and its obligations, the love of wealth, the desire to be well-known, all the various pleasures connected with eating, as well as every other amenity that can make life nicer.

Second, the devil caused him to imagine all the hard things and austerities and the hard work that goes with the struggle to acquire virtue. He called attention to the fact that the body is weak and an entire lifetime is a long time. In short, the devil caused a kind of great dust cloud of arguments to rise up in his mind that worked to get him to abandon his set purpose of giving his entire life to God.

However, the Enemy quickly saw that he was powerless so long as Anthony kept his determination firm. Indeed, the devil saw that he was the one who was losing the struggle because of Anthony's steadfastness. The devil was being overcome by a solid faith supported by means of constant prayer.

The Enemy put his trust in the weapons furnished by a person's own body, especially that part of the body located near the belly button. This is the devil's preferred snare for the young, and he was proudly confident. So, he attacked this young man (Anthony was a teenager at the time of his conversion and choice of the monastic way) at night and made his life difficult by day. Even those who saw Anthony could tell that a struggle was going on between him and the Enemy.

The devil would provoke filthy thoughts but the young man would dissipate them by prayer. The Enemy would try to incite him to lust but Anthony, would fill himself with shame and so surround his whole body with faith. The desperate devil even masqueraded as a woman who came at night, making her attractive in every possible way simply in order to deceive Anthony. But he filled his mind with thoughts of Christ, reflected on the nobility of a soul as it comes from God, and thought of its spiritual character. That put out the burning of temptation.

Again and again, the Enemy caused him to imagine pleasure's seductive charms. But Anthony reacted by getting angry and feeling sadness, keeping his imagination fixed on the threat of hell-fire and its pain and corruption. He used these thoughts like a shield and came through all the temptations unharmed.

This whole sequence of events put the Enemy himself to shame. He had imagined himself to be like God and here he was being made a fool of by a mere youth. In his conceit, he had looked down on all creatures of flesh and blood and here he was being driven off by a being of mere flesh. Indeed, the Lord works with and in young Anthony and in us. The One who took on flesh and blood for our sakes gave Anthony complete victory in

his body and over the Devil himself. Let this be a lesson for all who struggle in earnest for God. As St. Paul says, "*Not I, but the grace of God within me*" wins the victory.

Tuesday

WE SAW THE STAR IN THE EAST, AND WE CAME TO WORSHIP HIM (Mt 2:2) **Excerpts from the Introduction to the Theme for the Year 2022 (part 1)**

According to the Gospel of Matthew (2:1-12), the appearance of the star in the sky of Judea represents a long-awaited sign of hope, that leads the Magi, and indeed all peoples of the earth, to the place where the true king and Savior is revealed. This star is a gift, an indication of God's loving presence for all humanity. The figures of the Magi are a symbol of the diversity of peoples known at that time, and a sign of the universality of the divine call which appears in the light of the star shining from the east.

The Magi reveal to us the unity of all nations desired by God. They travel from far-off countries, and represent diverse cultures, yet they are driven by the same hunger to see and know the new-born king. Christians are called to be a sign to the world of God bringing about this unity that he desires. Drawn from different cultures, races and languages, Christians share in a common search for Christ and a common desire to worship him. The mission of the Christian people, therefore, is to be a sign like the star, to guide humanity in its hunger for God, to lead all to Christ, and to be the means by which God is bringing about the unity of all peoples.

Part of the Magi's act of homage is to open their treasures, to offer their gifts, which from Christian antiquity, have been understood as signs of different aspects of Christ's identity. The diverse gifts, therefore, provide us with an image of the particular insights that different Christian traditions have into the person and work of Jesus. When Christians gather together and open their treasures and their hearts in homage to Christ, all are enriched as the gifts of these insights are shared.

