

**THE SOLEMNITY OF
THE MOST HOLY BODY & BLOOD OF CHRIST
THE SOLEMNITY OF
THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST
TWELFTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME**

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Sunday

GIVING THANKS FOR THE LORD'S GOODNESS

A reflection from a sermon by Theophilus of Alexandria

What could bring greater happiness to those who love God, who long for true life, than the ability to enjoy God for ever while resting in divine contemplation? People who fill themselves with ordinary food and drink, and even indulge in selfish and passing pleasures, like to boast of their physical well-being. Those, however, whose first care is for their souls have a much better reason to be glad about a better sort of well-being. Having grown up nourished by the Holy Gospel, they will shine. As Isaiah says, it will be as though they were dressed in cloth of gold, richly embroidered!

Our spiritual journey has brought to us the highest and most life-giving mystery. The Lord has set before us a gift that words can't even describe rightly. We are meeting together for a life-giving and sacred meal. It brings us to the fulness of our heavenly calling. We have put on the wedding garment that is undefiled faith. We have come to Christ, our host, and Christ who waits upon us, Christ who loves and refreshes us, and Christ who is our food.

More than a fatted calf has been prepared for us. Wonderful are the words we hear spoken to us. Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. For us this lamb has been slain. The Heavenly Father is filled with joy that the Only Son is offered as a willing and voluntary victim. He isn't offered by the enemies of God but offers himself. His passion is voluntary!

Are you certain of his love for you? Pay attention, then, to the words of those who foretold all this. Consider, for instance, the words of King Solomon's prophesy: "*Wisdom has built herself a house and set up seven pillars; she has slaughtered victims and prepared wine and spread a table*". These are all symbolic realities. They pointed to what is not being fulfilled in fact. What is being given us are the unfailing delights of a heavenly banquet.

At this dinner, the Heavenly Giver is present in person. The divine gifts are placed before you. The sacred meal is ready. A life-giving wine has been prepared. The King of Glory summons us and the Son of God receives us. God, the Incarnate Word, invites us. The personal and subsistent Wisdom of God, having built a house, a temple not made by human hands, is giving us his own life-giving blood in the form of wine and his own body in the form of bread.

What a wondrous mystery. How marvelous the arrangements made by our God! How unsearchable the divine mystery! The Creator offers himself for the joy of his creatures. The one who is life itself gives himself to human being as food and drink for everlasting life. "*Come, eat my bread and drink the wine I have prepared for you!*" These are his words. I have prepared myself to be your food and drink, if you indeed long for me. I, says the Lord Christ, am the Word and Image of the Father, and I share flesh and blood with you so you may be saved. Taste and see how good the Lord is! What better reason could we have to give thanks?

Monday

THE PATH TO HOLINESS

A reflection from a sermon by St. Bernard

I rejoice that we are all students in the Lord's school, the Spirit's school. Here we learn goodness, discipline and knowledge. Here we affirm with the words of the psalmist: "I have understood more than all my teachers". Why is this so? Because we have clothed ourselves not in purple and fine cloth but in understanding and we ever strive to better understand the testimonies of God's prophets and holy ones. Happy are those who remain in this school of the Holy Spirit.

Let's pray: "Don't cast me away from your face or take your holy spirit from me, but create a pure heart in me, O my God, and renew a right spirit within me." It is characteristic of the Lord to cast away whatever is impure and to banish sin. To receive the Holy Spirit is to receive that holiness without which no one will see God. And yet who can refrain from every evil? Who can restrain himself, not only from bad actions but even from bad thoughts?

We must let God strip off our "old nature" and put on us a new one. We are to become new in the spirit of our minds and not simply in our flesh. We need to ponder what is right and walk in the newness of the Spirit and not simply in the written word. Christ brought a beautiful model of uprightness from heaven and he left it on earth. It is instilled in all his works.

Once the body has been set right through holy actions, and the heart purified and renewed by upright thoughts, saving joy is restored. Then we walk in the light of God's countenance and exult in God's name all day long. What, then, do we need to do except let ourselves be strengthened by a ruling spirit that is holy? In what is this strengthening if not in love? What other gift is worthy of our God? Nothing whatever will be able to separate us from this love of God.

Do you know how to possess yourself, to possess the gift God has given you in a holy way and not in dark passions or lusts? You have received a holy spirit. Is it your will that, whatever you want others to do to you, you also do for them? You have received a right spirit for service of your neighbor. This is the uprightness that each law commends to us. Then we are taught by our nature and by what is handed down in Scripture. If we persevere with strength in receiving both, we receive the ruling spirit of God. It is what God approves.

