

THE FIFTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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A reflection developed from various sources

Sunday

GOD CALLS US TO GO INTO DEEP WATER

A reflection from The High Green Hill by Fr. Gerald Vann

“Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret with a crowd pressing around him to listen to the Word of God, and he caught sight of two boats close to the shore with the fishermen who had gone out in them washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, Simon’s.” (Lk.5:1-11) Do you remember our Lord’s words to Simon once he had finished proclaiming God’s word? Go out into the deep water, he said. There is always a temptation to think of religion as something added on to the main business of life, like an addition to a building. But if we think like that, we miss the whole meaning and adventure to which God calls us. Living our faith isn’t something added on to life but the revelation of a wholly new dimension of life. We are invited to plunge into it as a diver plunges into the sea. The temptation we face is to live on the surface of life. We concern ourselves with the jobs and joys that every day brings without bothering about what lies beneath them. But that means we don’t live fully! If we go on like that there is no depth in our lives. Our Lord says to us, Go into the deep water!

This can be a frightening thing. Remember the first time you went into the water, especially if it meant going into the sea. It can be scary. The first time you go in you find yourself in a new and strange element. But if you go on you can forget your fright and enjoy a new thrill. You find a sense of freedom; what was strange begins to seem friendly and the water buoys you up and supports you. But if it is the sea, it still has the feeling of overwhelming immensity!

That is what the life of faith is meant to feel like. It isn’t a matter of knowing more things than you would otherwise but of knowing something underneath and deeper than everything else. You know the secret heart of everything because you know that Presence which is Love Divine. You know what surrounds and is in all things. You plunge into Divine Life rather like a diver does into the water. This is why Our Lord said that he had come that we might have life and have it ever more abundantly. If you plunge into faith, you escape the narrow confines of selfish and shallow living. You move into immensity. It can be scary. Remember what Jesus tells us: Don’t be afraid! His hand is always there to hold us up and his voice to encourage us, even as he encouraged and held up Peter when he lost faith and began to sink in the stormy waters.

Remember now what Simon said to Jesus after Jesus finished teaching and told him to go into deeper water. *“Master”,* he said, *“We worked all night and didn’t catch anything!”* Isn’t that how we often feel about prayer? Yet we know we have to go on and say what Simon did: *“At your command, I will try again!”* St. Luke tells us that when he did, the net brought up a huge number of fish.

Sometimes people fail because they try to pray in a way that does suit them. That is the experience we call “dryness”. It means we have more to learn. God is teaching us in a way that really makes an impression. We are learning to pray as a way of loving God rather than achieving some other result. Nobody expects an adventure to be easy. The life of faith and that of prayer are an adventure. It brings us to God and to trusting wholly in God. The adventure is always worth the effort! Obey the Lord’s word and learn the truth.

Monday

WHAT OUR DEPARTED CONTINUOUSLY DO

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

The dead are alive. In God, they are more alive than we are. Their life expresses itself in prayer and praise. This is directed to God, but it is also done for our sake. These friends are enwrapped in God's love and that is only possible if they, like God, are love. The Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium*) reminds us that those God has chosen to be holy and entirely his now intercede for others. This is likened to Christ's intercession.

Christ is the sole mediator between God and the world, and those with God take part in that mediation. It is love. That means their love constantly helps us in our weakness because they intercede for us along with Christ. They are bound to him in virtue of God's election; this makes them holy. This is the total gift of self to God which they are always making, or perhaps still learning to make. That is what Christ is.

We are called to unite our prayer with those of the dead in the same adoration and praise and intercession that is Christ's. Insofar as we are one with them, we are one with Christ and so with God! But that is the purpose of our living. Let me speak about the power of example. This is given by our departed sisters and brothers and it is proportioned to the completeness of their union with Christ. It is by this union that God is in them. That means they can manifest to mankind the presence of God and God's face fully shown to us in Christ. They show us Christ, and Christ shows us God, and we can then live in a way that shows to all who know us the face of Christ and of God.

The Council says this finely, "*He himself speaks to us in his chosen ones and shows us the meaning and reality of the Kingdom*". Those in the Kingdom were, and are, signs of God's presence, and that of the Kingdom, among us. That means they are God's word, and help us to see more of what God's unique Word, Christ, means for the life of our race and its members. Each of our departed showed us something of what the living Word of God can mean by their daily life. This is a witness to the truth of the Gospel's Good News. For those who are now with God, there are no more half-measures. They no longer have moments of uncertainty. They have now realized what God meant to say to us through them and as we pray with them, and even for them, we are better digesting that message and seeing how to make it real and true practically.

