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Sunday

THE DIFFERENCE CHRISTIAN VALUES MAKE

A reflection from a homily of St. John Chrysostom

“Blessed are you who are poor, but woe to you who are rich.” Only a Christian can have a true sense of values. What’s more, only a Christian can have the joy that comes from true values! It is not only our values that are different but our joys and sorrows. Have you ever watched a boxing match? Even if the winner is bruised and hurt, still the winner’s attention is not on pain but on the fact of being a winner. If all you could think of was the pain you would never have the least idea of the joy that fills a winner’s heart and mind. When people see what Christians suffer but know nothing of what they genuinely value, people have no idea of why Christians accept sufferings and deprivations with joy. In the eyes of those who don’t share Christian values, Christians are only suffering; they see the struggle to face danger but they can’t see what Christians are looking forward to—they can’t even imagine the rewards and sense of being victorious that fills a genuine Christian.

When Paul talked about possessing nothing and yet having everything, what did he mean by “everything”? He was talking about good things, ones that are both earthly and heavenly, physical and spiritual. Entire communities looked upon Paul as a messenger from God and received him with joy and honor. Isn’t that an earthly gift? If people were ready to sacrifice themselves, even baring their necks to the sword of an executioner for the sake of what he had taught them, wasn’t this an earthly honor? Yet these were nothing in comparison to the spiritual wealth that truly made Paul rich.

The King of the universe, the Lord of angels, loved Paul so much that he shared his secrets with him in a vision. Didn’t he surpass everyone else in riches because this was given him? Can’t we say that he possessed all things? The same was true of Peter. If it had been otherwise demons wouldn’t have been subject to him and sickness and suffering wouldn’t have been banished by his mere presence! Shouldn’t we suffer for Christ’s sake, and do it not merely with courage but even with joy?

If we have to go hungry can’t we be as glad as if we were enjoying a banquet? That’s what happens when you value what Christ values and so gain true values. We value unity with Christ more than anything else! If we are insulted, we can feel elated as though we were being showered with praise, because we value suffering with Christ. If we lose all we possess, we can consider ourselves gainers because we have Christ and that means we have all things. If we provide for the poor, we regard ourselves as receiving a great gift. When we give alms, we don’t think we are losing anything by gaining the great gift that is heaven. This is the way it is in regard to all the virtues we practice.

We don’t think of painful efforts or any negative thing but only of being with Christ and God in their life. Our struggles are for the Lord in two senses. We are struggling to let go of our old values and put on Christ’s and we are struggling to love all whom Christ loves. If we do both, we will be made able to rise above all struggle and live in the happiness of knowing we are doing and having exactly what we want. Nothing brings more happiness than this.

Monday

THE STRUGGLE FOR PURITY OF HEART

A reflection based on Butler's Lives of the Saints

Saints Methodius and his brother Constantine were educated to be civil servants in the Byzantine Empire—Methodius in the strictly and Constantine in the ecclesiastical.

They were ordered to leave their careers and use their language skills as missionaries. It was a struggle to bring Christ to Slavic peoples settled in the Balkans and Ukraine and they were opposed by Germanic missionaries. The border between Byzantium and the Holy Roman Empire ran through the Balkans and the Holy Roman Empire wanted to dominate the area. To resist this a Bulgarian king asked Photius, then the Patriarch of Constantinople, to send missionaries. He wanted to preserve the Slavic language and customs. The brothers spoke Slavonic and so Photius sent them to give him influence in the disputed territories.

How do you keep your heart and mind on preaching Christ when almost everyone is trying to use the Gospel to advance political control and prestige agendas? As asked, they preached in Slavonic, converted many, but didn't have enough priests to minister to the converts. In the meantime, they had created an Old Slavonic liturgy, a Slavonic translation of the bible, and the alphabet from which today's Slavic alphabet comes. The closest bishops were in Germany lands and wouldn't ordain priests for Slavonic ministry. Purity of heart in practice requires us to value our cultures, traditions, families and countries less than God's call to all peoples to be converted. Yet people are only converted in the context of a culture and language and a family and country. To learn a new language and function in a new culture is already stepping back from your native one. To do this for the sake of the Gospel was to exercise the beginnings of purity of heart; this can be a very real cross. And other Christians may ignore opposed it, even violently.