Manifold is the Spirit who inspires us in so many ways. The Spirit is bestowed on all for their benefit—for working the miracle of salvation and for help and for consolation. The Spirit lavishly bestows the common goods of life, and on both the good and evil. Truly God is unbounded in goodness and love. How ungrateful not to acknowledge this goodness. Doing this helps our weakness in every struggle if we turn to God with our entire hearts; then God works salvation. We can see by such experience that we are children of God. We experience God, the Spirit, in the mighty flame of love we find in our hearts. Let us too be filled with the spirit of forgiveness and with exultation. Let's us live our lives of dedication with all the fervor of the Spirit.

Tuesday

SEEING EVERYTHING IN TERMS OF GOD'S LOVE

A reflection inspired by a letter of St. Aloysius Gonzaga

Because young Aloysius Gonzaga was given the gift of a vital faith he saw that the greatest of all goods was God's very self. He renounced the title of Prince in favor of his younger brother and joined the Society of Jesus. He didn't do this simply for his own sanctity or to gain heaven for himself. He did it so he could be made an instrument of God in saving others. When, during his time of studies, the plague broke out and many were dying of it he volunteered to become a nurse and care-giver. He did not know what caused the plague and so could not take any precautions against getting it himself. Most of those who cared for the plague-stricken got it and died, as did Aloysius. He wrote a series of letters to his mother and family members as he lay dying. He was trying to share with his family the spiritual sight that led him to give his life to help others die in Christ.

"Mother, may the comfort and grace of the Holy Spirit be yours always. I am still lingering in this place of the dead and dying and must make my way to heaven at last. I long to praise God forever in the land of the truly living. I had expected to come to the end of my personal journey before this. St. Paul tells us that charity weeps with those who are weak and rejoices with those who rejoice so I hope that you will have exceedingly great joy in knowing that God, in his grace and love for you, has shown me the path to that genuine happiness that is knowing I shall never lose God!

"The divine goodness is a measureless depth and a shoreless ocean. When I plunge my mind into the mere thought of this I am carried away by the immensity of that goodness. I feel lost and bewildered. Think of it: In return for such brief and feeble labors as I have done God calls me to an eternal joy and peace. God's voice invites me to heaven and to infinite bliss! I have sought God, and this bliss, so lazily and with so little fervor. He offers me this reward as though for tears I so seldom actually shed.

"Care for the things of God. It would be an insult to God's boundless kindness to mourn as if really dead one who is alive and stands face to face with God. In God's presence, my prayers can bring you more wonderful support in your own troubles than anything I could do on earth. Besides, we will not be separated for long. We will see each other again, and in heaven. We will be united with our Savior. We will praise Jesus with all our heart and soul! We will sing of God's mercies forever! We will rejoice in eternal happiness!

"When God reclaims the life we have on loan, God simply makes sure the treasures we are will be kept safe. God only wants to give us the blessings we ourselves want most to have. I write this with the one desire that you and my family will look upon my departure as a joy and special favor. Speed me with your blessings—especially with a mother's blessing—in my passage across the waters of death to the shore on which all blessings are found. I can find no better way of telling you how I love and respect you and how much I owe you." God be with you and bless you.

Wednesday

THE GRACES OF PREPARING FOR HOLY FEASTS

A reflection from a sermon by St. Bernard

How do you prepare to celebrate a holy day or the feast of a saint? Do you think of decorations and special meals or freedom from work? Remember that worldly celebrations are often accompanied by drunkenness and other works of darkness and we mustn't be children of the night but of the light. Let's think of three of the benefits we can hope to receive from our celebration of such a day. First, we can think of the help that can come to us from the holy one we celebrate. Second, think of the good example we can give to others if we celebrate a holy day in a holy way. Third, think of your own shame if your life hasn't been holy.

When we celebrate a feast of the Lord or of a saint, we should remember that those who are with God don't love us less but more and better for being with God. God is love and the closer we are to God the more our life expresses love in all we are and do. What is good in a person isn't lessened by the closeness of God but made more perfect. That is why we should look for graces and helps when we celebrate the Lord or one of the saints. St. Paul noticed that God uses very ordinary people to help others, and especially in leading them to salvation. God didn't reject his Chosen People because many refused to believe in Christ but intends to use our faith to help them. Jesus (e.g.) came among us to help all, and did it through the Israelites that came to him and worked with him when he called.

