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Sunday

CHRIST'S TWO GREAT BIRTHDAY GIFTS

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great

Today our Savior is born. We must rejoice! Surely, there is no place for mourning on the birthday of Life Itself! Christ has given us the gift of a new life and swallowed up mortality and all its fears. Christ has brought us besides, the joyful promise of life everlasting. No one is excluded from today's jubilation. All have the same reasons for joy. You see, just as our blessed Lord found none of us free from guilt so in the same way he came and freed us as never before.

You holy ones, rejoice! You are soon to receive recompense. You sinners, break forth into praise! You have been welcomed to forgiveness. You unbelievers, take courage! You are called into a new life. In the fullness of time, God ordained, by the mystery of his divine love, that the Son should clothe himself in human nature and reconcile the entire human race to its maker. He overcame the devil in that very nature from which the devil had taken the false reasoning that had brought him original victory over us.

So, it is that at our Lord's birth the angels sing this song of joy, "*Glory to God in the highest!*" They go on to proclaim "*Peace on earth to all of goodwill*". They see the Heavenly Jerusalem being filled by all the peoples of the world. If the angels, exalted as they are, find this act of divine love so great a cause for gladness, how much blessedness should it bring to lowly human hearts?!

Dear friends, give thanks to God the Heavenly Father, do it through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Give thanks for the great charity with which our God has loved us. God has taken pity on us when we were dead in sin. God has brought us to new life in Christ and made us a new creation.

Having given us so much, what more can be left? Yet there is another gift, and one just as great as we already have received. It is the gift of laying aside our former way of life with all its works and claiming our share in Christ's sonship. In our joy, we can renounce all the deeds of our formerly corrupted nature.

Recognize your new dignity, Christian, and do the deeds proper to the divine nature you now share. Keep in mind that you are members of Christ, as your head, and you live as a member of Christ's Body. You can now see that none of the evil deeds we did could bring us to the good we longed for, but we see now that all we sought is given us freely.

Live from now on by the light and love we see in Christ. Our first parents didn't believe you, Lord, when you told them what was good. So, they chose what was evil. We are freed from that deception coming from unbelief. Now we can live for what is truly good. Accept the gift of following Christ and you will possess the gift of true freedom that enables us to live for what is good.

Monday

THE TRUE MEANING OF PERSECUTION

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Gregory of Nyssa

“Blessed are those who suffer persecution for my sake!” This is a promise of the Kingdom of Heaven; the Lord makes this clear. The objective of all we do is to become the sort of person who can live by sharing with others in our turn all that God shares with us.

The Lord sees human frailty. The Lord tells us that we will be tested but that the outcome of these trials will be life in his Kingdom. It is the hope born of this promise that gives us the strength to overcome all passing experiences of pain.

This was the hope that enabled St. Stephen to rejoice in the hail of stones that fell upon him from every side. He prayed that the sin of his murderers might not be held against them. He responded to evil with good and with a blessing.

When the time for him to suffer came, Stephen thought first of the promise made to all who suffer with Christ. He saw his hope being fulfilled through his very sufferings. He had made his profession of faith and now he saw the heavens open and God bending down to encourage him in his struggle as he ran toward the goal.

There is a wonderful meaning for us in God’s presence at the contest of his friend and beloved, Stephan. Could one suffering persecution for the Lord’s sake have any greater blessing than the knowledge that the Lord was presiding over his struggle as a helper and support? We have this just as Stephan did.

We must live for the present on earth. But when we depart from it, we will change our dwelling in such a way that what seems harsh and hurtful here becomes a longed-for fruit and joy when we enter our new home. As St. Paul remarked: *“Discipline is never pleasant; at the time it seems painful but, in the end, it bears fruit in peace and goodness for those who have been trained by it”*.

What is affliction really? It is the flower that comes before a much-longed-for fruit. This enables us to even welcome persecution and to run our race successfully. Why should we be sorrowful when we are attacked and persecuted? It is really a matter for rejoicing.

