

THE TWENTY-FIFTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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Sunday

GIVING TO GOD THAT WHICH IS GOD'S

A reflection from a biblical homily by Fr. Karl Rahner

“Jesus said to his disciples, A rich man had a steward who was reported to him as misappropriating his wealth...”. Our lives are a series of unexpected changes. By turns, we feel happy and then unhappy. One moment we're full of life and the next exhausted. First, we're young, and then old. Now encouraged by success and then crushed by utter failure. First grateful for all the good things we've received and then depressed by the thought that we're going to lose everything! What do you do in the face of all these ups and downs? More importantly, what can we learn about ourselves from the way we cope with these changes?

Do you meet each moment with faith, with a humble mind but a stout heart? More, are you docile to God's Providence? Does every change seem to you an opportunity to bring forth fruit for eternal life and to show your love for God? Or do you think only of how you can use each change to gain some advantage for yourself—so you don't lose anything basic!

Our God asks us to be patient and even courageous, unassumingly devoted to service and mutual love. Are we ready to see God's will in each situation? Before we can make up our mind, God will likely have sent us another such challenge. We have to respond quasi-automatically with a willing, loving God and service-centered prudence quite different from the steward pictured in the Gospel. Each moment is a call from our God! We need to accept changes as God's good pleasure and get on with loving God and others. Whatever happens, can be accepted as a grace and a blessing.

Of course, that supposes having a heart that is well-disposed and humble, that listens and obeys. Why don't we ask God for that gift? Isn't it better to pray than complain? Call on God rather than blaming someone! In every heart, there is an unhealed wound. We would be saints in the literal sense if we always and in every way were at one with God and God's will. That is just the reason for the parable of the imprudently-prudent steward. Our lives include situations, relationships and burdens that we can merely cope with if we turn to God's grace—if we are prudent enough to do that. This fact is a call from God to be courageous and loving like Jesus.

It is not only the goods of this world that belong to God but all the moments of every life. We are stewards charged with using these times to love God and one another. Into God's hands, we are to commend our lives. That we can do right now. We are only giving again to our God what God has given to us.

Monday

THE LIGHT IS NOT MEANT FOR THE FRIDGE

From a homily by Pope Francis

If you do not want to be Christians in name only, you have to carry out your daily commitment to “preserve, and not hide” the light that was given to you at baptism. This is a commitment that takes place in “everyday” life, taking care not to give in to certain temptations in which one tends to fall.

It is important not to fall into misunderstanding, “in daily speech, we say: ‘But this is a luminous person, or this person is not luminous’”. Indeed, in the Gospel, “we do not speak about this human brightness. To cherish the light is to safeguard something that we have received as a gift and we are luminous” in the sense “of having received the gift of light on the day of baptism”. It is precisely for this reason, “that in the early centuries of the Church, and even still in some Eastern Churches, baptism is called ‘enlightenment’; when we baptize a child, we give a candle, with light, as a sign: it is the light that is the gift of God”.

One might ask, “Father, how can this light be hidden? How can one hide the light so that it does not enlighten, and why do men not see the light that comes from good works?”. The Book of Proverbs (3:27-34), in which we see “counsel: tips from a wise father to his children”. First, it reads: “Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it”. This is very simple: “If you can do good, do good. Everyone has the right to receive good, because we are all children of the Father who gives us good”. While on the contrary, “those who do not do good, when they are able to do so, are covering the light”, which “becomes dark”.

“Do not say to your neighbor: ‘Yes, go, go, go... come again and I will give it to you tomorrow’. If you have with you now what the person is asking for — and this is a very strong argument made in the Bible — do not make the needy person wait; do not pay the salary the following day”. This serves as a reminder to “never put off the good. The light is not meant to be kept in the fridge, that is to say, it should not be preserved; “The good is today, and if you do not do it today, tomorrow it will not be there. Do not conceal the good for tomorrow”. And those who think with the logic of “go, come by again, I will give it to you tomorrow”, are “heavily covering the light”.

The Book of Proverbs also advises: “Do not plan evil against your neighbor, who lives trustingly beside you”. Very often, “people trust in one person, and that person plots evil to destroy him,... to make him fail”. It is “the little bit of mafia we all have: one who takes advantage of his neighbor’s trust in order to plot evil, he is a mafioso”, even if he does not actually belong to a criminal organization: “this is the mafia, it takes advantage of trust... And this covers the light. It darkens you. All mafia is dark”.