The Gospel tells us all this. It helps us live what may be called the culture of the Beatitudes. They are tools to form a common mentality in our race and to guide our acting and thinking as we try to show God's presence to others. We do what our departed have shown us how to do—and what they continue to do by reminding us of their lives as we remember them. To think of them is now to think of God and Jesus Christ. That is what we are called to do today in a special way. By the grace of Christ may this be true. What they now do continuously we can begin to do with them as we pray with them.

Tuesday

THE ASCENT TO GOD

A reflection on Psalm 83 by St. Bruno

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord. My soul longs to enter the courts of the Lord”. We long for the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God. The Psalmist tells us why. We ought to seek to enter the courts of the Lord because of a promise: “Blessed are those who dwell in your house”, in the heavenly Jerusalem. If we want to be blessed we seek to be with God. Help us, O Lord, God of all the heavenly powers, my king and my God!

It is as if the Psalmist had said: Who would not want to enter your courts, since you are God, the creator, the Lord of Powers, King? Besides, all who dwell in your house are blessed! Court and house are the same thing, and when he says “blessed” he means that those dwell there are possessed of as great a blessedness as it is possible to conceive. The reason is that they are blessed who praise God with loving devotion, a world without end—for eternity. There could not be praise for eternity if they were not blessed for eternity.

No one can attain this blessedness on one’s own. Even if one has faith, hope and charity that is not possible. But that one is blessed—that is, comes to blessedness—whom God helps to climb the ladder to blessedness which God sets up in the heart. This means that one can be said to be likely to attain blessedness if one sets one’s heart on climbing by the many steps of virtue and good works and receives help from God’s grace. No one can climb alone by a personal strength—not to ascend to such heights. As the Lord has said, “No one has ascended into heaven except the Son of Man who is in Heaven.”

I said that God has set up a ladder in the heart because God is living now in our hearts in this vale of tears, this present life, which is so lowly and filled the tears of tribulation. Compared with that other life, called a mountain, and which is full of joy, this present life is as nothing. God’s grace helps one ascend each step.

Since the Lord has said, “Blessed are those whose strength is in God”, one might ask: Will God’s help be forthcoming? To which we reply, Help from God is there for the blessed. For the lawgiver—Christ who gave us the law—gives and will go on giving blessings in the form of innumerable gifts of grace. By them, God blesses those who are God’s own. This means that God will raise them up to blessedness. As they make the ascent they will, by God’s blessings, mount from strength to strength.

In time to come, in the heavenly Zion, Christ himself, the God of gods, will be seen. Christ, who is God, will deify those who are God’s own. To put it another way, the God of gods, the divine Trinity, will be seen in a spiritual way among those who dwell in that Zion. Again, by the light of the intellect, they will see among them the God whom here we cannot see. For God will be all in all.

What comes to fullness in Heaven begins even now as we ascend the ladder. Christ has ascended and he calls us to follow him. He takes us to the Father, who is all blessedness.

Wednesday

THE GIFT OF SINCERITY OF HEART

A reflection taken from a sermon by Cardinal Newman

Great is the difference between sincere and insincere Christians. All commit sin, even after receiving the grace of God. God's true servants sin and are sorry, while hypocrites sin and are not. The two sorts of people look like one another but the word of God discriminates between them by a straightforward test: Christ dwells in the consciences of the one and not of the other. Those who belong to the first group open their hearts to God and the others do not. The one views God as the Lord and owner of all that is and the other admits the Lord only for, as it were, a night or some brief period of time.

We are all filled with stains and corruption. We don't see them because they are as invisible as the air is when the sun is shining. But God sees all. God pervades us as sunbeams do the air. We cannot hide ourselves from God and our wisdom as our duty lies in embracing these truths, accepting them gladly, and acting upon them.

Our first need is to beg God to teach us the mystery of his ever-presence in us and in all things. By acknowledging it begins to be real to us and to have effects on us. We must confess it with faith so that we may possess it unto justification. Let us so own it as to set God before us in everything. The Psalmist declares: I have set God before me for God is on my right hand, therefore I shall not fall. Let us in all circumstances look to God.