The star rose in the east (Mt 2:2). It is from the east that the sun rises, and from what is called the Middle East that salvation appeared by the mercy of our God who blessed us with the dawn from on high (Lk 1:78). But the history of the Middle East was, and still is, characterized by conflict and strife, tainted with blood and darkened by injustice and oppression. Most recently, the region has seen a series of bloody wars and revolutions and the rise of religious extremism. The story of the Magi also contains many dark elements, most particularly Herod's despotic orders to massacre all the children around Bethlehem who were less than two years old (Mt 2:16-18). The cruelty of these narratives resonates with the long history and difficult present of the Middle East.

It was in the Middle East that the Word of God took root and bore fruit. And from this east that the apostles set out to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The Middle East gave thousands of Christian witnesses and thousands of Christian martyrs. And yet now, the very existence of the small Christian community is threatened as many are driven to seek a more secure and serene life elsewhere. Like the light which is the child Jesus, the light of Middle Eastern Christianity is increasingly threatened in these difficult times.

Jerusalem is a powerful symbol for Christians because it is the city of peace where all humanity was saved and redeemed. But today peace is missing from the city. Various parties stake their claim to it and disregard others.

Jerusalem was the city of kings, indeed the city that Jesus will enter triumphantly, acclaimed as king (Lk 19:28-44). Naturally, the Magi expected to find the new-born king revealed by the star in this royal city. However, the narrative tells us that, rather than being

blessed by the birth of the Savior king, the whole of Jerusalem was in tumult, much as it is today.

Wednesday

WE SAW THE STAR IN THE EAST, AND WE CAME TO WORSHIP HIM (Mt 2:2) **Excerpts from the Introduction to the Theme for the Year 2022 (part 2)**

Today, more than ever, the Middle East needs a heavenly light to accompany its people. The star of Bethlehem is a sign that God walks with his people, feels their pain, hears their cries, and shows them compassion. It reassures us that though circumstances change and terrible disasters may happen, God's faithfulness is unfailing. He walks beside his people and brings them back when they are lost or in danger. The journey of faith is this walking with God who always watches over his people and who guides us in the complex paths of history and life.

For this Week of Prayer, the Christians of the Middle East chose the theme of the star that rose in the east for a number of reasons. While many Western Christians celebrate Christmas, the more ancient feast, and still the principal feast of many Eastern Christians, is the Epiphany when God's salvation is revealed to the nations in Bethlehem and at the Jordan. This focus on the theophany (the manifestation) is, in a sense, a treasure which Christians of the Middle East can offer to their brothers and sisters around the world.

The star leads the Magi through the tumult of Jerusalem where Herod plots the murder of innocent life. Still today, and in various parts of the world, innocents suffer violence and the threat of violence, and young families flee tyrants. In this context, people look for a sign that God is with them. They seek the king of gentleness, peace and love. But where is the star that leads the way to Him? It is the mission of the Church to be the star that lights the way to Christ who is the light of the world. By being such a star the Church becomes a sign of hope in a world of troubles and a sign of God's presence with his people, accompanying them through the difficulties of life. But the divisions between us dim the light of Christian witness and obscure the way, preventing others from finding their way to Christ. Conversely, Christians united in their worship of Christ, and opening their treasures in an exchange of gifts, become a sign of the unity that God desires for all of his creation.

The Christians of the Middle East offer these resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity conscious that the world shares many of the travails and difficulties that they experience, and yearns for a light to lead the way to the Savior who can overcome darkness. The COVID-19 global pandemic, the ensuing economic crisis, and the failure of political, economic and social structures to protect the weakest and most vulnerable, have underlined the global need for a light to shine in the darkness. The star that shone in the east, the Middle East, two thousand years ago still calls us to where Christ is born. It draws us to where the Spirit of God is alive and active, to the reality of our baptism, and to the transformation of our hearts.

