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Sunday

BECOMING SHOULDERS FOR CHRIST

A reflection from a homily by St. Peter Chrysologus

The story about the lost sheep and its shepherd is not about an earthly shepherd but a heavenly one, Jesus Christ Risen from the dead. The story doesn't portray a merely human activity by a divine mystery. The one who owns a hundred sheep is Christ. Christ is the good and loving shepherd. In a single sheep, Adam, he formed the whole human flock. He led that sheep to a place of rich pasturage, paradise with all its joys. But the sheep wouldn't listen to his voice and guidance; for some reason it preferred the howling of a wolf, and so lost paradise and couldn't any longer hear the shepherd. There we all were, seeming without a shepherd or a sheepfold and pierced and torn by deadly wounds.

Our God didn't forsake us, though. He actually became one of us by means of the Virgin's womb, and so assumed all our humanity. By letting himself be raised on the cross he, as it were, took us on his own shoulders. He bore the consequences of our sin and so found us, took us upon his shoulders and brought us back to God. That was his intense joy, the joy he fulfilled in his resurrection.

You know that if we lose something very precious to us and then find it we experience joy more intense than we had before we lost it. That is a pale reflection of the joy God knows when Christ brings us back to our heavenly homeland. Jesus' parable is more concerned with this divine tenderness than with what we did in going astray or getting lost and wounded. A human shepherd would be so worried about losing the 99 sheep that didn't go astray as not to dare to go and seek the lost. But that isn't true for God. Our Lord can keep the 99 safe even while going to seek the lost. And when he finds us he puts us on his shoulders and calls together the angels to rejoice with him.

Brothers and sisters, Christ asks us to go with him as he seeks those who have gotten lost and been hurt. He asks us to lift them up onto our own shoulders and so bring them back to the Heavenly Father and his paradise. You have to have strong shoulders and you mustn't be afraid! If we go with him we will also share in the joy of the party God gives when any lost one is found. The angels didn't feel any jealousy because God did such wonderful things to save our race and each of us; all jealousy was banned from heaven with the devil.

Brothers and sisters, Christ sought us so let us seek him where he is now in Heaven and let us bring all those who are poor or injured to him. He tells us that what we do for them we do for him. More, he tells us that his shoulders are our shoulders when we take up another to bring someone to God and joy. We have been found and now we can help others to be found as well. It can only mean joy for all of us, and it will be a sharing in the joy of our God.

Monday

TWO SERVANTS

From a homily by Pope Francis

Today's Gospel ... speaks to us of service, showing us two servants, from whom we can draw precious teachings: the servant of the centurion, who is healed by Jesus, and the centurion himself, at the service of the emperor. The words that he sends to report to Jesus, so that he does not come as far as his house, are surprising and are often the opposite of our prayers: *«Lord, do not disturb yourself! I am not worthy that you enter under my roof»* (Lk 7,6); *"I did not consider myself worthy to come to you"* (v. 7); *"I too am in the condition of subordinate"* (v. 8). In front of these words Jesus is admired. He was struck by the great humility of the centurion, his meekness. And meekness is one of the virtues of (the centurion)... Faced with the problem that afflicted him, he could have been agitated and expected to be heard, by asserting his authority; he could have persuaded with insistence, even forced Jesus to go to his house. Instead, he becomes small, discreet, meek, does not raise his voice and does not want to disturb. He behaves, perhaps without knowing it, according to the style of God, who is *"meek and humble of heart"* (Mt 11:29). In fact, God, who is love, out of love even pushes himself to serve us: with us, he is patient, benevolent, always ready and well disposed, he suffers for our mistakes and seeks the way to help us and make us better. These are also the meek and humble traits of Christian service, that is imitating God by serving others: welcoming them with patient love, understanding them without tiring us, making them feel welcomed, at home, in the ecclesial community, where it is not great who commands, but who serves (cf. Lk 22:26). And never scold, never. Thus, in meekness, your vocation as ministers of charity will mature.

