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Sunday

KEEPING OUR EYES FIXED ON THE LORD

A reflection by Origen of Alexandria

“Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit and his reputation spread throughout the countryside; he taught in the synagogues and everyone sang his praises.” When we read about Jesus teaching in the synagogues of Galilee and about the praise everyone heaped upon him, we must be careful not to think of those peoples as privileged in some unique way and of ourselves as deprived. If Scripture tells us the truth, Jesus speaks to us today just as truly as he spoke to synagogue congregations long ago. He is speaking to us, assembled here, and to congregations all across the world and throughout all time. He is asking us to be instruments through which he can continue his teaching.

What we have to do is pray that we may always be fit and ready to sing his praises and repeat his words and deeds. *“Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. When he stood up to read, they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling it he found the passage where it is written: The Spirit of the Lord has been given me for he has anointed me.”* This was no coincidence. It was part of the plan of Divine Providence.

God planned that Jesus should unroll the Isaiah scroll and find this passage prophesying about Jesus himself. Do you remember the other Scripture text which reads, *“not a single sparrow will fall to the ground without your Heavenly Father’s permission”*? Do you recall that the apostles were told that every hair on their heads had been counted? Remembering such texts, we can be sure it was not by chance that the Isaiah scroll was produced rather than some other or that this precise passage was found. Nor is it by chance that we hear these words.

We too can say *“the Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me”*. When Jesus proclaimed this message *“every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him”*. At this very moment he wants us to fix our eyes upon him too. Whenever we direct our inward gaze upon our Savior, we fix them on wisdom and truth in contemplation of God’s only Son. Blessed the assembly of which it can be said *“all eyes are fixed upon him”*. For all of us to have our eyes fixed on Jesus — and not just the eyes of our bodies but of our inner selves — is to reflect the radiance that streams from him, as at his Transfiguration.

How do we reflect Jesus? We do it when the beauty and wonder of love fills our hearts and streams forth in our deeds of care for one another. This is how we should understand that other Scripture text: *“The light of your face has shed its brightness upon us, O Lord”*. We see that on the Cross and in the Resurrection, and we see it in our congregation and in each of our brothers and sisters—if we all keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and our ears and hearts fully open to his work. What the Spirit places within us is meant to shine forth. Let us love one another, and all God’s children, as Jesus loves us and them and fulfill God’s intention.

Monday

THE PATH TO FERVENT LOVE OF GOD

A reflection taken from a letter by St. Francis de Sales

You want to know how to love God fervently and so come to peace of mind. Reflect that love of God is a virtue, an inclination to do willingly whatever is pleasing to God. It is an enlargement of the heart opening one to God. The good walk in this way and the fervent run in it, and swiftly.

The first step is to obey God's general commandments and then those that go with our state in life. To fail in this is to live in sin. As a bishop I am obliged to visit the people I shepherd; if I spent the whole week praying and fasting while neglecting this duty I would be lost! A married person can't refuse his/her spouse conjugal obligations or neglect care for their children; refusing to do these things is worse than unfaithfulness! These two sorts of commandments, faithfully observed, are the foundation of fervent love for God if one does them promptly and willingly.

How does one acquire promptness and willingness? First by remembering that it is God we serve. Our purpose for existing is to do God's will so we should be anxious to do it. We ask daily that God's will be done so why does it seem so hard to do it?

After all, one remembers that God's commandments are gracious, gentle and sweet. What makes them hard is self-will. You want to do what you want, period! From among all sorts of fruit our First Parents chose the one forbidden fruit; they wanted it to be good and thought they could make it so. Saul was ordered to destroy everything pertaining to Amalek but he destroyed only what he thought not precious enough to be offered in sacrifice and a feast for his soldiers. God wants obedience and not sacrifice! The contemplative life is good, but not if that gets in the way of obedience. If God wants us to serve in one way, we mustn't try to serve in another.

Third, we have to face the fact that every state in life has its irksome side; there is always something that seems bitter and unpleasant. That leads people to think they want to change their state in life. Bishops would rather not be what they are and married people want to be single and single people want to get married and so on. We want to get rid of what irks us and we have a general restlessness, not to mention a kind of rebellion against all sorts of constraints. We like to think everyone else is better off than we are and don't want to accept the truth. What we have to learn is to resign ourselves to God's will and do it willingly. Sick people are never comfortable and tend to toss and turn and complain. A person who is not sick with the fever of self-will can put up graciously with everything. What we ought to aim at is having no real personal preference but seeking only God's will as such.

