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Sunday

THE CHARIOT THAT IS HUMILITY

A reflection from a homily by St. Gregory Palamas

The parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee is a proof of how humility can lift one from the depths of sin. In spite of having lived in sin, the tax collector joins the ranks of those who live upright lives through a single prayer, and a short one at that. It was a prayer of humility and by it, the tax collector is relieved of his burden of sin, lifted up, and raised above every evil. By it he is admitted to the company of the righteous and justified by the supremely impartial judge.

Contrast this with the case of the Pharisee. In his own eyes, he is a person of importance and a righteous one. Because his righteousness is false he is actually condemned by his prayer! In spite of all that he has done! Really he is an insolent person, even when standing before God. For this reason, every syllable he utters provokes God's anger!

Why does humility raise us to the heights of holiness and self-conceit plunge us into the abyss of sin? It is because the one who has high regard for self, and even in the presence of God, actually asks to be abandoned by God because he thinks that there is no need for God's help. Why look to Heaven for mercy if you don't need it? Scripture says, "*the Lord resists the proud but gives grace to the humble*".

The tax collector went away justified, but not the Pharisee. That's what the Lord himself said! He tells us it is "*because all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves will be exalted*". The devil is incarnate pride, as well as arrogance, and these are the devil's own special vices. These sins drag down every human virtue because they declare the lie that we have no need of God whereas every good gift comes from God.

Humility is the virtue of good angels. It conquers every vice and sin. Humility is the chariot in which one ascends to God. It carries one to the community of those who will be with God for endless ages. St. Paul says: "*We shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so we shall always be with God*". Humility is like a cloud in that a cloud can't by itself support anyone or anything. If we stand in humility we stand firm wherever we are. It has great power precisely because it supports one wholly with help that comes from God. That help is our chariot, one that takes us to Heaven and to God's very self. What can be more wonderful or more powerful than that?

Monday

NEVER SLAVES OF THE LAW

From a Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis

The healing that Jesus carried out provoked the indignation of the leader of the synagogue. The leader “feels the duty to reprimand the woman and says: ‘Come to heal on other days but not on Saturday, the day on which you cannot work!’. Jesus responds forcefully: ‘You are a hypocrite! For example, what do you do with your ox, with your donkey? Do you not untie him in order to give him a drink and food? But for her, you would not?’”.

“The word ‘hypocrite’ is often repeated by Jesus to rigid people, those who have a rigid attitude in carrying out the law, who do not have the freedom of children: they feel that the law must be carried out in this way and they are slaves to the law”. However, “the law was not established in order to make us slaves, but to make us free, to make us children”.

“Hypocrite, Jesus repeats often to the people who are rigid, because there is always something else behind the rigidity, always”. For this reason “Jesus says ‘hypocrites!’”: behind the rigidity, there is something hidden in a person’s life”. In fact, “rigidity is not a gift from God; meekness, goodness, benevolence, forgiveness, yes; but rigidity, no!”.

Therefore, “behind the rigidity, there is always something hidden, in many cases a double life”. However, “there is also something like a disease: those who are rigid suffer greatly when they are sincere, and they realize this, they suffer because they cannot have the freedom of the children of God; they do not know how to walk in the law of the Lord and are not blessed. And they suffer a great deal”. Therefore, even if “they look good, because they follow the law, there is something within that does not make them good: they are either bad, hypocritical or ill”. In any case, “they suffer”.

To clarify his reasoning even further, the Pope reintroduced the story of the “two sons in the parable of the prodigal son”, recounted in the Gospel of Luke (15:11-32). “The eldest son was good”, so much so that “all of the neighbors, all of his father’s friends”, said: “this son is so good, he always does what his father says!”.

In the end, however, the story “collapses and that sinner, who is gone, realizes he has done wrong and comes back, asks for forgiveness, and his father celebrates”. The “good” son, however, “is there and shows what is behind his kindness”. In other words, “the arrogance of believing that he is right”.

This is the “hypocritical attitude: behind the good they do, there is pride”. The prodigal son, for his part, “knew that he had a father, and in the darkest moment of his life he went to his father”. The eldest son, however, “only knew his father as a boss, and never saw him as a father: he was rigid, he walked in the law with rigidity”.

“It is not easy to walk in the law of the Lord without falling into rigidity”, the Pope said, “but those who are rigid, suffer a great deal”. To the extent that even the leader of the synagogue, whom Luke mentions in the Gospel, “was ashamed in the end because Jesus talked sense into him”, saying: “But don’t you do this with your donkey?”