After the centurion, in today's readings, there is a (second) servant, the one who is healed by Jesus. severe illness. In some way, we too can recognize ourselves in that servant. Each of us is very dear to God, loved and chosen by him, and is called to serve, but first of all, he needs to be healed internally. To be able to serve, we need heart health: a heart healed by God, which feels forgiven and is neither closed nor hard. It will do us good to pray with confidence every day for this, to ask to be healed by Jesus, to be like him, who "no longer calls us servants, but friends" (cf. 15.15). (You) can ask for this grace every day in prayer, in a prayer where you can present the hardships, the unexpected, the weariness, and the hopes: a true prayer, which brings life to the Lord and the Lord in life. And when you serve (others) ... you will find the presence of Jesus, who gives himself to you, so that you give yourselves to others.

Thus, available in life, meek of heart and in constant dialogue with Jesus, you will not be afraid to be servants of Christ, to meet and caress the flesh of the Lord in the poor of today.

Tuesday

ON GRIEF AND DEATH

A Homily by St. John Chrysostom

We weep for those who are leaving home or are going on a journey, but we do not do this as if we were in despair. Weep in this way at the death of a dear one, as if you had bidden farewell to one setting out on a journey. If the one who died had been a sinner who committed many offenses against God, you would weep in order to do what you could to give that person assistance—you would give alms and offer sacrifices. You might even rejoice because the opportunity to do evil deeds has been taken away.

It is far different if the person who died was just. You ought to be happy because the fate of such a one is secure and free of uncertainty. In the case of a young person, you could rejoice because the person has been quickly freed from the evils of this life. If the person was old you should be happy because by departing this life after having received in its fullness much that seemed so desirable, there now remains Heaven's reward.

Truly, honor for the dead does not consist in lamentations and moanings but in singing hymns and psalms and living a noble life, for the person who has left this life is in the company of the angels, even if no one were present at the funeral, while one who was corrupt would gain no profit even if an entire city saw him off at the grave. Do you wish really to honor the departed? Give alms, perform good works, take part in the divine services and rejoice in the Lord.

Let us look heavenward. Let us reflect on spiritual considerations. How shall we be able to turn the unbelievers away from their empty thoughts about death? How shall we be able to exhort them if we do the same sort of things unbelievers do? How shall we preach to them of the resurrection? How shall we talk with them about the other Christian teaching on death? How shall we ourselves live in the security of heart ourselves? Do you not know that death may be caused by grief? Darkening the soul's spiritual vision not only prevents it from perceiving what it should but even causes it harm. Give thanks and then you will not lose heart.

Yet how is it possible not to grieve when you have lost a father, a wife, a son or daughter? How can you not grieve? Do not deny grief but restrain it by hope. It is God who has taken the person away, a person who was only mortal. What has happened was only something that belongs to our mortal nature. You were born human, therefore you were born mortal. Do not let grief prostrate you because something has happened in accordance with nature. You eat in order to live; you never seek to maintain your life without eating. Act in this way in regard to death. Do not imagine one should be immortal in the present life. Grieve for your sins and for sin; this is the right kind of sorrow. Rejoice in the gifts of God to the one who has departed. This is the soundest way to practice what you as a Christian believe.

Wednesday

THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

A homily of St Andrew of Crete

We are celebrating the feast of the cross, whereby darkness was dispelled and the light restored. We are celebrating the feast of the cross, and with the crucified one we are raised up, leaving behind us the earth, and sin so that we may possess what is above. How great the cross! What blessings it holds! The one who possesses it possesses a treasure. More noble, more precious than anything on earth, in fact, and in name, it is indeed a treasure, for in it and through it and for it all the riches of our salvation were stored away and restored to us.

If there had been no cross, Christ would not have been crucified. If there had been no cross, Life would not have been nailed to the tree. If he had not been nailed, the streams of everlasting life would not have welled from his side, blood and water, the cleansing of the world; the record of our sins would not have been canceled, we would not have gained freedom, we would not have enjoyed the tree of life, paradise would not have been opened. If there had been no cross, death would not have been trodden underfoot, the underworld would not have yielded up its spoils.