Even if we have sinned let us not dare to keep away from God in our thoughts or actions. With the prodigal son, let us rise and go to God. Or, if we are not conscious of anything, still let us not boast in ourselves or justify ourselves. Let us feel that the One who judges us is the Lord. In all circumstances, of joy or of sorrow, of hope or of fear, let us aim at having God in our innermost heart. Let us have no secret that is for us apart from God. Let us acknowledge God as enthroned within us at the very springs of all our thoughts and feelings. Let us submit ourselves to God's guidance and sovereign direction. Let us come to God that God may forgive us, cleanse us, change us, guide us, and save us.

All this is God's great gift of love to us. Let us accept it and let us do it with all our heart. That is the gift of sincerity. To receive it we need only pray. It is the first expression of humility and of the truth.

Thursday

FULFILLING THE OBLIGATIONS OF THE LAW OF LOVE

A reflection based on the Dialogues of St. Gregory

St. Benedict makes it very clear that the abbot of a monastery living under his Rule for Monks must observe all its provisions. He also makes it very clear that the objective of the Rule's provisions is that monk's heart be enlarged so as to find no burden in keeping God's commands but run the way they create filled with joy. The laws and observances of the Rule teach and form monks to love God, above all else!

Pope St. Gregory, also a monk, used the story of St. Benedict's final meeting with his twin sister, St. Scholastica, to reflect on these ideals and what sort of surprises can happen when one puts them into practice. The heart of the story is the seeming conflict between the obligations of the law of love for God and neighbor—with all one's heart and mind and strength, and the obligations of the Rule that exist to teach us, such love. The moral of the story is that since God is first, the work of leading others deeper into the love of God trumps every other obligation.

We all know the story. Scholastica is abbess of a monastery a few miles from Benedict's monastery. Since women weren't permitted to enter his abbey the two of them met in a house near the bottom of the mountain. The mountain is very steep and the road winds back and forth upward. It's an exhausting walk for two elderly monks. Scholastica felt her death was near, but the spiritual support they gave each other made it all worthwhile.

Scholastica was filled with anticipation of the wondrous life awaiting her in God's Kingdom. It wasn't the joy she would know that was most important to her but being with God! So she wanted to share this bubbling love for God with her brother and hear about his experience of God. But he had to obey the Rule! So they had to stop in time for him to get back to the abbey before the Grand Silence.

Probably the two communities lived by the same Rule but she now wanted him to ignore part of it—to ignore the Grand Silence, to spend the night away from the monastery and with women. Benedict said "No!" Did he shake his pastoral staff at her in admonition? If he did it was in vain. She wanted to keep on sharing their experiences of prayer and seeking God. She put her head in her hands and used her gift of tears to pray to God!

As we know, the resulting rain had to be seen to be believed. St. Gregory draws a lesson: Surely it is no more than right that her influence was greater than his since hers was the greater love! Is that an extraordinary thing for a monk to say? The Rule was their guide to total love of God. But he was putting the observance of the Rule ahead of helping her love God with all intensity. At that moment she was deeper in love for God than he was. Is there anything more important than helping another grow more intensely in love with God? The purpose of the Rule took priority over the means it provided. The love of sharing the love for God is the highest of all obligations. On whose authority does a pope utter this verdict? On that of God who worked the miracle.

Friday

Excerpt from the Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 30th World Day of the Sick

Thirty years ago, Saint John Paul II instituted the World Day of the Sick to encourage the people of God, Catholic health institutions, and civil society to be increasingly attentive to the sick and to those who care for them.

Merciful like the Father

The theme chosen for this Thirtieth World Day of the Sick, “*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful*” (Lk6:36), makes us first turn our gaze towards God, who is “rich in mercy” (Eph2:4); he always watches over his children with a father’s love, even when they turn away from him. Mercy is God’s name par excellence; mercy, understood not as an occasional sentimental feeling but as an ever-present and active force, expresses God’s very nature. It combines strength and tenderness. For this reason, we can say with wonder and gratitude that God’s mercy embraces both fatherhood and motherhood (cf. Is49:15). God cares for us with the strength of a father and the tenderness of a mother; he unceasingly desires to give us new life in the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, the mercy of the Father

The supreme witness of the Father’s merciful love for the sick is his only-begotten Son. How often do the Gospels relate Jesus’ encounters with people suffering from various diseases! He “went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people” (Mt4:23). We do well to ask ourselves why Jesus showed such great concern for the sick, so much so that he made it paramount in the mission of the apostles, who were sent by the Master to proclaim the Gospel and to heal the sick (cf. Lk9:2).