Now Jesus would do the same with us. Let's think of how the examples of those the Lord's followers, accepting even death, put us to shame. Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth and the light*". Others have walked that way; they were made of the same stuff we are and yet walked with the Lord, turning neither to left nor to right. Why we can't follow them as they followed Christ? We are offered the same grace they were given. Accept it. No wonder we're ashamed. Why think you can't do by grace what others did by grace? Yes, we live in what is called a valley of tears and shouldn't expect to escape tears and trials, but the Lord Jesus bore his cross and we have to follow in his footsteps. He commanded us to.

Don't look only at the wondrous things our Lord and the saints have done and ignore all that was dark, difficult and painful. We have great cause for rejoicing, even in our sorrows and shame. Ponder this as you prepare for holy celebrations. If you do, it will lead us to turn to God with special fervor and dedication. Think of what great things God did, not only through his only Son but through the Blessed Virgin and saints like Peter and Paul. Paul tells us that just when he was humanly weak, he was strong in God. You and I can't plead human weakness as an excuse; it isn't an excuse but an embarrassment. When we are weak, we can best witness to God's love and grace by doing all that is involved in walking the way of holiness but not on our own. That is what our special celebrations are about. Let us rejoice in God's great marvel that is the grace that enables us to do what we of ourselves cannot. It is in God that we are strong, and never stronger than when we confess our weakness.

Thursday

GOD'S GIFTS OF GRACE

A reflection taken from a sermon by John Henry Cardinal Newman

Let's consider the majestic and even severe sanctity of Holy John the Baptist. He seems to have had a privilege very nearly as exalted as the Most Blessed Mother of God! She was conceived without sin, and he was born without it. Each was, in their way, chosen by God, and freed from every obstacle to doing God's will fully and with a pure and complete gift of self in praise and service.

St. John, in the beginning of his existence, was a partaker of Adam's curse and so lay under God's wrath. He had need of that grace which is the life and strength of every human person. Yet Christ, the Lord and Savior, came especially to him, brought by the Holy Mother of God. When Elizabeth greeted Mary and she responded, the grace given to her was given also to John and he was cleansed from sin and brought as close to God as a human person can be.

Think of the reason why we celebrate the "birth" of John the Baptist. The Church doesn't celebrate anything unholy; it doesn't celebrate any birth except that of Jesus and of Mary and of St. John the Baptist. It doesn't matter how holy they later became. It doesn't celebrate St. Augustine's or St. Gregory's or St. Bernard's or St. Aloysius' birth. They were all born in sin. The Church celebrates their conversions, the gifts given them by God—their martyrdoms, their deaths, and even the translations of their relics; but it doesn't celebrate their births. What it celebrates is God's grace and the wonders it works in all sorts of people.

Reflect, then, on the very special grace given to the Baptist. The way he began, under the power of this grace, was the way he lived and the way he died. He was carried away by the Spirit into the desert. He lived on the simplest food and with the rudest of clothing, and perhaps in caves otherwise inhabited only by wild animals. For thirty years he led such a life. It was a life of mortification and of meditation. He lived in this way until God called him to preach penance and proclaim the coming of the Christ. He was even given the grace to baptize his Savior. And then, having done the work God had given him to do, he laid it aside. He was an instrument of God, used and then laid aside when it was time. He languished in prison until the grace of martyrdom came.

The themes that light up his life are those of grace and holiness. To be holy is to be close to God. This is not something we can do of ourselves. We can only respond to the call of divine grace. He was called to witness to holiness in all he was and did. He was called to consecrate his entire life and self in response to God's grace, calling him even while still in his mother's womb.

This is a most marvelous grace and calling. A most marvelous saint John was. From childhood a hermit dedicated to living only for God and the coming of God's kingdom. Yes, he was also a preacher to those who were fallen and perhaps living in sin. He called them to God not only by word but by example. As God had called him through Mary's word to Elizabeth, so he called others through his words, until the time came for him to point to the lamb of God and then retire from the scene until the Lord indicated to him the further grace he should live. All these were graces of witnessing to God's grace and love. We can do no better, even want no better, than that.

Friday

WHAT IS WORSHIP OF THE SACRED HEART?

