

# Fourth Week in Ordinary Time

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Sunday – January 29

## **HOLINESS, THE BEATITUDES, AND DISCERNMENT**

### **A reflection by Tim Muldoon**

In 2018 Pope Francis wrote an apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (Rejoice and Be Glad). The title comes from the Beatitudes in Matthew's Gospel, specifically, Jesus' exhortation to rejoice when people "insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me."

*Gaudete et Exsultate* is a meditation on the call to holiness in everyday life. (The word holiness appears 87 times.) Francis points to the "saints next door," who quietly persevere in their holiness, because their lives have become so closely united with Christ. In an extended meditation on the Beatitudes, Francis describes them as God's invitations to deepen our capacity to love. We become happy—and holy—to the extent that we "go against the flow" of many of the world's values, choosing instead: to be poor of heart; to share in others' mourning; to react to others with meekness and humility; to hunger and thirst for righteousness; to see and act with mercy; to vigilantly keep our hearts free to love; to sow peace around us; and to keep the Gospel with us always, even in the face of persecution.

The exhortation is an extended meditation on Ignatian discernment (the word appears 17 times) and particularly on the call to reach out to others. The Pope calls Matthew 25, the call to serve others as Christ himself, "the great criterion."

He writes: "If we seek the holiness pleasing to God's eyes, this text offers us one clear criterion on which we will be judged. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

He recalls the words of St. John Paul II: "If we truly start out anew from the contemplation of Christ, we must learn to see him especially in the faces of those with whom he himself wished to be identified."

For Francis, as for his predecessors, the call to discernment is always a call to self-knowledge that spills over into a commitment of one's life for the care of those whom Christ loved.

In our prayer this week, perhaps we might ask God, then, to help us "rejoice and be glad" in the call to serve those easily forgotten: the unborn, the migrant, the elderly, the destitute, the victims of trafficking, and so many others. May we allow God's grace to enlarge our hearts in order that we might find happiness and holiness.

Monday – January 30

## **A REFLECTION ON SILENCE IN ST. BENEDICT'S RULE From the Cistercian Family of Bethlehem Abbey**

If there is anything in the popular imagination that is associated with the monastic and contemplative life it is probably silence. But the type of silence which people imagine reigns in monasteries and hermitages is really only a very pale reflection of reality. That said, the practice or discipline of silence, especially in a monastery which belongs to the Benedictine tradition, is one of the pillars of monastic life, and it certainly is given a very particular prominence in St Benedict's Rule.

St Benedict devotes an entire chapter in the Rule – Chapter 6 – to the observance of silence, and so accords it an importance on a par with the other monastic disciplines which define this type of life. Indeed, it is part of a run of chapters which, in one sense, lay the bedrock upon which monastic observance must be erected: Chapter 4 – the tools for good works; Chapter 5 – on obedience; Chapter 6 – on silence; Chapter 7 – on humility. Only then, when he has unfurled the great tapestry upon which our lives will be woven does Benedict proceed to lay down the norms for that most important work of all, the Work of God, or divine office.

But the teaching which he offers on silence is by no means confined to this one chapter. Throughout the course of the Rule, and in different ways and for different purposes, St Benedict reminds us about what it means to practice restraint in speech, and why it is important to do so. Sometimes, indeed, he leaves off specifying the reason, and for one good purpose – he wishes the monastic to consider for themselves why silence is knit into the fabric of our lives and practice.

Silence hangs over the Rule from the very first word – *Obsculta*: Listen. We cannot overemphasize the defining value of being able to listen and make listening a defining part of who we are. Listening involves a turning towards a source from which a word is spoken. It implies that we stop what we are doing, that we give our attention to the word addressed to us, that we have a disposition which is open to receiving what is being shared. Good listening allows the one who is speaking to know that we are attending to them, and so it brings with it a degree of affirmation for the other. One Bible concordance (Strong's) shows us that the word "listen", or an equivalent "hear", depending which translation you follow, in some form, appears some 550 times, and is frequently found on Christ's lips. This isn't to mention its derivatives, like hearer, heard, hearing, and so forth. The behavior associated with listening is part of our relationship with God's presence already, even if we do not acknowledge it to be so.

Then in Chapter 4, the tools for good works, St Benedict prepares us, as it were, for Chapter 6, by offering tools which concern speaking and not speaking:

"Guard your lips from harmful or deceptive speech. Prefer moderation in speech and speak no foolish chatter, nothing just to provoke laughter; do not love immoderate or boisterous laughter. Listen readily to holy reading, and devote yourself often to prayer."

*Tuesday – January 31*

## **HOW A SAINT CORRECTED CHILDREN**

### **From the writings of St. John Bosco to his Salesians**

In dealing with the young, we must not allow the shadow of anger to darken our countenance. Self-control must rule our whole being – our mind, our heart, our lips. Do you remember how Jesus answered those apostles who wanted him to call down fire and brimstone upon those cities that had refused to hear their teaching about him? He had only words of pardon for them.