They twice obtained papal approval in spite of the opposition. During the first visit to Rome Constantine died, making monastic vows on his deathbed and taking the name, Cyril. He had been appointed abbot of a monastery in Constantinople but never got to exercise the office and perhaps his death bed profession was intended to clear this up in his conscience. Methodius was consecrated bishop of Sirmium (in modern Hungary) but the local Germanic bishops wouldn't obey nor cooperate with him; imprisoned for two years, the pope finally got him released. Through it all he continued preaching and doing what he could, in Slavonic. The brothers saw all this as the struggle to live purity of heart. It is a gift of God only gradually assimilated. Their missionary work was a success because Slavs identified it with preserving their ethnic independence. God writes straight with crooked lines. Each Christian has to struggle to put Christ first without devaluing the human creations God uses to draw us into Divine Love and the Heavenly Kingdom. We aren't in control but depend on Providence. Our response to this grace is surrender of what is dearest to us in this world, made possible by trust in our Lord's love, not just for us but for the human creations that are dearest to us.

Tuesday

DWELLING IN THE SHELTER OF GOD'S LOVE

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

We are called to dwell in the protection of God. We are told that to dwell under God's protection is to dwell in safety. We can understand best that to which we are called by considering three sorts of people who don't dwell there.

The first lacks hope, the second has given up hope, and the third hopes in vain. Those who lack hope trust in themselves rather than God. Those who are giving up hope are those who despair of ever getting what they seek. Those who hope in vain live in sin. They flatter themselves so much with the thought of God's mercy that they never bother to amend their sinful ways. There is no love in this and that is their downfall.

The first group mentioned dwell in personal merits, the second dwells in personal woes, and the third in personal vices. What is more foolish than to dwell in a half-built house? When a person has just begun to build a dwelling place for God, that person can't act as though it were finished. That's what one does if one doesn't live in hope. That is the situation of those who think their merits are enough to bring them to God. The only people who dwell in the shelter of God's presence are those whose sole desire is to receive it and whose sole fear is that they might lose it and who ponder it carefully day by day.

Is there under heaven anything that can harm a person whom the God of Heaven has decided to protect? So, nothing better can be sought than to dwell in the protection of the God of Heaven. We are taught not only to seek God so that we may avoid evil but to seek to be with God always so that we may do good.

Be careful to pay close attention to the saying: "The one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide under the protection of the God of Heaven; such a one will say to the Lord, You are my protector!" This Scripture speaks of living under the protection of God and not in the presence of God. Angels rejoice in God's presence. All we ask is to be able to abide under God's protection. All I ask is to be secure in God's protection.

There is no doubt that God is everywhere. But God is in heaven in a way that makes God's presence on earth seem like nothing. So, when we pray we say "Our Father, who art in Heaven". Our soul is in the whole of our body but it seems more especially to be in the head where all the senses meet. The head seems in some way to govern the other members of a person and so the person seems to dwell in the head more than in the other members. In the same way, we say the very presence of God is in Heaven and can scarcely feel the same about the protection of God as we would about God's presence. God is our protector. We long yet for God's presence. To be in God's presence we are willing to surrender everything. We are led there by a love that counts nothing as so wonderful as coming to be in God's very presence. It is for this that we hope with all our heart and strength.

Wednesday

WORDS OF LIFE CAN BECOME WORDS OF DEATH

A reflection inspired by a text of Dianne Bergant

When you were young were you taught the ditty: “Sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never hurt me”? Actually words can harm, even kill, people—if they are taken seriously. We need an antidote to our tendency to understand self or others by the word labels others apply to us and it isn’t enough just to ignore them as the ditty suggests.

Scripture says the Ten Commandments are words of life. To live by them is to be on the path to genuine life that our faith tells us will last forever. The Commandments are also termed the “Ten Words”; almost all the oral law, what the New Testament calls “tradition”, is supposed to make these Ten Words life giving and so not to be ignored when seeking to make one’s life a good one.