One twentieth-century philosopher suggests a reason for this: “Pain isolates in an absolute way, and absolute isolation gives rise to the need to appeal to the other, to call out to the other”. When individuals experience frailty and suffering in their own flesh as a result of illness, their hearts become heavy, fear spreads, uncertainties multiply, and questions about the meaning of what is happening in their lives become all the more urgent. How can we forget, in this regard, all those patients who, during this time of pandemic spent the last part of their earthly life in solitude, in an intensive care unit, assisted by generous healthcare workers, yet far from their loved ones and the most important people in their lives? This helps us to see how important is the presence at our side of witnesses to God’s charity, who, following the example of Jesus, the very mercy of the Father, pour the balm of consolation and the wine of hope on the wounds of the sick.

To touch the suffering flesh of Christ

Jesus’ invitation to be merciful like the Father has particular significance for healthcare workers. I think of all those physicians, nurses, laboratory technicians, the support staff, and the caretakers of the sick, as well as the numerous volunteers who donate their precious time to assist those who suffer. Dear healthcare workers, your service alongside the sick, carried out with love and competence, transcends the bounds of your profession and becomes a mission. Your hands, which touch the suffering flesh of Christ, can be a sign of the merciful hands of the Father. Be mindful of the great dignity of your profession, as well as the responsibility that it entails.

Saturday

HUMILITY AS THE LAMP STAND FOR GOD'S LIGHT

A reflection developed from various sources

Blessed Humbeline was the youngest sister of St. Bernard. She married and had children but was unsatisfied with her life as a way of serving God and so decided to seek counsel from her brother. St. Bernard, misjudged the reason for her coming to him, and refused to see her until she humbly sent him a message explaining that she had come to ask his advice about her way of best serving God. His advice was that she should obtain her husband's permission to become a nun and so spend the remainder of her life seeking God above all else.

Humbeline had to work for some years before she was able to obtain her husband's permission to leave married life and enter a monastery. She went to Jully, whose abbess was the sister of her husband. She remained there for the rest of her lifetime, though she was later elected abbess, or prioress—the sources don't make it clear how the community at Troyes saw the matter. The sister-in-law went away to found a new monastery and Humbeline was elected in her place.

She devoted her life to the loving service of her sisters and seems to have been a good and faithful superior. Her monastery lived the Rule of Benedict but was not joined to the new order of Citeaux. As far as we know, St. Bernard and others had nothing but praise for the life of the nuns living under the guidance of Humbeline. She had made the humility with which she responded to her brother's harsh judgment the rule of her life and ministry to her sisters.

We are told that St. Bernard was present at his sister's death and that she told him she was tremendously grateful for his advice that she leave married life and take up instead the monastic life. She had found it a choice filled with joy and inner peace. This, no doubt, is a word for us even more than for St. Bernard. One who lives the monastic life fully, without looking back at what has been left behind, finds it a source of joy and mutual help that leads one to a spiritual fulfillment not found in any other way. That is what Humbeline experienced and what she recommended to many others.

St. Benedict presents humility as a key virtue for those who choose to walk the monastic way toward God. Humbeline gives us an example of a person who wasn't filled with self-concern or self-importance. She was willing to rely on others whom she could see were dedicated first of all to loving God and all the others who choose to seek Him as well.

She knew that Bernard had made this choice and so was fully prepared to hear and follow his advice, as long as that advice was consonant with fulfilling the obligations to God and others she had already undertaken. That her husband eventually gave his permission for her to enter monastic life meant that she had his support and his willingness to give up all the types of support he had received from her throughout their years as husband and wife. She hoped what she did would also lead him to place God even more practically at the center of his life. All of this exemplifies what humility looks like practically. Removing self from the center of one's life makes room for God to fill that place. That is what can bring us all to God and to God's light. It makes us ready to

live the life of the Kingdom of Heaven. Like Humbeline, we become lamp stands from which the light of Christ shines.