"Let nothing disturb you!" was an expression often on the lips of St. Teresa. It is good counsel. St. Francis de Sales, that meekest of saints, never allowed his tongue to speak when his spirit was disturbed. "I am afraid," he once said, "to lose in a quarter of an hour that little sweetness that I have gathered up, drop by drop, like dew, in the vessel of my heart through the efforts of 20 years."

Master your own character, and then you will succeed in mastering those of your pupils. Show them that uncontrolled emotion plays no part in your actions; they will respect you for that, and their respect will prompt their obedience. But betray the least sign of weakness, of passion, of impatience, and your authority and prestige will not long endure. Besides, your punishment will not be taken as a remedy for the boy's fault, but as a vent for your own passion. It can bear no fruit!

Even a slight flush of the countenance or a slight change in the tone of voice caused by anger betrays us and incites the boys to lose their esteem and confidence in us. Then all punishment is useless, because the boys feel that reason alone ought to be used in correcting them.

Keep Jesus before you. He patiently bore the ignorance and rudeness of his apostles. He had to put up with their faithlessness. The friendly hand he extended even to sinners aroused surprise in some and scandalized others. Yet his one interest was to inspire confidence and hope in the hearts of sinners. Well could he command us, then: "Learn of me, for I am meek and humble of heart."

Act like a caring father. You will obtain anything from your children if they realize that you are seeking their own good. Act towards them as a good father who checks his children only from a sense of duty, when reason and justice clearly require it.

Always be gentle and prudent. God will surely reward you if you are persevering in these virtues. He will make you the master of your children's hearts even when they are stubborn and rebellious.

Wednesday – February 1

## **SUBMISSION TO THE WILL OF GOD**

### **From *Radical Spirit* by Sister Joan Chittister**

Submission to the will of God, of course, requires that I finally learn to relinquish my rabid devotion to the self-will. The entire world, the whole universe, is the treasure house of the will of God, the mind of God for us all. It means that when I find myself liking my ideas and my plans better than others, struggling to impose them, cutting people off in conversation before they can even lay out all of their ideas, the caution light will go off in my heart. I will then begin to think again – only this time I will be thinking about everybody else's ideas and answers, plans and visions, needs and hopes for life. Not simply my own.

This is the change point of life. This is where humility becomes a way of life rather than a threat to personal ambition and ability. I am beginning to understand now that there are ways of doing things other than my own. There are other answers to the question that are more inclusive of the effects of this moment on other - "down to the seventh generation" - as the Native Americans teach. I begin to realize that there are other plans to consider first, rather than my own. Now, by listening to others, I begin to understand the idea of discernment and, led by the Spirit, I come to peace.

At this point, I begin to see the world through the eyes and the mind of God. All life is God's will, not simply mine. All people are the image of God, not only my kind. All of us have something to say, and in listening to the insights of others, we get closer to the mind of God. Contemplation of the will of God for us all is the spiritual work of a lifetime, the purpose of life. Otherwise, how can I ever be sure that I am really following the will of the God whose will is therefore everywhere and in everyone else, as well?

Then peace comes. Why? Because then we are in contention with no one. We aren't arm wrestling with anyone. We are simply part of the gathering of ideas that will someday serve to make the world a better place. In our time? Possibly not. By me? Seldom. Because of me? Undoubtedly.

The first and second steps of humility are the path to right-heartedness in life, to life lived between the actual and the spiritual. The desert monastic Isaac the Syrian spoke about it in the seventh century, and his ancient insights get truer by the day. Isaac says, "Knowledge of God and knowledge of self give birth to humility." When I know who God is – and accept that glory, that ultimacy – then I know who I am. And who I am not. And I am not God. But I am "made in the image of God" in order to mirror God here.

That God's will is better for me than my own stumbling attempts to pretend to be more than I am becomes obvious. Isaac was right: It is knowing our place in the universe that makes for humility, that guarantees us peace. And we are neither its glory nor its ultimacy. That puts a lot of things into a more proper perspective, doesn't it?

*Thursday – February 2*

## **WHEN WE MEET ONE ANOTHER IN THE LORD**

### **From a homily of Pope Francis on the Feast of the Presentation**

Forty days after Christmas, we celebrate the Lord who enters the Temple and comes to encounter his people. In the Christian East, this feast is called the “Feast of Encounter”: it is the encounter between God, who became a child to bring newness to our world, and an expectant humanity, represented by the elderly man and woman in the Temple.

In the Temple, there is also an encounter between two couples: the young Mary and Joseph, and the elderly Simeon and Anna. The old receive from the young, while the young draw upon the old. In the Temple, Mary and Joseph find the roots of their people. This is important, because God’s promise does not come to fulfillment merely in individuals, once for all, but within a community and throughout history. There too, Mary and Joseph find the roots of their faith, for faith is not something learned from a book, but the art of living with God, learned from the experience of those who have gone before us. The two young people, in meeting the two older people, thus find themselves. And the two older people, nearing the end of their days, receive Jesus, the meaning of their lives. This event fulfills the prophecy of Joel: “Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions”. In this encounter, the young see their mission and the elderly realize their dreams. All because, at the centre of the encounter, is Jesus.