Finally, we need to learn to do God's will cheerfully. I am a bishop and am obliged to do the hard things involved. What's more, I must do them joyfully! I must find my pleasure and happiness in doing these things. This means denying self and your own will, according to our Lord's wish. To think I would do better at something

else or be happier is just a temptation. Our Lord knows what he is doing. Let us do his will out of joyful love!

Tuesday

FINDING GOD IS FINDING ONE'S TRUE SELF

A reflection from St. Paul Apostle of the Nations by H. Daniel Rops

What Saul had done to the Nazarenes in Jerusalem—tracking them down, denouncing them, having them arrested and beaten, forcing apostasy—was not enough. Groups had formed outside Palestine and he would strike them down! He would start with Damascus. Suddenly a light shone around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Stammering, he replied: “Lord, who are you?” “I am Jesus!” Stunned and trembling, the Pharisee murmured: “Lord, what do you want me to do?” “Get up and go into the city and you will be told what to do. I have appeared to you to appoint you a minister and a witness.” It was a portentous event, incalculably important; apart from it the future of Christianity would have been changed.

One supposes it impressed those of Saul's age as much as us. The New Testament retells it four times in narratives that are identical apart from details. The facts are incontestable just by reason of Paul's two accounts. On the road to Damascus, in the midday sun, he found himself face to face with Jesus and addressed by name. This is how the so-called conversion of St. Paul was accomplished.

If there were in him secret openings to grace—unknown even to him, or if discernable elements contributed to the staggering psychological shock on the road to Damascus, this is of secondary importance. The narrative made clear that Paul continued to believe he was through and through Jewish in conviction. Yet he was caught up in an overwhelming event that changed him radically and completely. What he hated one day, he adored the next. The cause he had fought against so violently, he would serve with the same violence. In a single second God had transformed him and bound him forever to Jesus.

This man whom the light struck down upon that road was conquered, but in this defeat his heart's most profound desires were fulfilled. How can we avoid a certain envy? Saul of Tarsus, more sinful than any of us, an executioner whose hands were stained by the blood of faithful Christians, had the inconceivable good fortune to meet Christ personally and to be called by name by Christ's voice. Why was this? Why was this one person singled out?

We are in the midst of what Paul thought of as the mystery of grace. There, in the secret designs of Providence, all is obscure. Yet everything still leads to one goal and that is what the Light decides. Paul has become the person God had chosen for him to be from before his conception. It was to be the fact that Paul would ever after move toward the goal set by this divine choice. The Christ who overcame him would, in his words, parade him on the highways of the world as his own captive and even slave. Saul made Paul would always find the hours of his life too few to adequately give witness to his love for the One who had loved him so much as to strike him to the heart and make him Paul. May God grant that we should have such a blessing and always live in it.

Wednesday

THE JOY & CROSS OF FOLLOWING ST. BENEDICT

A reflection from the Great Exordium of Conrad of Eberbach

“Hugh, archbishop of Lyon and legate of the Apostolic See, to Robert, abbot of Molesme and to those brothers who desire with him to serve God according to the Rule of St. Benedict. ... You want to observe more strictly and perfectly the Rule of St. Benedict, which you have professed and which is kept somewhat tepidly and imperfectly in that monastery. Because many obstacles prevent you from doing this at the aforesaid place, we give you leave to go to another.”

Relying on this authorization, Abbot Robert and his brothers returned to Molesme and chose as associates brothers who rejected the enticements of a lax life, those who burned with eager minds to keep the Holy Rule purely and simply. There were 21 who set out in the desire of keeping to the straight and narrow way of the more perfect living of the Rule of the Holy Father Benedict.

