

EIGHTH WEEK OF ORDINARY TIME - C

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THE SEASON OF LENT BEGINS



Sun. **The Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time**
27 **THE FRUIT OF GENUINE CHRISTIAN LOVE**
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March 1 **WAITING UPON THE LORD**
 A reflection from On Conduct by St. Cyprian

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Wed. **ASH WEDNESDAY**
2 **THE GRACE THAT COMES WITH OUR FASTING**
 A reflection by a Carthusian

Thurs. **Thursday After Ash Wednesday**
3 **LET GOD STRETCH YOU & MAKE YOU LIKE JESUS**
 A reflection by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

Fri. **MONASTIC DESERT DAY**
4 **Friday After Ash Wednesday**
 PUT ASIDE EVERYTHING BUT CHRIST
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5 **OUR LENTEN OBSERVANCE**
 A reflection taken from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Sunday

THE FRUIT OF GENUINE CHRISTIAN LOVE

A reflection from Works of Love by S. Kierkegaard

“A good tree doesn’t bear bad fruit nor does a bad tree bear good fruit, but every tree is known for what it is by its fruit”. Every tree is recognized by its proper fruit. It may happen, however, that two fruits are very much alike and that one is healthy and the other poisonous. Sometimes too, the healthy fruit is bitter tasting and the poisonous one good tasting. In a like way, genuine love is known and distinguished from false love by its proper fruit.

Why do people make mistakes? Either they do not know love’s fruit or they do not know how to discriminate the genuine from the false. For example, one may make the mistake of calling what is actually self-love “genuine love”. One may loudly protest that it is impossible to live without one’s beloved, but such a one may not want to hear about love’s demands and tasks. Such a person has to practice self-surrender and give up calling things such as erotic self-indulgence love. One may easily make the mistake of calling such weak self-indulgence love or that of calling what is merely spoiled whimpering or a corrupting attachment or an indulgence in vanity or self-flattery or momentary attraction or a passing relationship by the noble name of love.

There is a flower which is named “the flower of eternity” and another which is quite remarkably called “the everlasting flower”. But these, like all perishable flowers, bloom once a year at a definite time and perish. What mistaken names! The flower, however, is so beautiful at the time of its blooming that people want it to last always or at least symbolize the beauty of the eternal. They exaggerate.

As every tree is identified by its proper fruit so the love of which Christianity speaks is known because it reveals that it has within it the truth of an eternal beauty. All other loves are passing, whether humanly speaking they wither soon or lasts for years! All other loves merely blossom in their hour, even if the hour lasts 70 years. Then they are gone. Christian love is really eternal.

If a Christian has genuine self-knowledge there is no possibility that person will say the love proper to Christianity is merely a passing blossom. No poet with true self-understanding would think of celebrating passing love in a song. When a poet celebrates something passing it must have a kind of anguish in it, and just because it is like a passing blossom.

Such love is like our present life. It is meant to blossom and perish. But Christian love abides. That is a reason why it is Christian love in its proper and special sense. It is a reality which has being always. We don’t just sing about it, we believe in it, and we live it.

Monday

GROWING TO BE ONE WITH GOD

Reflection on Athanasius' Life of Anthony

St. Athanasius writes that on an occasion when many monks had gathered around Anthony he spoke about perseverance in the quest for union with God. The Holy Scriptures are enough but it is good also to encourage one another. As monks often bring their struggles to me, I help them by sharing what I have learned from my experience. So all who are dedicated to the quest for God should help one another in like manner. What is most important is to help one another avoid becoming lax in our observance. If you began well and have lived monastic life a long time, the temptation to discouragement will come. We need to increase our determination day by day rather than the opposite. Think how short life is in comparison to the centuries to come, and yet all time is as nothing compared to eternal life.

In ordinary life, everything is assigned a value and can be purchased by giving an equivalent value in exchange. What is the value of eternal life? If measured by its length its value can't be measured. Yet we purchase it with comparatively brief struggle. Our body is now frail and easily hurt but we shall inherit one that can never be hurt and that lasts forever. See how tiny the sufferings we experience are compared with the glory that is to be ours! How could we say think we were doing too much or having to labor for too long a time?

With this in mind keep yourself steady in observance and refuse to give in to laziness. Isn't the Lord working with us? St. Paul tells us that God works with us for the good if we choose to seek the good. Reflect on the words: "I die daily". This keeps death before our eyes and we live each day as if it were our last. Mindful of this we do not sin. Every day on waking I say to myself that I will not live till evening, and every evening when I go to bed I think I will not wake up the next morning. This helps us walk the path to excellence in faith and in virtue.

