

THE THIRTY-THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

The Sunday of Joy Never Ending

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 A reflection taken from texts by Sts. Benedict & Bernard

Sunday

THE GIFT OF UNENDING JOY

A reflection: The Gift of Unending Joy

In November of 1949, twenty-nine monks from Gethsemane Abbey arrived at Mepkin to found the Monastery of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Fifteen were novices, supposedly flexible enough to adapt to the hardships that go with founding a new community. An ancient motto to help us along the path to God says: “Through hardships, to Heaven!” Monastic life provides hardships and God provides the grace to bear with them and persevere. Brother Boniface summed up the challenge and the grace by pointing to two of Mepkin’s huge live oaks: “Those great big oak trees were once just little nuts that held their ground!” Monks are nuts for Christ putting down roots into monastic life and persevering until death, as St. Benedict says, they show the Church and the world the inner beauty that grows in one who walks the monastic way with Jesus. It is a matter of seeking the face of God in prayer, work and community living. Only 10 of the 29 founders persevered to be buried at Mepkin.

All Christians are called to pray, to work, and to live in a community of mutual love, and monks seek to do this in the most thorough way possible. It is hard. Everything begins and ends with prayer—no matter how hot the summer heat or how hard the drudgery of turning what contained only a summer home into a property able to feed and clothe an entire community. Trappist tradition insists that monks support themselves by the work of their own hands. It took many experiments for the community to find success in raising chickens for their eggs, and then mushrooms.

This makes it difficult not to let prayer slip from the center of who you are and what you do. Besides, you live in silence and a kind of solitude; you rise early so you can get prayer and meditation in before the day’s work begins. Many of our human ways of finding encouragement and support are deliberately given up in monastic life. A monastery is a kind of half-open door through which one can glimpse the life and joy of the Kingdom of God. The name ‘mepkin’ is said to mean “beautiful place”. To translate natural into spiritual beauty it is important to have a beautiful church and liturgy. The monastery became the “Abbey of Our Lady of Mepkin”—Our Lady of the Beautiful Place—to show that beauty leads to joy. The present award-winning church was dedicated in 1993 with this in mind.

Mepkin Plantation didn’t put prayer first but focused on work, done by slaves. Monks work to become wholly free and make the fruit of their work a free gift to others. It is a life of turning from all that enslaves people and leads them away from the love of God and loving respect for others. This is the path to God’s Kingdom and unending joy. The twin blessings that are the Mepkin community and its church remind all of God’s call to live now the life of charity that will last forever. Those who have gone into glory remind us who remain to keep death, and God, daily before our eyes. We show that we too can share God’s unending joy. The special thing our founders did was love one another in God for an entire lifetime. Deeper than hardships, and even sin, is the joy given us in Christ. It shapes each monk’s life as a witness for all to see and an invitation to follow Jesus. It is a response to the call that is faith and our call to celebrate on earth the Day of Unending Joy.

Monday

THE CALL TO PATIENT ENDURANCE

A reflection developed from a Letter by St. Nilus of Ancyra

We undergo many times of trial. In such times it is of great advantage for us to endure them patiently relying on the help of the Lord. Scripture says, “*By patient endurance, you will win life*”. It did not say that you will win life by fasting, or by solitude or by silence or by singing psalms; yes, these things are very helpful in finding life with the Lord. But Scripture actually said: “by patient endurance” in every trial that overtakes you will find life.

We have many afflictions. They may come from being treated contemptuously or even insolently. They may involve all sorts of disgrace, either minor or major. They may be bodily and due to physical weakness or they may be spiritual and due to the inimical attacks of Satan. It doesn't matter whether they are trials caused by other people or by evil spirits. What matters is that “by patient endurance, you will win life”.

Of course, we must also be prepared to give wholehearted thanks to God for trials. We must turn to God in prayer. This is part of being humble. God is our benefactor, God is our Savior—and the Savior of the world, and it is God who disposes all things in such a way as to bring about what is good, or certainly what is for our benefit.

St. Paul has written: “*With patient endurance, we run the race of faith that is set before us*”. What has greater power than virtue? And what virtue has greater firmness and strength than patient endurance? Of course, I am speaking of endurance for God's sake.

Enduring for God's sake is the queen of virtues and even the foundation of virtue. It is for us a haven of tranquility. It is peace in time of war. It is calm in rough waters. It is safety, even amidst treachery or danger. It makes those who practice it stronger than steel! No weapon, no bow or arrow, no troop of worked-up soldiers, no siege engine, no flying spear, and no enemy advance can harm such a person.

Do you fear an entire army of evil spirits? Do you fear the organization that promotes Satan's ends and sees you as an enemy? Do you fear the devil himself, even when he stands in front of you backed up by all his armies and devices? Do not be afraid. None of these things have the power to injure a man or a woman who knows how to be patient and endure everything for the sake of God. This is your daily task. It is your task this very day. Be confident and trust in the Lord.