In conclusion, the Pope invited the faithful to pray “for our brothers and sisters who believe that walking in the law of the Lord is to become rigid: that the Lord may make them feel that he is their Father and that he delights in mercy, tenderness, goodness, meekness and humility”. And “that He teaches all of us to walk in the law of the Lord with these attitudes”.

Tuesday

HAVING PATIENCE WITH THE MUSTARD SEED

A sermon by Peter Chrysologos

You have heard how the kingdom of heaven, as vast as it is, can be compared to a mustard seed. Is that the sum of a believer's hopes? Is this what the faithful are longing for—a mustard seed? Is this the blessed reward of virgins for their long years of self-restraint, the glorious prize won by martyrs at the cost of their blood? Is this the mystery no eye has seen, no ear heard, no human heart imagined; the mystery past telling that St. Paul assures us God has prepared for all who love him?

Let's not be too easily disillusioned by our Lord's word concerning the mustard seed. If we remember that God's weakness is stronger than human strength, and God's foolishness wiser than human wisdom, we will be able to grasp the fact that the smallest seed in God's creation can prove greater than the whole wide world.

It is up to us to sow this mustard seed in our minds and let it grow within us into a great tree of understanding and love, reaching up to heaven and elevating all our faculties. Then it spreads out branches of knowledge and the pungency of its taste will make our mouths burn to speak the Gospel and kindle a flame within our hearts—the taste and heat of it will take away all repugnance born of misunderstanding.

A mustard seed is the image of the Kingdom of God. Christ is the Kingdom of Heaven. Sown like a mustard seed in the Virgin's womb he grew up into the tree of the Cross whose branches stretch across the world. Crushed in the grinder of the passion it has produced seasoning enough for the preservation and flavoring of every living creature. As long as a mustard seed is intact its taste lies dormant, but when it is crushed everything is different and revealed. Christ chose to have his body crushed because he would not have his power concealed.

We too must crush this mustard seed in order to feel the force of Jesus' parable. Christ is king because he is the source of all authority. Christ is human because all humanity is restored in him. Christ is a mustard seed because the infinity of divine greatness is contained in the littleness of flesh and blood. Christ has now sowed this seed in his garden, the Church. It is a garden that is to cover the entire world, tilled by the plow of the Gospel and protected by doctrine and discipline, cleared of every weed by apostolic labor, fragrant with the perennial flowers of virgins and martyrs, amid the green plants which are all those who bear witness to Christ by their lives.

Now you must take the wings of the dove, the Psalmist speaks of, and gleam like gold in the rays of divine sunlight. You are to fly to rest forever among the branches of this great tree. Spread the wings of love and service and fly confidently. Do not be afraid. What seems so tiny contains all the riches of God and it is within you. Let yourself be crushed in labors for the Gospel with Christ. Trust and wait for God's word to mature in you.

Wednesday

STRIVE TO ENTER THE NARROW DOOR

An Angelus Message of His Holiness Pope Francis

Today's Gospel passage urges us to meditate on the topic of salvation. St Luke the Evangelist tells us that while Jesus was traveling to Jerusalem, he was approached by a man who asked him this question: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" (Lk 13:23). Rather than giving a direct answer, Jesus shifts the issue to another level in an evocative way, which the disciples don't understand at first: "strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (v. 24). Using the image of a door, he wants his listeners to understand that it is not a question of numbers — how many will be saved —, how many is not relevant, but rather, it is important for everyone to know the way that leads to salvation.

This way means entering through a door. But where is the door? Who is the door? Jesus himself is that door. He says so in the Gospel of John: "I am the door" (10:9). He leads us to communion with the Father, where we find love, understanding and protection. But why is this door narrow, one might ask? Why does he say it is narrow? It is a narrow door not because it is oppressive, but because it demands that we restrain and limit our pride and our fear, in order to open ourselves to Him with humble and trusting hearts, acknowledging that we are sinners and in need of his forgiveness. This is why it is narrow, to limit our pride, which swells us. The door of God's mercy is narrow but is always open to everyone! God does not have preferences, but always welcomes everyone, without distinction. A narrow door to restrain our pride and our fear; a door opens wide because God welcomes us without distinction. And the salvation that He gives us is an unending flow of mercy that overcomes every barrier and opens surprising perspectives of light and peace. The door is narrow but always open wide: do not forget this.