Therefore, listen to this advice concerning “everyday” life — “they are not unusual things” — we welcome the invitation to “be children of light, and not children of darkness”, and to “guard the light that was given to you as a gift on the day of Baptism... All of us who have received Baptism” need to pray that the Holy Spirit “help us not to fall into these bad habits that cover the light, and that he help us to carry forward the light we received freely, that light of God that does so much good: the light of friendship, the light of meekness, the light of faith, the light of hope, the light of patience, the light of goodness”.

Tuesday

PREPARING OURSELVES TO CONQUER WITH CHRIST

A reflection developed from a homily by Bl. Gueric of Igny

“Since the days of John the Baptist the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence and the violent are even now seizing it!” That is what the Gospel tells us. We see this declaration coming true whenever we hear or think of the martyrdom of one of our brothers or sisters in Christ. That is what we celebrate today. We haven’t merited to receive the grace of martyrdom but we rejoice to see the Kingdom of God triumph in those who have. What couldn’t be accomplished by the justice of the innocent has been grasped by the violence of the repentant. This violence is a matter of seizing what has not been granted to nature so that people who by nature were children of wrath may be brought into the inheritance of the saints in all God’s glory.

Recall the story of the Patriarch Jacob and his wrestling with God during an entire night. He held fast and refused to let go without a blessing. Happy the struggling through which God makes a human being the victor and gives a new life to replace what was old and worn out. It is very like the phrase repeated so often to us: “I have loved wisdom more than health and beauty”. What shouldn’t we be willing to give in order to receive the sort of blessing Jacob did? The mortification of our bodies which we have learned from prophets and the holy ones who have gone before us is brought to completion by the surrender into God’s hands exemplified by martyrdom.

Our purpose is to win heaven and to do it by a kind of violence exemplified in our monastic way of life. We are wrestling, in effect, with the angel who guards the way to the Tree of Life. It is in every way necessary that we should wrestle thus both in a persevering way and until we have died to everything but Christ. But no one can achieve this except by the strength that is God’s grace. We all experience that we cannot overcome by our own strength or perseverance. Day by day you pray and God seems to resist your prayers. He is washing you in something that feels like frigid mountain water. This is actually what you wanted when you set out to acquire wisdom.

O, Divine Mercy, I know that you are concealing yourself and I know that you love those who struggle with you. You want us to overcome as Jacob did. God forbid that the one who willed to become weak and even die for us should refuse to struggle with us so that we might come to Him. Love is indeed stronger than death for God’s own strength is turned into weakness for our sakes. This weakness has proven stronger than even death.

Truly, those who do this kind of violence and do it to their own weakness and infirmity for God’s sake, are the ones Scripture talks about when it says: *“In toil, we struggle and do violence to our own perdition”*. This isn’t doing violence to our life. We see our perdition transformed into salvation. That is what happens for a martyr. This is likewise what happens for those who subject themselves to penance for the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom is at hand. Our leader is red with his own blood. By his example and his merits he helps us just as he does the martyrs we celebrate today.

Wednesday

PREFERRING NOTHING TO GOD

A reflection taken from a sermon by John Henry Cardinal Newman

According to the rule of the Gospel, the lack of wealth is, as such, a more blessed state than its possession. This is illustrated in the call of Matthew to discipleship. There is an obvious danger posed by worldly possessions. One may end up treating them as a substitute in our hearts for that One to whom supreme devotion and love are due. Possessions are present and seen but God is unseen. They are ready and at hand for us to use in accomplishing what we want. Whether or not God will our prayers for the fulfillment of those same wants is uncertain, or perhaps even certain in the negative. This is the case when we use wealth to satisfy the corrupt inclinations of our nature or heart. Worldly wealth promises and is actually able to do deeds as gods might, but they are gods that require no service. How easy to choose to serve such a master instead of the Lord who leads us to a cross.

Worse yet, wealth can fill us with notions of our own power and security and self-sufficiency which are wholly false. This is their constant and primary mischief. People who would live in God are not always able to eliminate from themselves all sinful desires, all the lust of the flesh and of the eyes, all gluttony and drunkenness and the like. They may continue to love mere entertainment and frivolous pleasures and putting on a show. One can't easily rid oneself of a feeling of self-importance and superiority. As a result, they get attached to this world and lose sight of the duty of bearing the Cross. One can become spiritually dull and near-sighted and lose the inner delicacy that alerts one to opportunities to love as Christ loves and to serve.

