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Sunday

OUR MISSION TO BRING LIGHT

A reflection by Fr. Karl Rahner

Our world is divided. It is a creation of God that has failed to achieve its full and proper perfection. There is evil and darkness and a doorway to hell in this world where God's creative design and humanity and its cultures should realize salvation. In fact, in our creative labors and all our earthly achievements—in cultures, in philosophy, in science, and in literature and the arts—we are too often seduced into falsity by a spirit of darkness. We are tempted to create a culture that is diabolical. From this fact comes our mission to exorcise our culture and bring light into darkness.

We are in great danger of deceiving ourselves about this. We tend to see the hand of the devil at work only when we sin against the commandments of God. When we don't sin in that way we think everything is in order. We may then drift with the tide and accept as right cultural creations that have been rendered diabolical by forces causing debasement, luxury-seeking, wild and senseless and unhallowed sexuality, and by the demons of covetousness and pride; we may self-imprison ourselves in the things of earth. If this is not to happen to us we can't let ourselves think that because something is widespread and "everybody does it" therefore it is right and proper.

We mustn't think that because many widespread debased cultural practices are presented as acceptable that it is right for us to go along with them. What is more, when we fight against them we mustn't let ourselves think we are doing this in the name of what we call "traditional values". Then we often end up fighting to preserve what was evil in the "old days" and making it seem better than today's evils. We Christians can't fulfill our cultural mission either by saying "Yes!" and "Amen!" to current cultural trends or to appeals to the past. That too is subject to judgment and to a discernment of spirits.

A Christian must be a discerner of spirits. We must have the courage to say yes or no to both the old and the new alike. We must have the courage to develop a Christian culture, one that belongs not only to the present but to God. What is needed is a Christian, an exorcised, and a purified culture. To fulfill this mission we need courage and light and, especially, strength from above. Yet even if this Christian yeast is mixed with the world's dough it may not permeate it wholly. We don't know that we can make our world's cultures pure and radiant and entirely aflame with divine charity.

We are laborers in God's vineyard and must bear the heat and burden of the day even if we never fully achieve the mission's goal and our God-given duty to make all perfect in Christ. That's why the vineyard owner in Jesus' parable kept going out to hire more laborers. We are to work continually to purify our cultures from the power of darkness and evil and leave the rest to God.

The world will reach its fulfillment only in the Kingdom of God. Before that comes we are like so many fingers of God serving as signs and symbols of the fact that the Kingdom has already come into the world and is growing. More than this we can't do. But even this is a noble mission and well worth doing. We are set against the darkness and sent to enkindle the faith that the Kingdom of God is among us. Through such faith, it grows until all God's purposes are accomplished. That is enough for us!

Monday

ST. DOMINIC'S FAITH-FILLED PRAYER

Developed from a reflection by an anonymous Dominican

Our holy father, Dominic, had a beautiful way of expressing his faith in prayer. He was filled with grace and devotion. For instance, after praying the canonical hours of the Divine Office, and even the Grace said after meals, he would go off quietly by himself to his cell or to some other quiet place. He seemed to be especially sober and alert. People thought that the divinely given words with which we had prayed had, so to speak, anointed him with the spirit of devotion and he sought to go on praying.

When he had found a suitable place he sat down to read in preparation for prayer. He seemed to be recollecting himself and fixing his inner eye on God and God's presence in the Divine Word. Thus he would open a book, make the sign of the Cross and begin to read. What struck those who witnessed this was that he seemed to be moved inwardly—sometimes with delight as though he was hearing the Lord speak to him. A psalm says: "I will hear what the Lord God is saying within me", and he gave the impression he was doing just that.

At times he seemed to be arguing, though as with a close friend. Again, it seemed that he was impatient, sometimes agreeing emphatically by nodding his head energetically, and at other moments he would appear to be listening quietly or disputing or struggling over something. At one time he would laugh and weep, both at the same time! He would seem to fix his gaze on someone and become submissive and beat his breast.

Those who were inquisitive enough to spy on him in this way got the impression he was acting like Moses in the innermost desert, beholding the burning bush and hearing the Lord speak to him. He seemed always to feel called to humble himself. He had a wonderful way of passing quickly from reading to prayer and from meditating to contemplating. In all this, he seemed absolutely filled with faith and trust in God.