Once more, Jesus extends a pressing invitation to us today to go to Him, to pass through the door of a full, reconciled and happy life. He awaits each one of us, no matter what sins we have committed, to embrace us, to offer us his forgiveness. He alone can transform our hearts, He alone can give full meaning to our existence, giving us true joy. By entering Jesus' door, the door of faith and of the Gospel, we can leave behind worldly attitudes, bad habits, selfishness and narrow-mindedness. When we encounter the love and mercy of God, there is authentic change. Our lives are enlightened by the light of the Holy Spirit: an inextinguishable light!

I would like to propose something to you. Let us think now for a moment, in silence, of the things that we have inside us which prevent us from entering the door: my pride, my arrogance, my sins. Then, let us think of the other door, the one opened wide by the mercy of God who awaits us on the other side to grant us forgiveness.

The Lord offers us many opportunities to be saved and to enter through the door of salvation. This door is an occasion that can never be wasted: we don't have to give long, erudite speeches about salvation, like the man who approached Jesus in the Gospel. Rather, we have to accept the opportunity for salvation. Because at a certain moment, the master of the house will rise and shut the door (cf. Lk 13:25), as the Gospel reminded us. But if God is good and loves us, why would he close the door at a certain point? Because our life is not a video game nor a television soap opera. Our life is serious and our goal is important: eternal salvation.

Thursday

GOD WEEPS

From a Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis

In the face of today's disasters, wars motivated by the worship of the god of money, the bombing of innocent people, a humanity which apparently does not desire peace, God weeps with the tears of a father and mother.

Centering his reflection on the day's Gospel (Lk 13: 31-35), the Pope said it "appears that Jesus had lost his patience, and he uses forceful words: it is not an insult, but neither is it a compliment to call a person 'fox'". He uses this term when speaking to the Pharisees about Herod: "Go and tell that fox". However, there had been "other occasions in which Jesus spoke severely": for instance, he had spoken of the "evil and adulterous generation". He had even referred to the disciples as "hard of heart" and "foolish". In Luke's account, Jesus summarizes "what will happen: 'I must go on my way today and tomorrow and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem'". Essentially, the Lord "says what will happen, he prepares to die".

However, "then Jesus quickly changes his tone", Francis observed. "After this very strong outburst", in fact, "he changes his tone, and looks to the people, and upon the city of Jerusalem: 'Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings!'". This is "the tenderness of God, the tenderness of Jesus". That day, he "wept over Jerusalem". However, "those tears of Jesus", the Pope explained "were not the tears of a friend before the tomb of Lazarus; those were the tears of a friend before the death of another". Instead, "these are the tears of a father who weeps; it is God the Father who weeps here in the person of Jesus".

"Someone said that God was made man in order to be able to be able to mourn for what had been done to his children", the Pontiff said. The tears recounted in the passage from Luke's Gospel are the "tears of the Father". Francis recalled the attitude of the "father of the Prodigal Son, when the younger son asked for his inheritance, and then left". And "this father is certain, he did not go to his neighbors and say: 'Look at what happened to me, what this poor wretch did to me, I condemn this son!' No, he does not do this". Instead, the Pope said, "I am certain" that father "went away to weep alone".

While the Gospel does not give an account of this detail, Francis said, it nonetheless shows that "when the son returns, he sees the father from afar: this indicates that the father would continuously go up to the terrace to watch out for his son's return." And "a father who does this is a father who lives in tears, waiting for the return of his son". These are the "tears of God the Father; and with these tears, the Father recreates, in his Son, all of creation."

"When Jesus went with the Cross to Calvary", the Pontiff recalled, "the pious women wept, and he said to them: 'Do not weep for me, weep for your children'. These are the "tears of a father and mother, which God also continues to shed: even today, faced with disasters, wars which are conducted out of the worship of the god of money, of many innocent people murdered by bombs which are launched by worshippers of the idol of money". Thus, "even today the Father weeps, and even today says: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, my children, what are you doing?'. And "he says this to the poor victims, as well as to arms traffickers, and all those who sell the lives of people".

In conclusion, Francis suggested that the faithful "think about how God was made man in order to be able to weep. And we would do well to think that God our Father today weeps: he weeps for this humanity which does not end, to understand the peace which he offers us, the peace of love".

Friday

I AM WHAT I AM ONLY IN JESUS

A reflection developed from a homily by Fr. Stephen Yim of Singapore

Nothing is known of the apostles named Simon and Jude except that Jesus chose them to bear witness to him. Legend has it that they did this in Persian Mesopotamia, where the church has existed from their day to this, usually under persecution. We are familiar with St. Jude because he is the patron of those in desperate need; i.e., when people don't know where to turn they ask St. Jude to pray for them. Who wouldn't want to be remembered for more than two thousand years as one who was close to Jesus and had a special gift of praying for others?