Yet Jesus tells the Pharisees, labeling them with some very powerful and negative names, that they had made life giving Words death dealing by the way they interpret them. Jesus says some Pharisees use traditions in a way that distorts God’s Words so they don’t give life, at least non “in God”. They want to be religious but end up being merely observant.

That is as much a danger for us as for them and so Jesus words to them are words to us. The text of James’ Letter read at this Eucharist tells us to remember that God’s words are not only about how we are to relate to him but how we are to relate to each other—most especially to those who can’t help themselves. In Scripture the symbol of such people’s plight is the neglect and mistreatment of widows and orphans—in a patriarchal society they tended to be treated as relatively unimportant. This Letter insists that God’s word is intended to transform us and set us free from the sort of cultural or religious tradition that blocks such love and care for others, the kind of love Jesus showed to such people.

Customs arise and turn into traditions through efforts to protect what is important for having a good life, and having it in fullness. Do we have any such customs? Look at the ways you label others, or yourself, and think of the effects. Do they get in the way of seeing what genuine and practical love demands of us? Setting out to follow Jesus in the circumstances of our actual life and in our particular society and setting, demands that we consider this matter with real care.

To understand the Word of God requires the right dispositions of mind, and to live them rightly is impossible without the right dispositions of heart. These are what make genuine devotion a reality. Only if heard and interpreted and lived with the kind of dispositions and mind set that Jesus shows us enables us to let God’s words become genuinely words for our living. We and our nation and our world need to hear and act on God’s words as Jesus did.

Thursday

A COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL

By Pope Paul VI

To speak of Jesus, as he appears in the course of the Gospels, has always been something that draws people and compels them to speak but is at the same time difficult. This has always been especially true of the question: Who is Jesus? It lends itself to the most varied answers, and did so even in the minds of his first disciples. It was not at all clear to them who he might be.

Recall how Jesus, traveling with his little group of disciples toward Caesarea Philippi in the north of Palestine near Mount Hermon, asked them the searching question: Who do people say that the Son of Man is? After a variety of confused answers, taken from public opinion, Jesus pressed home the point of what he was asking by putting a direct question to them as his future apostles: But who do you say that I am?

It was Peter, enlightened by God the Father, who replied, surely also in the name of the rest of them. He gave the famous, unconquerable definition of Jesus' identity: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God! Let us all hold fast, in thought and heart and life, to this wholly certain and inexhaustible truth about our Lord, Jesus Christ.

He is one in the divine Person of the only-begotten son of God. He is eternal in the nature of the Word. He is incarnate in human nature by Mary through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Let us remember the reality of this mystery. It over-shadows all history and all the destiny of the human race. It is the mystery of the unique person of the Word of God, living in the divine nature and in the human nature of Jesus.

This is the supreme dogma which we profess at Mass every Sunday and every feast day when we proclaim the creed. This truth is the foundation of our Christian faith and of our salvation. We must all remember the confession of Peter, which we ourselves have professed and to which we have joined ourselves explicitly. Let us remember the inexhaustible joy of this as we stand here over the tomb of Peter. We also stand in the certainty that the building he is now constructing—founded upon the apostolic rock and on that cornerstone which is Christ's self—cannot fall, either with the passing of time or with death which seems to destroy all other things.

The building in which we stand is his Church. That Church is holy and immortal. We have the great good fortune to belong to it. From it we receive Christ's very self, the bread of eternal life. Here faith appears in its supreme importance and necessity. It originates in an active gift of God, for all that it is only a humble and sincere beginning that reminds us of God's Word. With an act of faith, of acceptance of a Divine Truth that transcends our cognitive or experiential powers, we salute Jesus Christ. Once again we use the words of Simon Peter: "You are the Christ, the Son of Living God."

Friday

WHAT ARE YOU AIMING AT?