Tuesday

THE TWO GAZES

From an Angelus Message of His Holiness Pope Francis

The Gospel in today's Liturgy narrates the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, chief of the publicans of the city of Jericho (*Lk* 19: 1-10). At the center of this account, there is the verb *to seek*. Zacchaeus “was seeking to see who Jesus was”, and Jesus, after meeting him, states: “the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost”. Let us focus a little on these two gazes that seek: *the gaze of Zacchaeus* who is seeking Jesus, and *the gaze of Jesus* who is looking for Zacchaeus.

The gaze of Zacchaeus. He is a publican, one of those Jews who collected taxes on behalf of the Roman rulers, a traitor of the homeland, and took advantage of their position. Therefore, Zacchaeus was rich, hated by all and branded a sinner. The text says “he was short in stature”, and this perhaps also alludes to his inner baseness, to his mediocre, dishonest life, with his gaze always turned downwards. But the important thing is that he was little. And yet, Zacchaeus *wants to see Jesus*. Something drove him to see him. “He ran ahead”, says the Gospel, “and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way”. He climbed a sycamore: Zacchaeus, the man who dominated everyone, made himself ridiculous and took the path of ridicule – to see Jesus. Let us think a little of what would happen if, for instance, a minister of the economy climbed a tree to look at something: he would risk mockery. And Zacchaeus risked mockery to see Jesus, he made himself look ridiculous. Zacchaeus, despite his lowliness, feels the need to seek another way of looking, that of Christ. He does not yet know him, but he awaits someone who will free him from his condition – morally low – to bring him out of the mire in which he finds himself. This is fundamental: Zacchaeus teaches us that, in life, all is never lost, never. We can always find space for the desire to begin again, to start over, to convert. Re-convert, re-begin, re-start. And this is what Zacchaeus does.

In this regard, the second aspect is decisive: *the gaze of Jesus*. He was sent by the Father to seek those who are lost; and when he arrives in Jericho, he passes right by the tree where Zacchaeus is. The Gospel narrates that “Jesus looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house””. It is a truly beautiful image, because if Jesus has to look up, it means that he is looking at Zacchaeus from below. This is the history of salvation: God has never looked down on us – no; to humiliate us – no; – to judge us - no; on the contrary, he lowered himself to the point of washing our feet, looking at us from below and restoring our dignity. In this way, the meeting of eyes between Zacchaeus and Jesus seems to encapsulate the whole of salvation history: humanity, with its miseries, seeks redemption, but firstly, God, with mercy, seeks the creature to save it.

Let us remember this: the gaze of God never stops at our past, full of errors, but looks with infinite confidence at what we can become. Jesus always looks at us with love, he looks at us: as with Zacchaeus, he comes towards us, he calls us by name and, if we welcome him, he comes to our home. Then we might ask ourselves: how do we look at ourselves? Do we feel inadequate, do we seek the encounter with Jesus? And then: what gaze do we have towards those who have erred, and who struggle to get up again from the dust of their mistakes? Is it a gaze from above, that judges, disdains, excludes? Remember that it is legitimate to look down on someone only to help them get up again: nothing more. But we Christians must have the gaze of Christ, who embraces from below, who seeks those who are lost, with compassion. This is, and must be, the gaze of the Church, always, the gaze of Christ, not the condemning gaze.

Wednesday

HUMILITY AS THE KEY TO GOD'S GRACE

A reflection from The Herald of Divine Love

Among the many virtues that God had wonderfully given to this soul in which he dwelt humility was the one which shone out most brightly. This virtue is the treasury of every grace and the custodian of all virtues. Gertrude was led by her humility to consider herself so unworthy of God's gifts that she couldn't be persuaded to believe that they had been given to her for her own benefit. She saw herself as a channel through which, by some mysterious dispensation of God, grace flowed to the elect. She herself was so unworthy, and yet she did receive all God's gifts, small and great. So she thought of herself merely as one who was called to share these gifts with others. She took much trouble to do this, in speech or in writing. She did it with such fidelity toward God and with such humility toward herself that she reflected: "Even if after all this I have to suffer the torments of hell as I deserve, I rejoice all the same that the Lord is able to gather from others the fruits of these gifts".

It seemed to her that anyone else, no matter how wretched they seemed, would have been more fruitful soil for these gifts than she had been. And yet she was ready and willing at all times to receive any of God's gifts simply in order to use them for the good of others. It was as though the gifts were of less concern to her than were the others who received them through her.