Does it seem somehow unnatural to risk everything for the sake of imitating Christ? Does this seem extravagant and give one a morbid preoccupation with death? Isn't it better to act graciously and give good things to others with a liberal hand? What happens to the contemplation of death and the thought of going to God and facing God's judgment? Doesn't a dedicated Christian contemplate all these things willingly and with a kind of joyous anticipation? But people attached to this world are all too often content to remain as they are. Even if some do serve God in intention, and even in fact, they do it without the noble enthusiasm and elevation of heart and soul that marks the Christian who has given oneself into God's hands.

What if you didn't think there was anything after this life? Perhaps you "*would eat your bread with joy and drink your wine with a happy heart, seeing that your clothes always indicate joy and gladness and that you are anointed with sweet smelling perfumes and oils, living joyfully with one's spouse and loving one another all the days of your life—a life which is vanity even as you enjoy the good things won by your labor*". This is not even an indirect criticism of the good things God gives us. But it is a warning that these things are not the "One Spouse" who wants to be the One to whom all our love and devotion are directed. There is much more to come after death. To close one's eyes to these things is to misunderstand the Gospel. Everyday, turn always toward God and toward the marvels to which God calls those who love him above all else.

Thursday

THE POINTING FINGER

Reflection from a homily by Pope Francis

The vocation of all Christians is “to be witnesses to Jesus”, to fill their lives with the “gestures” typical of John the Baptist: “pointing to Jesus”. This is the common “mission” of the faithful.

The Pope suggested that such a vocation can be understood by looking at concrete examples. In fact, he recalled, Jesus described John as “the lamp”. However, he explained, “he was the lamp, but not the light: the flame pointing towards the light, the lamp pointing towards the light, bears witness to the light. In the same way, Pope Francis noted, John “was the voice”. John “says of himself, ‘I am the voice crying in the wilderness’”. However, he was not the Word. In fact, the Pope stressed, “he was the voice, which bears witness to the Word, points to the Word, the Word of God. He was only the voice”. And in this way, the Baptist “was the preacher of repentance”, saying clearly: “after me, one is coming, who is greater and grander than me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. And he will baptize you with the fire of the Holy Spirit.” Pope Francis then summarized: “The lamp that points to the light, the voice that points to the Word, the preacher of repentance and baptizer who points to the true baptizer in the Holy Spirit”. The Pope concluded that John “is the provisional and Jesus is the definitive. John is the momentary pointing to the definitive”.

For the Pontiff then, what epitomizes John the Baptist “is his provisional witness, but confident, strong”. He is “the flame that was not to be extinguished by the wind of vanity” and “the voice that was not to be silenced by the power of pride”. The Pope explained that John is “always the one who points to the other and who opens the door to the other testimony, that of the Father.

Therefore, John “is great”, because “he always keeps to one side”. Francis explained that the saint is great because “he is humble and chooses the path of humiliation, of effacement, the same road that Jesus will take later”. And in this too, John “offers a great testimony: he introduces this way of self-emptying” which Jesus also followed.

John the Baptist’s witness extends also to the physical realm: “to the disciples, his own disciples, once when Jesus was walking by”, he pointed his finger and said, “this is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Him, not me, Him”. And, faced with the persistent questions “of the leaders, the people, the doctors”, John always maintained “It is necessary that He [become greater]; he must increase, but I must decrease” *(Jn 3:30). The Pontiff then said that humility “is the greatness of John”. “He becomes smaller; he annihilates himself, until the end: in the darkness of a cell, in prison, beheaded at the whim of a dancer, the jealousy of an adulterer and the weakness of a drunkard”.

Pope Francis repeated the expression: “Great John”! Adding that if we were to paint a picture of the Baptist, all we would have to paint is the image of a pointing finger.