A reflection by Fr. Jean Leclerc

There are two essential aspects of our celebration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The first is that we are worshipping God when we worship the Sacred Heart. We worship God incarnate in Jesus Christ, our Savior, and we worship him in the humanity which he took upon himself. When we speak of someone's heart, we usually aren't referring to that person's physical heart simply as an organ that pumps blood through the body. We are referring to the heart also as a symbol of a person's love and concern for others. In Jesus Christ we encounter God become human and so taking to himself a human heart, physically and symbolically. Because of its unity with the Godhead, the humanity of Jesus is really and truly, hypostatically, united to the Person of the Word of God made flesh. This heart is the center and sign of God's charity in human form. That is what we worship when we worship the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

When we worship God, then, we primarily worship. We don't worship God to make reparation or to plead for this or that. If we do these things, we do them as part of worshipping and adoring God as redeeming and uplifting love. If we want to make reparation, we can only do it by letting ourselves be taken into the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Christ and we do it because we want the entire world to experience the effects of this redemption. Christ alone takes away the sins of the world and we can only be a part of this as one with Christ.

To adore God is to offer ourselves to God. This is the purpose of all adoration of the Sacred Heart. It is the heart of Jesus Christ fully and for all eternity offered wholly and fully to God the Father in the Holy Spirit. Sometimes this has been referred to as "devotion" to the Sacred Heart. The Latin word behind the English means simply to dedicate oneself wholly. In Christian faith, the word refers to the interior disposition by which a person dedicates self, gives self, and consecrates self to God through Jesus.

Devotion is worship. Primarily, it is a form of liturgical worship. That means it is community worship and not something merely or primarily private. What is more, this worship is a way of acting out the Christian faith in action. The meaning and the fruits of worship have to overflow in Christian living and serving. That is what devotion to the Sacred Heart points to first and primarily. Because this devotion has so many and such rich facets it can't stop with Jesus' human heart. If we plunge into this self-dedication, we plunge into that of the Church to its Lord and bride—into the life of the Trinity itself. In the eyes of the Heavenly Father, each of us and all of us together as a Church constitute only one heart in and with the heart of Christ.

If we would deepen our understanding of what we do, we should recall how St. Paul spoke of charity and its manifestations. They were concrete and practical. They were deeds of love, and they spoke of his love for his converts. He talked about a "visceral" love, a gut-level love. We think of Christ's heart but it's his whole insides. There isn't anyone who loves humans as they need to be loved to be redeemed except Jesus Christ. If we would be part of this we must love as He loves and in his love.

Saturday

LEARNING PURITY OF HEART FROM MARY

Based on a reflection by Hans Urs von Balthasar

Mary is a prototype of the Church, and so models the maturity in Christ for which we are being formed. She mediates this grace to us in two ways. First, she is the place of the real and bodily indwelling of the Word. As St. Paul says, our body is to become Christ's body so we will no longer live in the old way but Christ will live in us. Second, she is a servant of God and Jesus in her entire person, body and soul. She knows no law but conformity to the Word of God and his demands. We are called to this.

Mary was a virgin. That means she was exclusively dedicated to being a hearer of God's word. For her to hear was to obey and to obey was to become a mother for Jesus as Son of God. The word became incarnate in her. She was blessed in this way because she heard the word of God and kept it. She kept all the words of God and about God that were given her to hear and pondered them in her heart. She is thus the model which governs all contemplation.

Mary shows us that we must keep clear of two dangers. One is that of seeing the word only as something external to us. Rather it is the most profound mystery of our own being. It is that in which we live, move and are. The other danger is that of regarding the word as so interior to us that we confuse it with our own being. We could confuse it thus with natural wisdom given us, once for all, at our creation and so belonging to us to use as we will.

The most excellent Hearer of the Word is the virgin who became pregnant with that Word. She bore the Word as her own and at the same time as the word of the Father. She herself, even as mother, remained the Word's servant. The Father is the master and gives us the Son as our master; Mary allows this to mold her. We too are called to live wholly for the fruit of her womb. Now she has given birth but she continues to carry Jesus as her gift to others and as ever calling her to turn to the Father. Mary needed, and needs, only to look into her heart to find Jesus and so the Father, and she wishes that gift to be ours as well.

She did not fail to keep her gaze uninterruptedly on the child by her side, on the man proclaiming God's kingdom and whose words and actions every more astonished her. More and more she understood, not what he meant but that his life was wholly the Father's will and that hers must be exactly that as well. Even when he gave her John, to be his mother, she obeys the word that resounds ever more strongly and divinely in her, even if it seems more alien. She gives herself wholly and radically, even in advance, to being led whither she does not expect but where He points.

This is having an "immaculate heart". As she is wholly in accord with God's leadings, so she calls us to let ourselves be so shaped that we too will have Jesus and the will of the Father engrafted in our hearts, as he is in hers.