This is the assurance given by the One who promises blessedness to all who suffer persecution for his sake. By the grace of Christ, if you suffer and persevere nevertheless, yours will be the Kingdom of Heaven.

Tuesday

SEEING, HEARING AND TOUCHING THE WORD OF LIFE **A reflection from St. Augustine's Commentary on I John**

"I speak of what has existed from the beginning, of what we have heard, and have seen with our own eyes; we have watched and touched it with our hands: The Word of Life." How could anyone actually touch The Word unless it had been made flesh and come to dwell among us? But this Word, which was made flesh and has dwelt among us, could be touched and still can.

He began to be flesh from the flesh of the Virgin Mary. Yet this wasn't the beginning of the Word. The Word had existed from the beginning. What we hear in this Letter of John we also heard in John's Gospel. *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God"*.

We can all gain a kind of knowledge of the Word by hearing about him, as we just have. But receiving human words, like the phrase "the Word of Life", is not the same as touching the body of Jesus Christ. Yet we are also told that *"this life was made visible"*; that is, Christ who is the Word of Life has been made visible to us; isn't the visible touchable?

We know now that the Life which is in Christ, and which has been given to us, can actually be perceived only by the heart. Thus, for the healing of hearts, and so they may be able to perceive this life, it is made visible in various ways to human eyes. The Word and Life are perceived, and received, only by and in the heart, and yet we are led to them through their presence in the flesh and that is perceived by bodily vision and received in sacrament.

All this is possible because the Word itself became flesh in a way visible to mortal eyes. This was done so that the heart might be healed by what was seen by our eyes and so become capable of receiving the Word in an even fuller way.

Listen to John again: *"We saw it and we are giving testimony, telling you of the eternal life which was with the Father and has been made manifest to us."* And then he says: *"What we have seen and heard we are telling you"*. Who is doing this? John is doing it and telling us about it.

Now let me repeat these words: What we have seen and heard we are telling you, my dear friends. John and the other disciples saw the Lord present in the flesh and they heard his words and then repeated them to us. We did not see the Lord and we didn't even see his disciples, but we have seen those whose hearts were healed by him and by his disciples, and then were able to receive in their hearts the Word. Do you think you are less favored than they were?

Why did they tell us what they did? They answer, *"that you too may be in union with us"*. That means union not just with them but with the Word and with the Father who sent the Word. What was worked through Jesus, by God's grace, is worked through his disciples. We share the same faith and so are in union with them. We are all in fellowship with Jesus Christ, and so with the Heavenly Father.

John adds: *"We write this so that your joy may be complete"*. It is the same fullness of joy, the same fellowship, the same unity, the same love that was made flesh in Jesus Christ and in St. John. Now they are made flesh and are seen and touched in us.

Wednesday

THE ALL-EMBRACING LOVE OF CHRIST

A reflection taken from a letter by St. Cyprian of Carthage

The martyrdom of children marked the very beginning of Christ's life. For his name's sake, all those two years old and under were put to death. Too young to fight in the usual ways, they were still made able to win a martyr's crown. By their innocence, they were made able to bear witness to the innocence of all those who shed their blood for Christ. When even such as these are made martyrs, witnesses, clearly no one is immune from the peril of persecution and witnessing. Clearly, in the same way, no one is separated from the love and care of Christ that makes one a martyr. Martyrdom is not a work we do and not a glory we earn; these are gifts given to us freely and unearned by God.

What a shameful thing it would be if Christ's servants—God's servants, were to recoil from suffering what their Master suffered. We are living in a world dominated by sin and must not be unwilling to suffer the consequences. It is a gift from God. We ought not to refuse the gift, even if we are able. The Son of God suffered in order to make us children of God. We must not refuse to persevere in that glorious status by suffering. We may have to put up with the world's hatred, but so did Christ and so did the holy children.

Listen to Christ: *"If the world hates you, remember that it hated me. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own. But you are not of the world; I chose you out of it, and therefore it hates you. Remember the saying I gave you, "The servant is not greater than the Master". If they persecute me, they will persecute you also."*

Such suffering is not due to what we make ourselves to be, but what God has given us along with the gifts of life and birth. There is no excuse for a servant to avoid what the martyrs had to endure. Our Lord and God practiced all he taught. We can't listen to the teaching and not be willing to live by it and die by it.