She tried always to judge herself in the light of truth, and so she considered herself the least of those of whom the prophet spoke: "All nations are before God as though they had no being at all!" Just as a little dust, hidden under a pen, is hidden from the sun's heat, so she worked to hide herself from the light which the gifts of God might throw on her. She gave all the glory to God who is able to inspire those whom He calls and whose help accompanies those whom he justifies. She kept herself focused on that guilt which seemed due to her because of unworthiness and ingratitude. She liked to say: "It isn't right to defraud God of the greater profit that others might bring him through the benefits he has given me, for I am depraved and wretched." Whatever work she did, she regarded herself as being of no more value in the Church of God than some scarecrow is on a farm.

That she was dedicated to prayer and vigils is clear from the fact that she never neglected to observe any of the canonical hours, unless she lay sick in bed or was engaged in some charitable work for the glory of God or the salvation of others. Because the Lord never failed to gladden her prayers with the blissful consolation of his presence, she prolonged her spiritual exercises long after her strength would have been exhausted by any other occupation. As St. Bernard said, "Oh, if you have once been inebriated by the taste of charity, soon every labor and sorrow is made joyful!"

She had such great interior freedom she couldn't bear to keep anything for her own use unless it was indispensable. If given a present, she at once gave it away to others, especially to those who were most in need. If she had something to do or say, she did it at once, lest it should hinder her in the service of God or in doing the work of contemplation. Things pleased her only to the extent to which they helped her to serve God. It was not for herself that she made use of things created by the Lord, but in order that the Lord might be eternally praised.

Thursday

THE WAY OF PEACE

From a Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis

“Jesus wept”. Indeed, as “he drew near Jerusalem”, the Lord “wept at the sight of the city”. Why? Jesus himself provides the answer to this question: “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes”. Thus he “wept because Jerusalem did not know the way of peace and chose the way of hostility, of hatred, of war”.

Today, Pope Francis recalled, “Jesus is in heaven, watching us”, and “he will come to us here, on the altar”. But “today too, Jesus weeps, because we have chosen the way of war, the way of hatred, the way of hostility”. This is even more glaring now that “we are approaching Christmas: there will be lights, there will be celebrations, trees lit up, even nativity scenes... all decorated: the world continues to wage war, to wage wars. The world has not comprehended the way of peace”.

Remembering his visit to the Redipuglia Military Memorial on 13 September 2014 during the centenary of World War I, the Pope quoted the words of Benedict XV as he spoke of the “useless slaughter” that took the lives of “millions and millions of men”. However, he added, “still we do not comprehend the way of peace”. And “it doesn’t end there: today, in the newspaper, in the press, we see that in those parts there have been bombings” and we hear that “that is war”. But “there is war everywhere today, there is hatred”. We even reach the point that we console ourselves by saying: “Well yes, it’s a bombing, but thank God only 20 children were killed!”. Or we tell ourselves: “Not too many people died, many were abducted...”. But in doing so “even our way of thinking becomes irrational”.

Indeed, the Pontiff asked, “what remains of a war, of the one that we are experiencing now?”. What remains are “ruins, thousands of uneducated children, the deaths of so many innocent people: so many!” And also “so much money in the pockets of arms dealers”.

A war, the Pontiff explained, “can be justified — in quotation marks — with many, many reasons. But when the whole world, as it is today, is at war — the whole world! — it is a world war being fought piecemeal: here, there, there, everywhere”. And “there is no justification. God weeps. Jesus weeps”.

Thus again we hear Lord’s words before Jerusalem, expressed in the Gospel according to Luke: “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!”. Today “this world is not a peacemaker”. And “while arms dealers do their work, there are poor peacemakers who, simply in order to help one person, and another and another, give their life”. And they carry out this mission by taking as their model “a symbol, an icon of our times: Teresa of Calcutta”. In fact “with the cynicism of the powerful it could be said: but what did that woman do? She lost her life helping people to die?”. The issue is that today, “the way of peace isn’t comprehended”. Indeed, “Jesus’ proposal of peace has not been heard”. And “this is why he wept looking at Jerusalem and he weeps now”.

“It will be good for us too”, the Pope said, “to ask for the grace to weep for this world which does not recognize the way of peace, which lives to wage war, while cynically claiming not to do so”. And, he added, “let us ask for a conversion of heart”. In conclusion, right “at the threshold of this Jubilee of Mercy”, Francis expressed the hope “that our jubilee, our joy may be the grace so that the world may once again find the capacity to weep for its crimes, for what it does with wars”.

Friday

A DAILY STRUGGLE

From a Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis

The Scripture passages of the day proposed a reflection on “that worldliness of the People of God who wanted to replace their covenant with the customs of all the pagan people”. A drift, the Pontiff explained, that leads to “single-mindedness”; and those who did not adhere were “persecuted”, after “many martyrs” and “so much suffering”.