The thing is to press on straight ahead; we mustn't look back, like Lot's wife did. "No one is fit for the Kingdom of God, the Lord said, who puts a hand to the plow and then looks backwards." To look backwards is to feel regret at what we left behind and to reawaken our taste for worldly things. Remember that the excellence we seek is not foreign to us or far from us. Greeks leave their own country and cross seas looking for learning. We don't have to travel to gain God's Kingdom. It is within us, the Lord says.

We need only to will to grow to be like Christ, for it is something God accomplishes within those who are willing. No need to cross oceans to obtain help in becoming like Christ. The source of this within us. We only have to act in harmony with the nature God has given us. God created us apt to become like Christ and if we live seeking this we become virtuous. It is only if we give ourselves to evil dreams and longings that we become wicked. If we had to go outside of ourselves to become what we seek it would be difficult. But God has given us ourselves as a trust to be preserved for Him so on the last day God will recognize us as His handiwork.

Tuesday

WAITING UPON THE LORD

A reflection from On Conduct by St. Cyprian

How often has it been revealed to us, the least and the last as we are, that our brothers and sisters who have been summoned from this world should not be mourned in any ordinary way? How frequently, how manifestly the Lord has commanded us to bear constant witness that the dead are not “lost” in any sense but simply called by God before we are. We are to proclaim that we are all travelers, voyagers, toward something supremely worth longing for. Those who have arrived before we do are not to be lamented except that we miss their earthly presence. Why would one wear dark colored clothing on earth when they have put on white robes in the Kingdom and stand before God? We too, long to be there. We mustn’t give non-believers reason to criticize us for acting in a way inconsistent with what we proclaim we believe!

Those who have no faith often believe that the dead are lost and gone forever. We lie about our hope and our faith if we seem to act as though we too had lost them in that way. There would be no gain if we declared our virtues only in words and didn’t act them out in truth and in deeds. In a certain sense, St. Paul rebukes and blames those Christians who are sorrowful at the death of dear ones. Listen to his words: *“We wouldn’t have you ignorant about those who are asleep in death. Don’t be sorrowful like those who don’t have any hope. If we believe that Jesus died, and yet rose again, it is the same for those who have fallen asleep in Jesus; God will bring them with Him to new life.”*

We live in hope; we believe in God and have faith that Christ suffered for us and then rose again. We abide in Christ and so we rise again through Christ. Why, then, should we be unwilling to leave this world? But if we are willing then why do we mourn and grieve for those who have already left? Listen to what Christ says: *“I am the resurrection; the one who believes in me, even if dead, shall live. Everyone who believes in me shall never die!”* Since we believe in Christ, let’s have faith in his words and promises. We aren’t going to die permanently but will come to Christ in joyful security and with Him conquer death by rising to reign with Him for eternity.

A person who will come to the dwelling of Christ, that glory which is the Heavenly Kingdom, has no good reason to grieve and mourn. We are to be ready—with firm faith, with rugged virtue, and with sound mind for every way in which God makes known to us his will. We have been freed from the terror of death that afflicts others. We think of the immortality which follows earthly death.

It is a matter of showing by our actions what we believe. When God summons us then we will answer his call without hesitation and filled with gladness. What is better than to come to the Lord at his call? The same is true for our loved ones. It is a matter of how we think of them and of ourselves. The gift of faith teaches us how to think about death and how to answer every call that comes from our Lord.

Wednesday

THE GRACE THAT COMES WITH OUR FASTING

A reflection by a Carthusian

The theme of the first week of Lent is that of turning to God, symbolized traditionally by the call to fast. Fasting, radically understood, is the removal of the obstacles to our profound conformation to Christ. Last Sunday's liturgy called us to join Christ in his fast in the desert by looking carefully at our temptations. Monastic tradition tells us that this aims at making the desire for God the deepest longing of our spirit and its guiding light.

In response to his own temptations, which are those not only of ancient Israel but of every person who would follow God, Jesus sets out the principles that would guide all he did in ministry and would lead him to the Cross. First, there is absolute obedience to the will of God. Second, there is trust in God without demanding evidence or proof that God can be trusted. Third, there is placing allegiance to God first, before every other allegiance or loyalty.