Let none of us be so intimidated by the prospect of future persecution, or even the coming of the Antichrist, as not to be armed by the example of Christ, and the rest of God's servants, against whatever may happen. What if the Antichrist comes? Won't Christ come also? The enemy may rage and inflict wounds but Christ comes to heal.

There is no one who can take us from Christ's arms for he is our Good Shepherd. We know what to fear—that we should separate ourselves from God and God's Christ. There is nothing else to fear. The love and care we receive is a free gift and no persecution comes without that gift coming too.

Thursday

LEARNING TO TREASURE GOD'S GIFTS TO US

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

The goodness and humanity of God our Savior have appeared. Let us give thanks to God for such a great consolation in the midst of a life that seems so unhappy and wandering, seems an exile. Before the humanity of God appeared, God's goodness was concealed. Of course, God was always good—for God's mercy is forever—but how were people to know that? People had no faith in promises which weren't confirmed by their own experience. The Lord had spoken through the prophets in many different ways and assured us that he was thinking thoughts of peace and not of affliction. But people were too aware of their afflictions to notice the rest. Now, at last, God has given evidence of the most convincing kind, for we do at least believe our own eyes.

God has come to live with us. What do we see now? Peace hasn't been only promised but has been sent; it is peace with God and with ourselves. What was promised has been given and more than we expected. It is as though God had sent a bulging purse down from heaven and then let it be torn open in Christ's passion—and behold it contained the price of our redemption and reconciliation.

It seemed only a small purse but it was very full. "*Unto us a child is given*". It is a child but one in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead and of humanity. When the fullness of time came, then the fullness of the Godhead came and also recognition of the gift of humanity.

God came in a human body because only in this way could he show himself to those who live in the flesh and are flesh and blood. That was true from the beginning. By the sight of our humanity made God's own we can be convinced of God's goodness and of the goodness of his gift of humanity. God has taken my human nature. God has assumed not only my misery but my humanity. That demonstrates the depths of his compassion and the depth of his goodness—in redemption and in creation.

"*O Lord, what is man that you are mindful of us? Why should you set your heart on us?*" This ought to make us stop and think. We should realize how much God cares for us. It should teach us how God thinks of us and our humanity. It should teach us how God feels for us. We mustn't draw conclusions only from our own sufferings but remember God's humanity and God's sufferings. We must learn from what he became for our sakes how highly we have been exalted. God's humanity will be a revelation of his goodness to us.

Truly great is the goodness of God, and it is manifest in his humanity. We learn about its goodness through him. He has given us the most positive proof of goodness by the pains he took to both enrich our humanity and add his divine dignity to it.

Friday

CHRIST'S HISTORY AND OUR OWN

A reflection by Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez

The Gospel of Luke tells us that “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled.” This simple text conveys a profound message. Jesus was born in a particular place at a particular time and under the Emperor Octavius, who had himself renamed Augustus when he reached the pinnacle of his power. It was also during the reign of Herod, a traitor to his people who had sold out to the occupying power. It was during this time that Jesus was born, a person of no importance in the eyes of the cynical and arrogant authorities. He was born in Bethlehem, “one of the little clans of Judah”, where at birth he was surrounded by shepherds and their flocks. His parents had come to a stable after vainly knocking at numerous doors. There, on the fringes of society, the Word became history, contingency, solidarity and weakness. But we can also say that by this, history itself, our history, became Word.

It is often said at Christmas that Jesus is born into every family and every heart. But this mustn't make us forget the primordial, massive fact that Jesus was born of Mary among a people that at the time were dominated by the greatest empire of the age. If we forget that fact the birth of Jesus becomes an abstraction or symbol. Events lose their meaning. To the eyes of Christians, the incarnation is the irruption of God's self into human history. It is an incarnation into littleness and service in the midst of overbearing power exercised by the mighty of this world who think they alone are important.