How great the cross, through which we have received a multitude of blessings, because against all reckoning, the miracles and sufferings of Christ have been victorious. How precious, the means of Christ's sufferings, and his triumph of victory! On it, he won the victory, wounding the devil, and conquering death, and shattering the bars of the underworld. The cross has become the common salvation of the whole world.

The cross is called the glory of Christ and his exaltation; it is the chalice for which he longed, the consummation of his sufferings on our behalf. It is the glory of Christ—listen to his words: "Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in him, and God will glorify him at once". By this, he means the glory which Christ received on the cross.

The cross is also Christ's exaltation—listen again to his own words: "When I am lifted up, I will draw all to myself". You see then that the cross is the glory and exaltation of Christ.

Thursday

REMEMBER HOW MARY CARRIED HER CROSS

A reflection taken from the homilies by St. Pope John XXIII

The Gospels and the Church and the liturgy teach us to meditate on the sorrows of Mary. We turn, then, to a memory of sadness, an example of patient endurance. We remind ourselves, for our own good, that all of life here below is beset with trials and difficulties. It is a life of hardships but in the end, we glimpse an everlasting joy.

Jesus, Mary, Joseph! Give us the certain hope of future triumph. Help us to have courage in every moment of our earthly lives. Jesus, Mary and Joseph each knew sorrow, privations and suffering. Yet each continually reflected the eternal splendor of Heaven and of a life lived with and in God.

The Fathers of the Church warn us that in every age and place there are and will be temptations. If we fail to stay alert and hope in God we may fall victim to some of them. Our longings for various things can wound us. The more wealth one has the more one wants. But using wealth wrongly leads us into wretchedness. The same may be said of the longing for power, even the power to put things right. Then there is pride that breaks the bonds of love and mutual concern and ignores justice in its search for things like power or wealth.

Mary never forgot the gift she had given to the world, to us. It is our Lord Jesus the Christ. He has taken up our crosses and by that means purifies us, strengthens and transforms our energies and frees us from using them in hurtful ways. God uses these crosses to further our spiritual lives and to train us in self-control, and above all in loving like Jesus. Mary lived immersed in Jesus' love, and she tried daily to follow him in that love. It led her, as it leads us, to take up various crosses and follow him.

The lessons we can learn from such wonderful examples as Mary gives us are to be the sources of never failing encouragement and strength. By these means, we rise again after every fall. We correct the faults that come to us from our formation as children and young adults. We shape our own temperaments so we want most of all to seek peace without self-seeking and so seek mutual love like Christ's. We strain forward toward the day and place where such wonders become our daily prayer and thanksgiving.

At the end of life, a door stands open. None can pass through except those who carry a cross. The Lord has kept us company and has shared with us the care of his Blessed Mother, and so many other holy persons. In this company our hope finds good soil, the soil it needs to put down roots and transform us. What challenges need we fear? What can frighten us away from that door at life's end? Those we love most have passed through and stand there with hands outstretched to take ours and guide us these last few steps. We can even now see them and their eyes of love. In trust, we walk forward carrying the cross and that is what makes us supremely like Jesus.

Friday

EXHORTING ONE ANOTHER TO MARTYRDOM

A reflection from a letter by St. Cyprian

Each Christian must prepare for the struggle of keeping the faith untainted. The thing is to think of nothing except life eternal and the crown that goes with confessing the Lord. Don't concern yourself with familiar things, as those heavenly realities were going to be the same. An especially difficult struggle now threatens us. Like soldiers preparing for battle, we need real courage and trust in God. Don't forget that you drink the cup of Christ's blood daily just so that you may be capable of shedding your blood for Christ. This is what it means to long to imitate Christ, not only in what he said but in what he did. Listen to St. John the Apostle: "*One who says, I abide in Christ!, ought to walk in the same way Christ did*".