Friday

LIVING IN PRAYER & LONGING FOR GOD

A reflection taken from various Padre Pio websites

“Pray, hope, and don’t worry. Worry is useless. God is merciful and will hear your prayer.” This quotation sums up Padre Pio’s attitude toward his life. From the early days of his life as a Capuchin friar, people were drawn to him as to a holy person. They raised many questions and these led to his being forbidden to exercise any public priestly ministry, including the hearing of confessions. A series of investigations was ordered by Vatican authorities, including several popes. The earlier ones were critical of Padre Pio, making the accusation that his stigmata were fake. At one point he was even excommunicated. However, he simply attributed the attacks against him as due to the work of the devil and continued to live the religious life in obedience. *“The most beautiful act of faith is one made in darkness, in sacrifice, and with extreme effort”.*

The restrictions on Padre Pio’s ministry were first lifted by Pope Pius IX and this policy was continued by his successor, Pius XII. The fact was that no matter what was done people wanted to come to Padre Pio as a confessor and to obtain his spiritual counsel. He placed special emphasis on prayer. At the time of his canonization, there was a count of “Padre Pio Prayer Groups” around the Catholic world and some 3,000 existed. He continues to lead people to prayer and to entrust themselves to God. *“Prayer is the best weapon we have; it is the key to God’s heart. You must speak to Jesus not only with your lips but with your heart. Indeed, on certain occasions, you should speak to him only with your heart”.*

After World War II there was a great outburst of interest in Padre Pio’s ministry to the suffering. A special hostel was built near his monastery. Pope Pius XII dispensed him from any impediment that might arise due to his vow of poverty. This led enemies to accuse him of misappropriating funds. His answer was: *“The life of a Christian is nothing but a perpetual struggle against self; there is no flowering of the soul to the beauty of its perfection except at the price of pain”.* *“The longer the trial to which God subjects you, the greater the goodness in comforting you during the time of trial and in the exaltation after the combat.”*

Padre Pio had a very sensitive conscience and confessed weekly and often consulted his Spiritual Director. Some belittled his intelligence and claimed the director was putting ideas in his head. They got his superiors to forbid him to consult this priest. He accepted this too until the prohibition was lifted. He himself heard a vast number of confessions. His formula for a healthy spiritual life was a weekly confession, daily Eucharist, and then constant meditation and prayer.

He conceived of his vocation as contemplative and did only such ministry as his superiors assigned him. *“Have courage and don’t fear the assaults of the devil; remember this forever—it is a healthy sign if the devil shouts and roars around your conscience since that shows he is not inside your will”.* As long as one’s will is fixed on God and on love for God and neighbor all is well. Everything is to be given into God’s hands: *“My past, O Lord, to your mercy; my present to your love; my future to your providence”.* His life continues to lead others to God.

Saturday

GOD'S IMMENSE LOVE FOR US

A reflection from *Journeying with the Lord* by Carlo Cardinal Martini

The Virgin Mary presents us with the perfect case and example of the dignity of life received from the beginning as grace, and expressed throughout its existence as obedience. This dignity is the fruit of grace, which means the fruit of God's love. As the Gospel says, Mary is full of grace. This expression in Greek is actually in the passive mood, which expresses something received. Even more, it is in the remote past. Therefore, we could interpret the phrase in this way: "O Mary, you have been loved for a long time!" This is the dignity of Mary—forever immensely loved.

With the help of St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, which speaks of God's eternal plan, we can realize in our contemplation the dignity of every person— each person born, each person conceived, each of us. Just as the words applied to Mary, they apply to us. We are creatures forever loved, forever present in love and in God's plan. "Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ."

"Before the world was made, God chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence, determining that we should become God's adopted children". Human dignity, seen in this mystery, is grace and gift and being loved.

But to be loved also means letting oneself be loved. It, therefore, concerns obedience: listening to God's Word. The sincere and loving acceptance of that Word—which has always spoken our name and which always loves us—is perfectly expressed by Mary's response to the angel: "Let what you have said be done to me". This is how our dignity is received and how it is expressed in obedience.

At the center of God's plan, we find a woman, and with her we find ourselves. This is the key to our understanding of our dignity and hers. Mary is the first in the chain of human believers. She is the beginning of the Church, the Mother of the Church. God himself was interested in her from before the beginning of all things. This is her human sacredness.

Such sacredness calls for respect, love, protection, and defense of human dignity—in ourselves and in Mary and in all human persons. From the beginning, all human persons are beings forever loved by God! God puts his love into our hearts. We are all called, invited, to listen to the voice of love that God puts there as the very source of our life. That is what we venerate, what we learn from Mary to venerate. We evoke all this each time we speak the "Hail, Mary". We proclaim the certainty of a life and a love that is eternal. We proclaim it best when we too respond to God, moment by moment, as Mary did at the moment when she heard the voice of the angel.