Let us look to our own lives, dear consecrated brothers and sisters. Everything started in an encounter with the Lord. Our journey of consecration was born of an encounter and a call. We need to keep this in mind. And if we remember aright, we will realize that in that encounter we were not alone with Jesus; there was also the people of God, the Church, young and old, just as in today’s Gospel. It is striking too, that while the young Mary and Joseph faithfully observe the Law – the Gospel tells us this four times – and never speak, the elderly Simeon and Anna come running up and prophesy. It seems it should be the other way around. Generally, it is the young who speak enthusiastically about the future, while the elderly protect the past. In the Gospel, the very opposite occurs, because when we meet one another in the Lord, God’s surprises immediately follow.

For this to occur in the consecrated life, we have to remember that we can never renew our encounter with the Lord without others; we can never leave others behind, never pass over generations, but must accompany one another daily, keeping the Lord always at the center. For if the young are called to open new doors, the elderly hold the keys. An institute remains youthful by going back to its roots, by listening to its older members. There is no future without this encounter between the old and the young. There is no growth without roots and no flowering without new buds. There is never prophecy without memory, or memory without prophecy. And constant encounter.

Friday, February 3

## **LOVE – GOD’S GIFT OF SELF TO THE WORLD** **From *Meditations on Priestly Life* by Fr. Karl Rahner**

Theologically it is all well and good that we talk of creatures returning to God. Quite true though this is, there is still something more to be said. The reason that we can really find God is that God has not just created the world – rather, God’s own self has, in His eternal Word, eternally descended into the world. In other words, we find God because God, by Himself with His own reality descending has lost Himself as love in His creation, never again to leave it.

Always remember that it is probably – to put it carefully – only in and through the Incarnation of the Word that the immediacy of the beatific vision is possible. For, if that were not the case, how could the sheer immediacy of the vision, its lack of anything to mediate it, be not the sort of immediacy that would just burn up the whole creature as it came to know? Of course we know that God is past all grasp – infinite mystery- but to live and experience God in His past all greatness, as this immediacy: how can anything like this occur at all?

In the last analysis, a minimal condition for this to be possible is that God as such, without ceasing to be God, can make a gift of self to the world. The Incarnation of the eternal Word amounts to God being worldly, God stepping out of Godself as love- the fundamental truth of God’s own self, of what God’s self actually does, of what God’s own self can do. But this means that immediate love for God, love so immediate that God in God – that love is possible only because God has descended into the world. From there follows that our ascending love to God is always a participation in the descent of God into the world’s own life and glory becomes the content of our lives as creatures.

If love is possible only with and within the self-emptying of divine love into the world, and if this is the real structure of our love for God, then all this is possible in the kingdom of Christ, in discipleship of Christ, who is precisely the Word who descends into the world. Thus, when we encounter the love of God as disciples, we come to know the love of God within the world and within the Church.

By participating in God’s action of descent into the world and love for the world the Christian can learn to love. This love, according to St Ignatius of Loyola, moves us in love into work and service, of the world and our brothers and sisters.

*Saturday – February 4*

## **THE SUBLIME VALUE OF SPECIAL DEVOTION TO OUR LADY From *Christ the Life of the Soul* by Blessed Columba Marmion**

Besides being extremely acceptable to Jesus Christ, devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary is very profitable for us.

First of all, because in the divine plan, Mary is inseparable from Jesus, and our holiness consists in entering as far as we can into the divine economy. In God's eternal thoughts, Mary belongs indeed to the very essence of the mystery of Christ. Mother of Jesus, she is the Mother of him in whom we find everything. According to the divine plan, life is only given to mankind through Jesus the Man-God. But Christ is given to the world only through Mary: "For us men and for our salvation... he was born of the Virgin Mary." This is the divine order and it is unchanging. Remark that this order was not means only for the day when the incarnation took place. It still continues as regards the application of the fruits of the incarnation to souls. Why is this? Because the source of divine grace is Jesus, the Incarnate Word. But as Christ, as Mediator, he remains inseparable from the human nature which he took from Mary.

The second reason, which is very closely related to the preceding, is that no one has more influence than the Mother of God in obtaining grace for us. In consequence of the incarnation, God is pleased to recognize the credit of those who are united to Jesus, the head of the Mystical Body (not however in such a manner as to derogate from the power of his Son's mediation but on the contrary to extend and exalt it). The credit is so much the more powerful according as the union of the saints with Jesus Christ is the more intimate.

"The nearer a thing approaches to its principle," says St. Thomas, "the more it experiences the effects produced by this principle. The nearer you come to a furnace, the more you feel the heat which radiates from it." The holy doctor adds: "Now, Christ is the principle of divine grace since, as God, he is the Author of it and, as Man, he is the instrument of it. And the Blessed Virgin being the nearest of any creature to the humanity of Jesus Christ, he having taken this human nature from her, she has received from him higher graces than any creature.