He used to venerate the books he was reading as instruments of God's presence, bowing toward them and kissing them. This was especially the case with books of the Gospels or when he had been reading a quotation from the words of the Lord. Sometimes he would hide his face in his scapular or bury it in his hands, and then he would show signs of anxiety and of yearning. He would rise and bow slightly, as though he were thanking someone with special respect. Whatever his demeanor he always went from his prayers seeming at peace in himself and very much refreshed.

We remember all this as a way of learning from our Holy Father how to pray, just as Jesus had taught his disciples and apostles. We too seek to find the Lord in prayer and speak to him personally and from the heart. That is what our Father did so beautifully.

Tuesday

CONTEMPLATION & COMPASSION

A reflection developed from a text by Waltraud Herbstrith

Edith Stein, a Jew who had fallen away from observance, received a doctorate in philosophy at the age of 23 with a dissertation on the nature of empathy. One night in 1921, as she was reading the autobiography of Teresa of Avila, she was struck by conviction: "This is the truth!" she said to herself. She was baptized the following New Year's Day.

In 1932 she was given an academic appointment at the University of Munster but a year later she was dismissed because the Nazis had come to power and begun their campaign against Jews. She wrote, "I spoke with the Savior, to tell him that I realized it was his Cross that was now being laid upon the Jewish People, that the few who understood this had the responsibility of carrying it in the name of all, and that I myself was willing to do this if he would only show me how." She decided that God called her to enter the Carmelites and she did in 1934.

She took the name "Sister Teresa 'Blessed by the Cross'—"Benedicta a Cruce". After the Kristallnacht, she let herself be smuggled into Holland for the sake of the other Carmelite sisters in Germany, but when the Dutch bishops wrote a pastoral letter condemning persecution of the Jews, she and all other Jewish Christians were arrested and destined for death camps. Her sister, Rosa, mentally handicapped, lived with her in the convent, and when the Nazis came to arrest her she told Rosa: "Come, we're going for our people." She occupied herself with prayer and the compassionate task of carrying for terrified children. She did this in the internment camp and on the journey in boxcars to Auschwitz, where she and Rosa died in the gas chambers on August 9, 1942.

What was remarkable about her was not the manner of her death or what she suffered but her very clear understanding of what was happening and the reasons why she should accept, even welcome death so calmly. She was to offer her life in solidarity with the Jewish People, her people, as an act of atonement for the evils of her time and as a way of consciously identifying herself and them with Christ on the Cross. She saw herself called to live the truth she had read about in the words of St. Teresa of Avila by accepting the gift of Christian faith and Christ's death. She turned to God as a Carmelite nun dedicated to prayer, though also to writing about the spirituality of St. John of the Cross. Her faith told her that this was what God had called her to do. In faith and in trust in God's love for her, for her People, and for the entire human race she accepted this death. She knew it was death with Christ. She knew it was the way God called her to fill up what still was wanting in the sufferings of Christ for others. She did it without ever flagging in prayer, even entering the gas chamber.

Wednesday

THE DEDICATION OF A DEACON TO GOD'S POOR

A narrative composed by St. Peter

Lawrence was an archdeacon of the church of Rome and very close to Pope Sixtus II, his bishop. When Sixtus was condemned to death Lawrence followed him as closely as he could to the place of his execution. We are told that Sixtus looked back at one point and saw Lawrence looking sad. Interpreting it as sorrow that he too would not receive the gift of martyrdom the bishop said, "*Do not be sad, my son; in three days you will follow me.*" This prophecy delighted Lawrence and he began to prepare himself inwardly.

In fact, he was almost immediately arrested, and since he was an archdeacon, and so was presumed to have access to the church's treasury, he was commanded to turn these treasures over. The holy Lawrence was actually poor in the sort of wealth the persecutor wanted but he was rich in virtue and responded by asking for three days to get everything together. Three days later he came to his judge accompanied by great crowds of poor people whom the church had aided. "*These are the riches of the church!*", Lawrence proclaimed.

He spoke only the truth, but it made his death more bitter, at least in his judge's eyes. Enraged at being made to look ridiculous the judge, who might have come up with a less severe penalty, ordered Lawrence to be killed by torture. He himself was aflame with an inner fire and so he brought forward the well-known gridiron for martyring Lawrence by roasting him and so dehydrating him. Only after that would he be decapitated as the law required. Lawrence, however, insisted on treating the gridiron as a bed of rest. It was torture in the mind of the judge but not according to the victim's outlook.