The Lord wants us to rejoice and even leap for joy when persecutions come. That is how we gain the crown of faith. Doing this opens the gates of heaven to us as soldiers of Christ, and most of all to martyrs. Don't think only of peace and draw back from the struggle of spiritual warfare; the Lord didn't turn back from it. He taught us humility and endurance and suffering and so He did first what he was teaching us to do in imitation of him.

In this world, those who are chosen to fight for their people undergo much and hard training. They receive great rewards if they are victorious in battle. Here before us is a high and marvelous struggle and the offer of a heavenly crown. This is how God makes us his own children! He rejoices in the spectacle of our victory, as do his angels and saints. What a great dignity we are given, and what great happiness, to fight in the very presence of God and of Christ, and to be crowned with Christ himself.

Prepare to fight with all your strength and with minds untainted by worry about what we may lose. Let those who are healthy put on their armor. Let those who have lapsed see that they can regain all they had lost, and let the longing for honor stimulate us all. Remember what St. Paul tells us: "*We don't wrestle against ordinary powers by against the princes of this world of darkness and against spirits of wickedness in high places. So put on the whole armor of faith so you may be able to stand fast on the evil day. Let yourself be belted with truth, and put on the breastplate of righteousness with the preparation that is the Gospel of peace as your boots and carry the shield that is faith so even fiery arrows won't be able to hurt you. Wear the helmet that is confidence in salvation and the sword that is God's word.*"

We all need to take this armor and these armaments. We need to strengthen ourselves with these spiritual safeguards. Then we will be able to endure any evil day of testing and of threats. We can't be hurt if we stand firm in the gospel teachings but will tread upon the serpent without being bitten or tripped up. Faith makes us brave and protects us from spiritual harm. Our ears will never have to hear condemnatory words and we will not be injured by any evil sights or images. The tongue that confesses Christ conquers! With the Gospel at hand we will never do any evil deed or compromise the purity of our faith. If we are aware of the Eucharist we know that the Lord embraces us and we embrace Him. We have received the Lord's body and by being faithful we make ourselves able to receive from the Lord the reward that is like a heavenly crown. Fear not! Only trust in the Lord!

Saturday

WE FIND OURSELVES IN GOD

A reflection extracted from the “Works of God” by St. Hildegard of Bingen

Everything God creates existed in God before the beginning of time. All things, visible and invisible, were in the pure and holy divinity from eternity. If trees grow near a pond, they look as though they were in the water because they are reflected in it. They appear there, however, just as they really are. So it is with God’s creatures. God said, “Let there be!” and all creatures immediately took on the form they had had in God before being created. That should hold for us.

How could God exist without knowledge of all his works? After being created each exists as fulfilling the task that God eternally intended to share with it. Each knows, and ministers, and even understands, as God gives these capacities. Just as a single ray of light causes things to cast shadows so God’s foreknowledge shadows forth the forms all creatures are to receive.

When we see the splendid light of the sun we are pointed toward the sun, as it were. In the same way, when we learn of the angels they point us toward God. All creatures are the praise of God embodied, though only as shadows of God’s fullness. The sun doesn’t exist without giving light. God’s creation only exists as praise of God. When God said, “Let there be light”, rational light arose. First, the angels came to be—both those who chose to remain true to God as well as those that fell into outer darkness where there is no light. Some denied God was their true light and wanted to make someone like God, though that was impossible.

So, God called another light into existence and clothed it with the body that is our humanity and he then gave us the place and the task that the fallen angels deserted. We are to achieve in praise of God what those others refused to do. We show angels in a human form to show that serving God continually in the spirit is an angelic work now shared with us.

We, like good angels, must never forget we are works of God and spirits in the service of God. Our faces must ever be turned to our God, as we imply when we picture angels turned to the east where the sun comes from. We have life in God and by God’s gift and in turning to God we find holy living and so happiness as well. This is what it means to “live in the light”.

The angels are messengers of God to share with others what God has shared with them. Thus, we learn to stand in their place by giving constant praise to God, a praise we live out by sharing thereby with others the gifts God has given us. Can there be a better and more blessed way of life than this? This is the kind of life that God has given us. We have only to live it in order to enjoy it forever.