After encountering the Savior and worshipping him together, the Magi return to their countries by a different way, having been warned in a dream. Similarly, the communion we share in our prayer together must inspire us to return to our lives, our churches and our world by new ways. But what does this mean in practice? Serving the Gospel today requires a commitment to defending human dignity, especially in the poorest, the weakest and those marginalized. It requires from the churches transparency and accountability in dealing with the world, and with each other. This means churches need to cooperate to provide relief to the afflicted, to welcome the displaced, to relieve the burdened, and to build a just and honest society. This is a call for churches to work together so that young people can build a future that accords to God's heart, a future in which all human beings can experience life, peace, justice, and love. The new way between the churches is the way of visible unity that we sacrificially seek with courage and audacity so that, day after day, "God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

Thursday

THE TASK OF RECONCILIATION

A reflection developed from a Homily by St. Pope John Paul II

The life and witness of Father Cyprian Tansi is more than an inspiration to the people of Nigeria, the people he loved so much. He was a lover of God and spent long hours praying before the Blessed Sacrament, the food of love and of generosity and courage that in him strove to bring God's love to as many as possible. Those who knew him testify to his great love of God. Everyone who met him was touched and moved by his personal goodness. He was a man for others. He always put others' good in first place and was especially sensitive to the pastoral needs of families.

If Christians are to learn to love God above all else and love one another as they love themselves they must begin in the life of their family. Father Cyprian always took great care in preparing couples for Holy Matrimony. He preached the special importance of marital chastity. He tried likewise to promote recognition of the dignity of women. More, this was integral to his concern for the education of the young. He knew all such things depend on love for God and seeking God's face in prayer. He was thinking of his people in this way when he got his bishop to send him to Mount St. Bernard Abbey to pursue a Cistercian monastic vocation. He hoped to bring contemplative life to his part of Africa.

Prayer and sacrifice are the door to holiness and sanctification. But Father Cyprian knew there is something of the prodigal son in every human being. He knew all are tempted to separate themselves from God and seek to control their own happiness in a self-centered, independent way. He knew that all are disappointed by the emptiness this elusive quest brings, yet it fascinates us. He also knew we all eventually find in the depths of our hearts a road leading to our Heavenly Father's house.

He made himself an apostle of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but not as an individualistic turning to God. We must forgive one another and learn from one another in God's love. He wanted reconciliation to be a reality at every level of Nigerian life. Thus the Prodigal Father of Jesus' parable is given us. This realization alone can lead all Nigerians, all Christians, both Christian and Muslim people, to reconcile with one another. The call to reconciliation is also a call to the joy of restored communion—with God and one another.

Let us join Father Cyprian in inspiring people to come to true peace in God and to nourish a life of peace with others through the grace of God. We begin with the Sacraments, and especially that of Holy Communion. We are one with Father Cyprian now in Christ and in the Eucharist. With him let us pray to God that all may become one in Him.

Friday

REMEMBERING THE POWER OF GOD'S GRACE

A reflection developed from Butler's Lives of the Saints

We are told in a fifth-century document about a thirteen-year-old girl who accepted martyrdom rather than be unfaithful to her complete gift of self to Christ. Her virginity is emphasized as a way of reminding all Christians that not even lustful attraction is more powerful where believers are concerned than love for God. Agnes was remembered as a person who had given herself in marriage to Christ. When young men sought to marry her she refused them with the explanation that she had already been "married" to God in Christ and so was not available. Finally, one of them denounced her to the prefect of Rome citing the decree of Diocletian that those obstinately professing Christ were to be executed.

In the legend, the prefect begins by decreeing she shall be confined to a public house of prostitution and all her clothes taken away. Those who sought to gratify lust with her found that they could not overcome her resistance, and this was attributed to the miraculous intervention of God. In other words, she was a convincing witness to the power of grace that enables one to cling to God, and to doing God's will, in spite of every and any obstacle. In Roman law, virgins were not to be executed, and to get around it, a virgin was usually lustfully violated by the executioner or condemned to prostitution—as a prelude to execution. The legend claims this did not work in Agnes' case and so the prefect had to order her killed while still a virgin. Nothing could keep her from remaining faithful to her gift of self to God alone.