Where no penalty for sin is involved no torture is really such inwardly. So the most blessed martyr, showing how peacefully he rested on red hot iron, told the bystanders: "*Turn me over now. If one side is done you can begin to eat.*"

We admire Lawrence's endurance. We have to admire it as a gift of God. In this case, the victim's faith was not burning him painfully but was consoling him as he was roasted. How did faith console him? It did this by keeping him faithful to the One who has promised all eternal life in return for believing trust. That his faith might not fail God bestowed on the martyr a horde of gifts. His hope burned more brightly than the fire kindled by his executioners. Indeed, his charity was enkindled all the more amid the bodily punishment that is fire. He is a supreme example to us of how to follow Christ to the cross when that is God's will. There is always a way to turn every difficulty into an opportunity to love God and God's People.

Thursday

DON'T LOSE THE OPPORTUNITIES GOD GIVES

A reflection developed from a letter by St. Clare

Every day look in your spiritual mirror and reflect on how you might make yourself more beautiful in the eyes of Christ, our lover. In this mirror, by the grace of God, you want to see blessed poverty, holy humility, and love beyond the power of words to describe.

You will behold the poverty of one who was laid in a manger and wrapped in very ordinary swaddling clothes. Not only was he poor but what wondrous humility he shows us. It is the King of Angels, the Lord of heaven and earth who is laid in that manger. Then think of the countless difficulties and labors that he accepted as the price for the redemption of our race. In these marvelous realities, we see the ineffable love which made him willing to die a horrible and shameful death on the cross.

When this sort of mirror is hung on the wood of the cross itself it seems to speak to us, to all of us: "All you who pass by, look and see whether there is any suffering like my suffering!" This is how he calls us to follow him. Can we reply in the traditional words? "I recall it, Lord, over and over again, and it puts joy into my downcast soul". If we do things like this we will glow with a greater and greater love for God and for Jesus.

Besides, as you meditate on the indescribable delights and riches and enduring honors Jesus offers us, and you in particular, and as you sigh and long with all your heart, try to cry out to Jesus with your love: "Draw me! We will follow you eagerly, Oh Heavenly Bridegroom!"

Yes, let us run and never grow weary till Jesus brings us into the banquet hall of Heaven. Then his left hand will be under my head and his right will embrace me and he will kiss me in loving welcome.

As you meditate in this way, please remember me. I think of you all and have inscribed you on the tablets of my heart and in happy memories. Let us all be so dear to one another.

Happy are all who are given the grace of sharing such a holy way of life as is ours. That is our spiritual mirror. The angelic court of Heaven never ceases to admire the beauty of this way of life. Love for it is love for Jesus. It exhilarates us merely to reflect on such realities and this brings ever new insights. It is so wondrous that it even brings life to the dead. With all the citizens of the Heavenly Kingdom let us rejoice in it. It is indeed a spiritual mirror in which we glimpse ourselves as God is making us, so we will be able to share everything God is, with God and with each other, forever.

Friday

GIVING HOPE TO ONE ANOTHER

Excerpt from a reflection by Damasus Winzen

Ezekiel has a divine mission to make it clear that even complete political annihilation, destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and of the city itself, and even the situation and status of an exile was God's way of working in God's chosen a new beginning in the Spirit. A new Israel is to rise out of the graveyard of the old and it will be gathered around a shepherd of David's line in an everlasting covenant of peace. There will be a new dwelling place watered by an ever-deepening river of the Spirit of God.

Ezekiel always remains the prophet of exile. This gives him great actual importance both for the scattered Jewish people and for Christians, who in their own way are refugees looking for a new homeland. Ezekiel was a refugee and revealed the divine meaning of this seeming calamity. Do not think in terms of power politics or plan a kind of revolution to recover what you once had, he warns us. Any such attempt will focus attention on things that are not of God and do not pertain to God's Kingdom. Such a focus only prevents people from realizing the spiritual source of their sense of loss and defeat. We will not realize that what we need to be freed from is sin.