Lord Odo, Duke of Burgundy, was delighted by the fervor and devotion of the brothers and at his own cost completely furnished the wooden monastery they built and supported them abundantly with lands and livestock. But not long after, the monks of Molesme complained to the Pope and legate that Robert’s absence was damaging their community. As a result, Abbot Robert was asked to return. Deprived of their spiritual father, the newly founded church of Citeaux quickly put forward as abbot a much-respected monk named Alberic. He was a learned man, assiduous in divine and human affairs, a lover of the Rule and of the brothers. He had been prior at Molesme, and shared in the founding of Citeaux. He endured much blame from false brethren, as well as blows and imprisonment. When, after considerable resistance, he agreed to accept the pastoral charge he sent two monks to the Apostolic See and obtained the protection of the Pope as guarantee of the abbey’s peace and liberty. In the second year after the foundation of the monastery they brought back the written privilege.

Following this, the abbot and his brothers began to arrange their new way of life in the manner prescribed in the Rule. They observed the Rule’s traditions about the manner and order of divine services, rejected supplementary psalms, prayers and litanies, because they were being performed tepidly and negligently. The Blessed Benedict declared a monk should make himself a stranger to all worldly affairs, and so the new community eliminated all that contributed only to comfort and spurned all tithes that would lead to conflict with secular clergy. They decided to receive lay brothers to help them support themselves by manual labor. The choir monks would remain within the cloister. In the tenth year of his abbacy, the blessed Alberic deserved eternal life.

By the grace of the Holy Spirit the monks elected as abbot a man named Stephen, a person of outstanding holiness and virtue, a lover of the wilderness and very zealous for holy poverty. Since the Order was newly established and its statues still needed work, he called the brothers together and consulted them. They forbade secular authorities from holding court at the monastery and forbade any non-necessary accouterments in the liturgy. The ideal of poverty guided these decisions. Abbot Stephen and his brothers advanced day by day in virtue and witnessed to the wise bargain they had made in choosing this way of life.

Thursday

OUR SACRIFICE TO GOD

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Augustine

If you want to please God you need only turn to Scripture to know what you should do. The fiftieth psalm says: "*Had you desired a sacrifice I certainly would have offered one, but you take no delight in burnt offerings*". These negative words need to be complemented by positive ones: "A sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite spirit, a broken and contrite heart God will not despise". We can always find something to offer.

Indeed, we are not asked to offer animals as in the days of the patriarchs. But you people through generations have the same faith even though the sacramental signs have been modified. Changes in the outward signs of faith have not affected the underlying truth. Rams, lambs, calf, and goats—whatever the victim once was it foreshadowed Christ. He is the one who leads his flock, and it is Christ who offers himself instead of the son of Abraham. Both the ram and Isaac were foretypes of Christ. As Isaac carried the wood for sacrifice so Christ carried his cross, but whereas the ram whose horns were caught in a thicket was offered in place of Isaac there was no substitute for Christ.

Behold the Lamb of God; behold Christ! He takes away the sins of the world. The ancient patriarchs believed in Christ, their Lord and ours. Not only did they believe him to be the Word of God, but they also believed that the man Christ Jesus is the mediator between God and humanity, and by word and prophecy they handed on that faith to us. That is what St. Paul means when he says: "*We have the same spirit of faith and therefore it is written: I believed and I have spoken accordingly.*"

King David, in the psalm I have already quoted, spoke of sacrifices which are no longer offered to God. However, he showed the vision of a prophet in that same psalm. Setting aside the practices of his own day, he looked into the future and taught us that "*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite spirit*".

Well, then, we have a sacrifice to offer. No need to go in search of a flock of sheep or sail to distant lands to bring back spices. Search your own heart and let it be broken and contrite. Are you afraid that such breakage will be the death of your heart? Don't be afraid! In the very psalm I have been quoting we find the words: "*A pure heart create in me, O God*". Yes, create a pure heart in me, Lord. And that it may be created let the old, unclean heart within me indeed be broken!

Friday

WE MUST WORSHIP ONLY THE ONE TRUE GOD

A reflection developed from a discourse by St. Thomas Aquinas

The first commandment has to do with loving the One True God: “*You shall not have strange gods in my presence*”. Scripture tells us some of the many reasons why people have worshipped something or someone other than the One God. For instance, some have thought demons more important or helpful than the True God. Some have worshiped the sun and the moon, mistaken for divine beings. In other words, people are deceived about who God is. Some imagine that natural things are the sources of life and goodness and so, in effect, worship them. Some have worshiped the dead or their ancestors and some have worshiped powerful living, though no salvation is from them. Some others have treated themselves, or things like pleasures, as though they were the sources of goodness. None of these should be worshipped as the True God is worshiped.