Jesus is to proclaim good news to the marginalized and poor and is to use spiritual means to do it. He is to continue doing this no matter what happens and how unsuccessful his labors seem to be. He is to reject reliance on anything and anyone other than God, including the idol that is his human ego.

In the person of Christ, it is the new People of God who overcome. It is the faith of the entire Church which struggles against human weakness, solitude, lack of support, and every need to succeed. We are to do it now. The second reading last Sunday announced, "Now is the acceptable time!" The liturgy is the irruption into our lives of a reality that transcends time and space. It bursts in upon us when we gather with Jesus to renew the offering of self we have made "in the desert". We will do it for one more day, or week, or year.

The desert confronted Jesus with the choice of a way to accomplish his messianic mission—especially to confirm his acceptance of the role of Suffering Servant. For us, there is also a special grace like this in Lent and each week of Lent. It is a quite individual grace that will never return and must be grasped now. It is linked in some mysterious fashion to this day and these circumstances in which we live and move and have our being in God.

The formulary of the Eucharist was composed largely of verses from Psalm 91, a cry to trust in God in the face of every sort of Satanic pressure to turn to other resources. We were to listen to Deuteronomy's call: "*Seek the Lord, your God. You will find God if you search after him with all your heart and soul. Because the Lord, your God, is a merciful God.*" (Deut. 4: 29f) God invites us to trust, but at the same time calls upon us not to hide from the demands following Jesus has made and will make upon us, and upon our community of faith.

What is happening in our lives is not mere play-acting, any more than were Jesus' temptations. We are undergoing a real test. Our decisions shape our lives just as those of Jesus shaped his ministry. Our ministry, in fact, is living out a response in faith and trust to just this testing.

Thursday

LET GOD STRETCH YOU & MAKE YOU LIKE JESUS

A reflection by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

Today's reading from Deuteronomy tells us that obedience with love brings life. Today's reading from Luke tells us that we must take up our cross daily in order to follow Jesus; i.e., to live in the same obedience in which he lived. Of all the books of the Bible, Deuteronomy reflects most often on obedience and the choice it asks us for is that we be obedient. It also repeats that this is really a life or death choice, whether we pause to realize this or not. After all, at the heart of Deuteronomy is the prayer and command: "*Hear, O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength.*"

Wherever love is total, spontaneous, and springs from the depths of one's life, it's every wish is a command. Obedience expresses the deepest law of existence in the person who loves as totally as God loves us and commands us to love in return. Disobedience, even in a small matter, can be disastrous. This is because it can disrupt a basic attitude, a fundamental disposition.

Love normally expresses itself in small, delicate ways. Not to obey such impulses in ourselves is to tear out of ourselves the roots of Jesus' way of life. "*Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live by loving the Lord, your God, by heeding his voice and holding fast to him.*" That's how Scripture puts it.

Jesus tells us in today's gospel passage not to choose life in the literal sense, but to choose to lose our lives for him, because only in this way will we find them. When Deuteronomy calls upon us to choose life it doesn't mean we should seek a selfish, narrow, biased existence, but rather a life of compassion concern, and of help for one's neighbors. When the laws of Deuteronomy are compared with law in other books of the Bible, Deuteronomy is marked by exquisite thoughtfulness. It modifies (e.g.) the third commandment about resting on the Sabbath—even if one is a slave, by adding the reminder that "*you too were once slaves in Egypt*" and you too longed for a day of rest.

Perfection and loving obedience brought Jesus to the cross, seeming to lose his life but really so that we might rise to a new and greater life at the end of our way of the cross. Jesus loved to quote from Deuteronomy and brought its message to a new fullness. It calls heaven and earth to serve as witnesses to love and to real obedience, precisely as calling us out of tiny, narrow, selfish ways of living into the breadth of all heaven and earth. We are to die to narrow concerns and prejudices. Break down barriers to justice and neighborly love. God tells us to come to total love! The narrow-minded and false life leads to death. But we must rise from the dead to true life. "*Happy are they who hope in the Lord; they are like trees planted near running water, that yield fruit in due season and whose leaves never wither*". That is God's call to us this Lent.

Friday

PUT ASIDE EVERYTHING BUT CHRIST

A reflection from On the Incarnation by Henry of Friemar

The Eternal Word willed to stoop to great poverty in order to enrich us in great abundance with heavenly gifts. He enriched us precisely by poverty, endowing us through his indigence. We should take this very seriously. We should reflect on the ways that he did it.