The Son of God was born into a little people, a nation of little importance. Further, he took flesh among the poor in a marginal area, Galilee. He lived with the poor and emerged from among them to inaugurate a kingdom of love and justice. That is why many have trouble recognizing him. The God who became flesh in Jesus is the hidden God of whom the prophets speak to us. Jesus reveals himself precisely through the anonymous people of history—those who aren't controllers of history or mighty or socially acceptable.

Christian faith is a historical faith. God is revealed in Jesus Christ and, through him, in human history and in the least important and poorest sector of those who make up our world. Only with this as a starting point can we come to God and believe in the real God. Believers can't go aside into various dead ends or corners of history and watch it go by. We must believe in the concrete settings and circumstances of our lives—even under repression and oppression and amid the struggles and hopes that are real in our time and place.

The Lord isn't intimidated by darkness or by rejection. God's light is stronger than all the shadows. If we are to dwell in God's tent, the one the Son of Man has pitched in our midst, we must enter into our own history here and now. We must nourish our hope in the will to live that we see in the poorest and most ignored. That will to live has to be transformed into a will for love and justice and for a lie that will go beyond what any human power can create. Are you ready to do this? Are you ready to start now and in circumstances that are actually your own? That is what God calls you to do.

Saturday

THE GRAND MIRACLE

A reflection by C.S. Lewis

Suppose you had before you the manuscript of some great work, a symphony, or a novel. Then someone comes to you saying, "Here is a new bit of that manuscript that I found; it is the central passage and everything is incomplete without it". The only thing you could do would be to put this new piece in the central position and see how it reflected on the whole of the rest of the work. If it constantly brought out new meanings from the whole of the rest, if it made you notice things you had not noticed before, then I think you would decide that it was authentic. On the other hand, if it failed to do that, however attractive it was in itself, you would reject it.

Now what was missing is what Christians are offering. It is the story of the incarnation, the story of a descent and resurrection. When I say 'resurrection' here, I am not referring simply to the first few hours or the first few weeks of the Resurrection. I am talking of this whole huge pattern of descent, down, down, then up again. What we ordinarily call the Resurrection being just, so to speak, the point which is the turning point.

Think what that descent is. The coming down, not only into humanity but into those nine months which precede human birth, in which we all go through what were pre-human or sub-human forms of life. Or think of going into being a corpse, a mere thing, which if there were no ascending movement, would presently have passed out of organic existence entirely and gone back into the inorganic, as all corpses do. One might picture someone going right down to the sea bottom and then back up again to the green and warm and sunlit water and out into the sunshine, holding what was found deep down. This thing is human nature. But it is inseparable from all nature and from it will emerge a new universe.

Now as soon as you have thought of this divine diving down to the bottom, to the depths of the universe, and coming up again into the light, you see at once that it is imitated and echoed by the very principle of the natural world. There is the descent of the seed into the soil, and its rising again as a plant. These are also such things in our own spiritual life, where something has to be killed and broken in order that it may then become bright and strong and splendid.

In the incarnation, we get the idea of vicariousness as well. In its highest form one person's profiting from what another does is the center of being Christian. This is a kind of steady motif in nature's symphony. In the natural universe, no being can exist on its own. Everything is hopelessly indebted to everyone and everything else. Of course, it can be used badly but everything good in nature shows how it is used well. What is implied in the incarnation fits in exactly what we see in nature. It is the missing part of the manuscript we had before us and were told was incomplete. This Grand Miracle is the missing part of a masterwork.

The incarnation is a miracle that has already happened. We can glimpse in it the first fruits of the cosmic summer that is to come. Christ has risen and so shall we. There will be a remade universe where we shall be those "gods" that we are described as in Scripture. One ought not to say: "The Resurrection happened two thousand years ago!", unless one says it as one says, "I saw a crocus yesterday". We know what is coming after the crocus. It may be a spring that comes slowly for us. It remains with us so as to follow our Lord and Leader into summer, or to die in winter. Let us go on into the spring and into that summer which lasts forever.