Scripture gives us a number of reasons why our worship should all be directed to the True God. The first is that one should reverence anything only according to its genuine dignity. We must not “*exchange the glory of the incorruptible God for the image of a corruptible thing*”, as the Letter to the Romans tells us. Everything else is passing and won’t always be there for us. The One God alone is omniscient and so knows all and cares for all. That is essential to God’s dignity as supreme. “*All things are open and naked in his sight*”, as the Letter to the Hebrews says.

We should worship God because it is from God that we receive everything good. God is the maker of all things. God fills all things with goodness. We would be very ungrateful indeed if we did not appreciate what has been given us. To look to anyone else would be to treat them as gods and so do exactly what we are forbidden to do. We have to put all our trust in God. “*Blessed is the one whose hope is in the name of the Lord*”. St. Paul asks, “*Now that you have known God ... how can you turn to what is weak and needy?*”

Yet again, remember that we have made a solemn promise to worship only the True God. We have renounced the devil and promised fidelity to God alone. This is a promise we must not break! “*One who breaks the Law of Moses can be put to death on the evidence of two or three witnesses, so how much more does one who treads under foot the Son of God deserve punishment!*” We have made a choice and must not try to undo it.

It is a terrible burden to try and find a good life by serving the devil and doing evil. The prophet Jeremiah reminded his contemporaries that if they chose other gods, they would have to work at serving them day and night and get nothing from it anyway. That is one reason why one who sins has to sin again; sin never gives us a good life but keeps us seeking it in vain. Jesus, on the other hand, tells us that his burden is light and his yoke pleasant to bear. You have entrusted yourself to Jesus. Don’t turn back. Think of the greatness of the reward promised us for serving God. There is no law that brings with it such promises. In Matthew’s Gospel we are told that “*we shall be as the angels of God in heaven*”. Think of St. Peter’s question: “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!*”

Saturday

DAILY TRUST IN GOD

From a sermon by St. Augustine

In Christ's name let us help one another not to let faith lie dormant when we are buffeted by the winds and waves of the world. The Lord's power is not dead. Nor is the Lord asleep. In yesterday's Gospel Jesus is asleep. Today is he asleep in your hearts? If Jesus were indeed on watch within you, then your faith too would be wide awake. Recall that St. Paul has reminded us that Christ is dwelling in our hearts—through faith.

The story of Christ's sleep has a symbolic meaning as well as a real one. The crew of that boat, which is a symbol of the Church, is made up of persons sailing the sea of this world. We are each a temple of God, just as is the Church, and each of our hearts is a kind of boat, which cannot be wrecked so long as we fill our minds with trust in God.

When you have to listen to criticism or abuse, you are being buffeted by the wind. When your anger is roused you are being tossed by the waves. Your heart is in danger; your boat is taking a beating. Hearing yourself insulted you long to retaliate. But to do that would cause what you fear, shipwreck. Why? Because you can only actually seek revenge if Christ is asleep within you. You seek revenge only when you forget Christ's presence in you. Wake him up! Remember him. Let him keep watch with you by yourself paying attention to what he says.

What was it you wanted? You wanted to pay someone back? Have you forgotten what Christ prayed as he was being nailed to the cross? "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Christ doesn't want vengeance. Don't let him stay asleep within you when you want it. Recall Christ's words and commands. When Jesus is awake within you the only thing you can say is: How foolish I am, thirsting for revenge! Do I want to leave my body breathing out threats and inflamed with rage? Remembering this calms rage and lets Jesus restore peace to my heart.

What I have said about anger should be our rule of conduct in every temptation. Something disturbs you. It is the moment to awaken Christ in your heart and let him remind you that one who can command the sea is one whom you should obey. Try to be more like the winds and the sea and obey God who made you and dwells within you. Words, actions, plans—are so much blustering and huffing and puffing. We refuse to be still at Christ's command. You are only human. If something overwhelms you with a tumult of emotion don't despair. Wake up Christ within you! Then you can sail in quiet waters. Then you can reach your destination.