Listen to St. Paul: "*Brethren, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: though he was rich he became poor for our sake so that we might be enriched by his poverty*". St. Paul teaches us this in II Corinthians: "*You know the race of our Lord Jesus Christ; that though he was rich he became poor for our sake, in order that we might be enriched by his poverty*". It is truly marvelous that by poverty and need he has enriched us in bodily as well as in spiritual ways.

He enriched us in bodily ways because there is nothing more precious in the entire treasury of the Church than the mean and worthless rags in which not only the poor Christ but poverty itself is wrapped. Is there anything more precious than the manger in which Christ was laid? Is there anything more glorious than the cross on which he suffered? That is why Bernard rightly says in a sermon: "The poverty of Christ is our wealth; the Savior's rags are more precious than any purple; the manger is more glorious than the gilded thrones of kings, and the poverty of Christ is richer than all wealth and treasures."

Christ's poverty enriches us spiritually because he shows us how to handle physical things. He gave himself for us by shedding his blood and by laying down the life he loved for us. He poured out all heavenly blessings for us. When the tiny wallet which was his body was pierced by five wounds it poured out upon us in abundance the heavenly treasures it contained generously.

All this is clear from the fact that he unsealed those five fountains of grace and blessing in his own body and lets us drink freely from them all sorts of heavenly blessings. At our own pleasure, we can draw ceaselessly the waters of saving grace from these fountains. Isaiah tells us of this invitation: "*Draw water with joy from the wells of the Savior!*"

Once we have tasted fully of this water, it utterly kills all transitory thirsts in us, as St. John also says quite clearly. May the Lord Jesus give us a taste for this water. It is offered to us during the Lenten season when we busy ourselves in putting aside all other things. People imagine many things can satisfy their bodily and spiritual thirsts but only Jesus can.

The Lord Jesus laid aside every sort of earthly advantage and yet brought immeasurable benefits to the world. He invites us to imitate him. This requires effort and much training. That is one of the gifts that the Lenten season offers us. Lay aside all things except for obedience and love toward the Lord our God. His Only Begotten Son has become incarnate to teach us to do this, and show us how to do it with gladness and joy.

Saturday

OUR LENTEN OBSERVANCE

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

Blessed be God, the Father of mercies and the God of all consolations; it is he who consoles us in all our tribulations. Many are the tribulations of the just but the Lord delivers them from everyone. We suffer, in fact, two kinds of tribulation. The reason is that we have a two-fold nature; we are fleshly and we are spiritual. As a result, we live on both these levels. We are, as long as we are in this world, partly carnal and partly spiritual in our behavior. According to our progress, or lack of it, we become more spiritual and less carnal or more carnal and less spiritual. Hence our two-fold tribulation. What is carnal in us is grieved by hardships while what is spiritual is grieved only by evil doing. If there were nothing carnal in us then no adversity would bother us, indeed there wouldn't be any adversity. The sadness we experience from hardships comes from what is carnal in us. The sadness we experience because we find iniquity in us is spiritual.

We seek both carnal and spiritual consolations. But when earthly consolation abounds, we should be more humble and cautious. When we have bodily health or when the weather is fine, we must use these things to help one another do what is spiritually good. No matter whether we are blessed by God with external or internal consolations we must seek to live in the joy of hope. If we share in Christ's sufferings we shall, after all, share in Christ's Kingdom.

As for the tribulations that we suffer interiorly because of iniquity unless the Lord helps us our foot would slip and we would fall. We are like Peter called to come to the Lord over stormy waters, weighed down by our earthly self but help up by our spiritual contact with Christ. The Lord gives us the support of his hand, even when we fall. We confess our sins and we gladly accept the tribulations that cleanse us inwardly. You need not fear the one who will come as judge if you have humbly confessed your weakness to Him and accepted the hardships of our life as suitable remedies for our seeking what is not God.

What we want is to burn with the fire of love, and to burn now rather than later. This is a fire that purifies. Behold, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation. Let us listen to the words of St. Paul: While we have time let us do good to all. Woe to those who burn but not with the cleansing fire of love.

We are daily burned by our strictness of life, as by a purifying fire, and woe to us if we are not cleansed thereby of our iniquities. However, why should I fear? We have many consolations and we know we are being purified and made more fully spiritual. We shall be truly happy if we recognize our wretchedness and grieve over it in longing for the Lord, and for an all-consuming love of Him. We need not fear if we always live in reverence for the Lord and if we walk in caution and love.