It is an interesting fact that depictions of St. Jude always show him with a picture of Jesus on a medallion around his neck. He, and even more his fellow apostle Simon, picture Jesus by what they do. What do they do? They proclaim Jesus and they imitate his constant turning to the Heavenly Father in prayer. Is there anything that any of us need to do besides letting our God make us an image of Jesus and ourselves carry that image always in our heart?

We are probably headed for obscurity and oblivion. In a couple of centuries who will remember the details of what we did with our lives? But more and more people are coming to Jesus and to the Heavenly Father all the time. As St. John the Baptist said: He must increase and I must decrease. That should be our prayer constantly. That's what it means to choose to be instruments for the proclamation of the Good News.

Saints Simon and Jude are named in the First Roman canon of the Mass. All who pray using that canon remember them as chosen by Jesus and made close to Jesus by God's grace. That is what all Christians pray for. Whether we are remembered by name is of no special importance. We are always with God and God is always mindful of us. Jesus is God and if we are inseparable from Jesus we are inseparable from God. That is what we pray for constantly.

These two saints are remembered as martyrs. All we know is that just as the world hated Jesus, and crucified him, so the world hates those whom Jesus has chosen as his witnesses. They are models for all who suffer because of their faith in Jesus. Whenever we undergo hardships, even interiorly, because we are struggling to let our faith be our very life and the source of all our hopes, we are experiencing the hatred of the world as it has come to be even within us. We have announced that we want to "leave the world" and cling only to Christ. That is what Simon and Jude announced, and what they did wherever they proclaimed the Gospel in word and by their lives. We have experienced that hatred and the pain and suffering that comes with it. Do we rejoice in this? Do we experience our sufferings themselves as reminders that we have chosen Christ as the Way and the Truth and the Light? To remember that is certainly a grace that brings us close to our Lord. It is the best assurance we can have that we are close to God and that we do God's will. That too is what we constantly pray for. Praise God that we have been given such a gift.

Saturday

MY PRAYER AND THE ROSARY

A reflection from a homily by St. Pope John XXIII

The substance of a well-meditated rosary is a three-note chord. It sounds a music in our heart and soul that raises us to God's love and its delight.

The first note is contemplation, pure and clear and immediate. Each mystery focuses us on a truth of faith that speaks about the redeeming mission of Christ and reminds us that we share it.

As we contemplate this we find ourselves in close communion of thought and feeling with Jesus in his life and teaching. He is Son of God and son of Mary. He lived on this earth. He redeemed and taught and sanctified. In the silence of his "hidden life" everything was prayer and work. But the same thing was true of his passion and its suffering, and of the triumph of his resurrection, and in the glory of Heaven.

The Risen Jesus sits at the right hand of the Heavenly Father. He is constantly helping and sending us the Holy Spirit. He is always giving life to us and to the Church that he founded. It walks his way through the centuries in prayer and work; it must follow his example.

The second note is reflection. It diffuses a kind of radiance over everything and everyone. This comes from the mysteries of Christ's life and their fullness. It is prayer that is responsible for this.

In each mystery, each praying person finds the right teaching for that time and place. We find sanctification through the Holy Spirit as it guides our hearts and minds. It dwells within us and from our depths intercedes with sighs too deep for words, as St. Paul reminds us.

Each one of us is offered the opportunity to confront our own life and all its weaknesses with the strength that comes from God in prayer. In this, we find an inexhaustible grace for our own spiritual struggles and the needs of those we will meet during the day.

Finally, the third note of our cord of love is our intention. Why do we pray? We intercede for individuals of all sorts. We pray for various institutions and the needs of the institutions in which individuals live and work. We pray for needs that are personal and needs that are institutional. We practice charity towards these neighbors God has given us in both ways.

What is more important than that charity should fill our hearts and everything that issues forth from them? We want all that comes forth from us to be a sharing in the charity of Christ and a labor one behalf of the Mystical Body of Christ and the healing of its wounds.

Think of God's intention in our regard. God seeks only our salvation and that of all. What does our prayer inspire us to do? We are moved from within to reach out and share our faith and our hope, and share them in love. If you daily pray the Rosary, you daily renew your own determination to share in this loving and saving intention of our loving and saving God.