The name 'Agnes' means "pure" in the sense of "guiltless". Scripture tells us that the "pure of heart" will see God. Agnes is a witness to the fact that God's grace can enable everyone who will trust in Jesus to remain pure and guiltless, and so to enter God's Heavenly Kingdom and "see" God face to face. If one need not fear government-sponsored persecution and the death penalty how can those who are not threatened by such extreme dangers drawback from fidelity to their gift of self to God in Christ? But accepting baptism is equivalent to making such a gift. There is nothing with a person, including carnal passion or attraction, which can prevent us from being faithful to this gift. The legend witnesses to the fear of their own passions which our early Christian ancestors felt, and an assurance that God's grace can overcome every such influence. Nothing can come between God and those God has chosen, as St. Paul declares. The example of St. Agnes amazed these ancestors of ours because they didn't expect a person so young could resist authority figures as she did. She overcame all obstacles, both within her and outside her, declaring "You may stain your sword with my blood, but you will never be able to profane my body, consecrated to Christ." Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ! We can bear witness to these things no matter what our age or circumstances. As Scripture so often says: Do not be afraid!

Saturday

THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON

A reflection taken from Mary for Today by Hans Urs Von Balthasar

The best way to learn something about Mary and how she is related to our present age is to start with Chapter 12 of Revelation. This question is at the core of this last book of the Bible, which uses visionary images to provide insight into the drama of the world's history.

The "great portent... in heaven," the "woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars," but crying out in the pangs of birth, is without doubt first of all God's people Israel suffering the birth-pangs of the Messiah: is it to give birth to something far more than an ordinary human being-- but how can this come about? And the pains are not just internal: joined to them is measureless fear of the monster, the fire-red dragon with its seven mouths open wide "that he might devour her child when she brought it forth."

But in Israel's heyday, in the embodiment of its entire hope and its entire faith, the birth takes place of the boy who receives from God absolute power over creation: power over death, power even over being swallowed up by the dragon, so that, rising again on the other side of this death, he can be "caught up to God and to his throne." This fulness of Israel's faith was a particular human being called Mary, who bore the Messiah in the flesh and shared in experiencing and suffering his entire fate up to the crucifixion and being raised to the throne of God. What became of her? It says first of all that she "fled into the wilderness, where she had a place prepared by God."

The dragon and the woman are opposed to each other; the dragon has no other aim than to "pursue" the woman. We are now in the period after Christ. This precisely is the age in which we live, in which also lives the woman who was Israel, who became Mary and who finally today has become the mother of all Jesus' brothers and sisters. In Revelation Mary becomes the Church, since it is said that in his anger against the woman the dragon "went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and bear testimony to Jesus."

The devil's rage against the Church is as great as it is because it is not able to achieve anything against her... "the woman is given the two wings of the great eagle that she might fly... into the wilderness." The woman is in flight, and this succeeds since she is given the wings of God, who like the eagle takes his young on his wings so that they may lose their fear and carries them out of the nest into the air, in this case, into the wilderness. It is precisely the wilderness that is the "place of safety" to which God brings the woman and where in a miraculous way he sees to her nourishment in the time of history, just as he had fed Israel in the desert. Then there was an exodus toward a promised land.

The Church means existence between what the dragon spews forth and the nourishment of heaven, threatened with death and yet protected in a place prepared by God. The Church is not some entity differentiated from its children: she lives in them, as her children live through and in her.

Mary, the "Mother Church" and at the same time "Mother of the Church" (she can be both, because at the foot of the Cross, she became the original image of the community founded by the Crucified One and at the same time received the apostle and in him all Christians as her children) in the hidden seclusion of her earthly life already experienced beforehand everything that her children would later encounter in the way of unpleasantness and consolation.