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Augustine of Hippo

“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself and take up the cross.” If anyone wants to be a follower of Christ then that person must renounce self and take up a cross and come after Christ. This is the Lord’s command. It may seem hard and heavy. Is it true that everyone who wants to follow Christ has to renounce self? But is that really a hard saying? After all, the command comes from one who helps us live it. The cross involved may seem heavy but the one who lays it on our shoulders helps us to carry it. Jesus said: “My Yoke is easy and my burden light”. Besides, whatever seems hard in the Lord’s commands is made easy if done out of love.

We know what great things love can accomplish, even when it is base and mere sensual. We know what hardships people have endured, what intolerable indignities they have borne to attain the object of their love. What I love indicates the sort of person I am. Making a decision about what kind of person I will be ought to be our one concern in choosing my way of life. Why be surprised if people who set their hearts on Christ and want to follow him are asked to renounce the kind of person they were out of love? If we lose our very self through self-love we ruin ourselves. We find our new self through renouncing the old self.

Who wouldn’t want to follow Christ to supreme happiness, to perfect peace and to lasting security? We do well if we follow Christ to these realities. But we need to know the way to do this. The Lord Jesus called us to renounce self when he had not yet suffered his passion and risen from the dead. If we look at what he suffered, the road seems rough, we want to draw back instead of following Christ. But follow him all the same. Christ has leveled the road for us by passing over it himself.

Everyone wants to be exalted and enjoys a high position. Yet self-abasement is the step that leads to it. Are you afraid of taking strides too big for you so that you fall instead of ascending? Recall James and John and their request to have the highest places in his kingdom. They wanted to reach the top without taking the step that leads there—self-abasement. You can’t reach the heights without taking the step of humility. That is the cross.

Taking up the cross means bearing whatever is unpleasant. Some who call themselves Christians may try to dissuade you. If you meet with threats, flattery or opposition that is your cross. Pick it up and carry it. You won’t collapse under it because the Lord carries it with you. What if we have to accept martyrdom or persecution! You can make light of everything if you live love for Christ.

Saturday

MARY AS A MODEL FOR MONASTIC LIVING

A reflection from a text by Fr. Thomas Merton

The goal and perfection of the monastic vocation is finding Christ. He is God's Word and to cling to him in the purity of perfect love and unalterable peace of heart is to say with the bride in the Canticle of Canticles, "*I have found him whom my soul loves; I hold Him and I will not let him go!*" (Song 3:4)

From this text we can come to see that the life we live unrolls with Mary, the Virgin Mother, who has given to the world God's Word Incarnate. Mary is the model and the summary, as it were, of the heart of monastic spirituality and of all Christian spirituality. Some of the Church Fathers spoke of her as "Mary the rule for monks".

The monastic life is a life lived "in the Spirit". For instance, monks live according to a "spiritual virginity". The point is that one should be moved not by personal desires or tastes or talents or feelings or human nature as such but by the will and love of God. This is a life like that of Mary. If one is conformed to the Virgin Mother of God one lives by a perfectly simple faith. By this faith she received into her Immaculate Heart the full light of God's Word. She enclosed that Word in her virginal flesh through the action of the Holy Spirit. That is how she gave Jesus to be the Savior of the World.

To live "in the Spirit" is to live like Mary. She is the "bride of the Holy Spirit". Life in the Spirit is the life she lived. As mediator through Christ of all grace, she has been the instrument by which the Spirit and its grace comes to us in Christ. All that she does "in the Spirit" is done from a heart filled with motherly love for Christ loved in the Heavenly Father. The movements of our life in the Spirit need to be directed by the same love. Our hearts are then, in effect, also conformed to hers. To treat Mary as our queen, is to abandon our-selves to the action of the Holy Spirit sent us through her Son.

If Mary is our queen and our "rule", we are living under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in a way that should more and more produce in our lives the detachment and pure love of God we see in Mary. That is what led her to surrender her entire being to the will of God. Monks see their consecration to a way of life under a rule as a replica of Mary's "fiat"—"*Let it be done in me in accordance with your word*". We are not only striving to give ourselves to God continually but we will and long to give ourselves as Mary did.