The glory of God has not been driven from us, nor was it driven from Israel of old. It left because of the abominations they, and we, commit in seeking what is not God. In chapter after chapter Ezekiel unfolds the dark picture of sin as a kind of mirror in which we can contemplate ourselves. Ruthlessly, Ezekiel exposes the falseness of the prophets who speak out of their own worldly hopes. He takes Jerusalem, and all those chosen by God, as a faithless wife of the Lord. But all his accusations and threats of punishment serve only one purpose: They are intended to lead us to repentance.

God does not want the death of sinners. God wants sinners to be converted and to live. Ezekiel does not address himself only to people in general. He realizes that penance and conversion are the work of individuals. Every single person, every single soul, is God's. God judges it according to its deserts and then seeks to lead it to what is beyond anything it deserves. No one can hide from personal responsibility by using the community as a shield.

How are we to find the hope in God which leads to conversion? All have infirmities. Think of growing old and all that comes with it. But in the Spirit, we can accept and live these infirmities without eyes fixed on the place, the life, to which our God is leading us. Others can see that we are not preoccupied with self but with God and with all that is good and can be hoped for. By living in hope we lead others to hope. That was the vocation of Ezekiel, and it is ours. God shows love even through judgments. Those who show others hope also fulfill their God-given vocation. Ezekiel was the first "spiritual director" in Israel. We are all such directors of the Spirit for one another. This is our hope and our source of joy.

Saturday

THE GLORIOUS VIRGIN SHOWS US WISDOM

A reflection from a conference by St. Bonaventure

Who can pay the price of our salvation? Only Jesus Christ. Who can bring us to Christ? The Blessed Virgin, by her spiritual fortitude and her prompt obedience. The commandments of God in the heart of a holy woman are like everlasting foundations resting on solid rock. This refers to the Blessed Virgin. She is not lazy and she not only listens but acts on what she hears. So the commandments of God were in her heart as the foundations of her life. Jesus said, “whoever listens to my teachings and puts them in practice is a wise person who builds a house on a rock foundation”. Eve violated the command of God and so destroyed the foundations of the home intended for our salvation; the wise Virgin restores these and so prepares us for salvation.

Again, the Blessed Virgin shared in paying the price of our salvation by being filled with goodwill. Listen to Gabriel: “Blessed are you among women; the Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you and so the Holy One to be born of you will be called the Holy Son of God.” St. Augustine tells us that the Holy Spirit is love and that there is no gift one can’t lose except this gift of love. All other virtues can be found in the good and the evil but love of God and neighbor can only be found in the good and the pious. This is the gift that makes one holy. Hugh of St. Victor says, “because the love of God burned so powerfully in the Virgin’s mind wonderful things were done in her body”. Through that fire, light came to the world and wasn’t put out. Fleshly love of a man and woman give birth to a fleshly child but from the Virgin’s love for God was born God’s Son. Our love should be like hers.

Whoever would be holy ought to imitate the holiness and the uncorrupted chastity of the Glorious Virgin together with her ready obedience and abundant goodwill. In imitating the Glorious Virgin we become like her instead of like Eve. We do this when we join her at the Cross. She was there accepting the Divine Will and conforming her own will to it. St. John tells us that Jesus saw his mother there and confided her to St. John, a virgin confided to a virgin, in order to teach us how to accept God’s will. She shows us how to give ourselves to God with Christ. God had laid upon Eve the curse of pains in childbirth. The Virgin didn’t know that pain but knew spiritual pains after childbirth. Ordinarily, the pains of childbirth are physical but in the Virgin they are spiritual. We too can share such pains.

In a spiritual way, the entirety of the Christian People was given birth from the womb of the Glorious Virgin. She represents the Church. While Adam slept God formed Eve from his side and while Christ slept on the Cross God formed the Church from the blood and water that flowed from his side—i.e., by the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. This was possible because Christ was formed from the Virgin and she was formed anew by him as he hung on the Cross. It was so that she might become a mother to us all and we might imitate her love and obedience and readiness to share in all that Christ does to reform our race for God. Mary considered as nothing all she suffered with Christ for our sake and we must imitate her in this by suffering for one another’s salvation. Indeed, we see how the Glorious Virgin united herself with Christ through the Holy Spirit to share in paying the price for the world’s salvation. She shows us true wisdom that is the Spirit’s gift through love.