When Jesus went to the temple and “began to drive out those who sold, chasing them all away, saying to them: ‘It is written, My house shall be a house of prayer; but you, however, have made it a den of robbers’”. At that time, the Pope explained, recalling the Gospel of Luke (19:45-48) which had been read shortly before, “the leaders of the temple, the chief priests and scribes, had changed things a bit. They had entered into a process of decay and had rendered the temple impure, they had blemished the temple”.

But this message is also relevant for Christians today, because “the temple is a symbol of the Church”. And, the Pope said, “the Church will always — always! — suffer the temptation of worldliness and the temptation of power that is not the power Jesus Christ wills for her”. Jesus does not say: “No, do not do this, do it outside”, but instead: “You have made a den of robbers here!”. The Pope commented that “when the Church enters into this process of degradation the end is awful. Very bad!”.

Pope Francis focused on this fundamental concept. It is a current danger. In fact, the Pope said, “there is always the temptation of corruption within the Church”. One falls into it when, “instead of being attached to fidelity to the Lord Jesus, the Lord of peace, joy and salvation”, one is “seduced by money and power”. We read the same in the Gospel today, where the “chief priests, the scribes, were attached to money, power, and had forgotten the spirit”. What’s more, “to justify themselves and say that they were right, that they were good, they replaced the Lord’s spirit of freedom with rigidity”.

At this point the Pope continued to analyze the Gospel scene, noting that the chief priests and scribes “were angry”. Jesus did not chase them from the temple, but those “who were doing business, the businessmen of the temple”; however, “the chief priests and the scribes were connected with them”, because they evidently received money from them. This was, Pope Francis said, the “holy bribe”. They “were attached to money and worshiped it as ‘holy’”.

The words in the Gospel passage are very strong, and say that the chief priests, the scribes and the leaders of the people “sought to destroy him”. “Why?” The Pope explained the difficulties faced by those who opposed Jesus: “They did not know what to do because all the people hung on his every word, listening”. Jesus’ strength, therefore, “was his word, his testimony and his love. And where there is Jesus, there is no place for worldliness, no place for corruption”.

All this is clear even today: “This is the struggle each one of us faces, this is the daily struggle of the Church”, which is called to be “always with Jesus”. And Christians must “always hang on his every word, to hear his word; and never seek security where there are things of another master”. After all, “you cannot serve two masters: either God or riches; God or power”.

Saturday

SEEKING & SHARING THE LORD'S JOY

A reflection taken from texts by Saints Benedict & Bernard

St. Benedict ends the Prologue to his Rule for Monks thus: "We are establishing a School of the Lord's Service. In founding it we hope to ordain nothing that is harsh or burdensome. Yet, if—to amend evil habits or to preserve charity—there is good reason for some strictness of discipline do not be discouraged or run away. The way of salvation has a narrow entrance. But as we progress in our monastic life and in faith our hearts will be enlarged and we run with love's unspeakable sweetness in the way of God's commandments."

St. Bernard supplements these words: "The one who is wise will view life as more like the filling of a reservoir than serving as a canal. The canal pours out what it receives at the same time it receives it while a reservoir retains the water until it is filled and then lets the overflow run out without losing its fullness. Today there are many in the Church who act like canals while the reservoirs are too scarce. The charity of those through whom the stream of heavenly teaching flows is so urgent that they want to pour it out before they are filled. They are more ready to speak than to listen; they are impatient to teach what they have not assimilated; they presume to set others in order while still not knowing how to govern themselves."

St. Bernard applies this to the sharing of the joy we experience in Christ: "If the bride is enticed by the Bridegroom it is because he gives her the desire of good works, the desire to bring forth fruit, and because the bridegroom is life and death is gain. That desire is powerful. We read, "Arise, hurry, and come!" Knowing she is being invited rather than sent, and that what happens is already in her will, for it is nothing other than an inspired eagerness to advance in holiness, she waits on the Lord. It is good indeed to save many souls but there is far more joy in going aside to be with the Word.

"God shows us this in Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Her will was in such harmony with God's that the love of Christ not only pierced her soul but penetrated her through and through. Thenceforth she would love with her whole heart, her whole soul and her whole strength, and be full of grace. And thus Mary mediates all grace."

Fr. Bernard Olivera applies all this: "It is clear that our first contribution to the Church and the world is what we are—our simple existence centered directly on the Mystery. This requires a simple and unified life. The living witness of monks, nuns and monasteries challenges every believer, and even nonbelievers, to search for authenticity. The price paid is that of being what we are called to be. When this exists as love and joy the influence of monastic life flow through its special channels. But what counts most, in the long run, is a unified way of life centered on the one thing necessary: Our Lord Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary by the work of the Holy Spirit. He died and rose for our salvation and whatever witness we can give is but a tiny seed of the Kingdom of God. This is the reservoir of joy from which monastics overflow into human history and draw all who experience this joy to Jesus Christ and to God.