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Sunday

OUR LIFE IS TO BE SHAPED BY CHRIST'S PRESENCE

A reflection from St. Cyril's Commentary on John's Gospel

"When John saw Jesus coming toward him, he said, *"Behold the Lamb of God; he takes away the sin of the world."* Notice that he doesn't call us to *"prepare"* for Christ. That would be out of place because the one we were preparing for is present; we see him with our own eyes. This fact calls for an explanation of a different type than when we were preparing.

What we need is an explanation of the one who is present, of why he has come down from Heaven to us and what we are to do because he is here. In effect, that is what John's words begin. *"Behold, the Lamb of God!"* This reminds us of Isaiah's words: *"He was like a sheep being led to the slaughter; he was like a lamb before his shearer; he didn't open his mouth."* He came to save. In the past the Law of Moses was the instrument of salvation, but it was only a foreshadowing because it was partial in not reaching out to embrace the entire world. Its mercy was extended only to Israel. But now the "true" victim lamb, one without blemish, has been led to the slaughter. What was partially prefigured is revealed to all and banishes sin from the entire world.

Think of what this means. Christ is to overthrow the one who destroyed the world; he has abolished death by dying for the entire human race; he has released us from a curse. The words *"Dust you are and to dust you shall return"* were just a statement of fact, but it was made a curse by our sin. The sin was following our own will about what for us will be good or bad and not God's will. It destroyed our right relationship with God. So Christ has come as a Second Adam, not merely of earth but of Heaven. He delivers us from the death our sin brought upon us and from the corruptibility that goes with mere dust. He persuades us to be reconciled to God's word and so to God, and so secures eternal life for us.

If that is to be true in fact and for us we have to live upright lives. That is the path to the Kingdom of Heaven. One Lamb died for all of us. He died to do the Father's will when he said it would be good for him to die on the cross. He died to bring us all into reconciled harmony with God's will for us. We are now subject to God. Christ died for us *"that all might live no longer for themselves but for him who died and was raised to life for them."* That is who we are and how we are to accept Christ.

Our many sins made us subject to death and corruption. The Heavenly Father gave his Son as our redemption, one given for all, since all are to be in him and he is greater than all others. The one died so that all might live in Him. Death, in effect, swallowed the Lamb of God but in forcing death to disgorge him he forced it to disgorge us all with him. That is why it is so important for us to be one in and with Christ. Death was destroyed because sin was destroyed and it had been brought into being by sin.

Sin is being destroyed in us as we do the Heavenly Father's will even to the point of death. Death is, as it were, the branch of sin, which is the root. When the root is torn up the branch can't survive. *"O death, where is your victory! O grave, where is your sting?"* As the psalmist says, *"All wickedness shall hold its tongue!"* From now on there will be no one to denounce sinners for their weakness. God is the one who acquits us! Sin caused a curse to be made of our origin in dust but *"Christ has redeemed us from the curse"*. He took upon himself its consequence and did it for our sake. For us there is no more curse where there is no more sin. Live by the Heavenly Father's word as Christ lived by it. He is saving us.

Monday

THE CHRISTIAN STYLE

From a homily of Pope Francis

We can learn about the Christian style by first knowing our attitudes that don't belong to the Christian style: the "accusatory style", the "worldly style" and the "selfish style".

The accusatory style belongs to those who always try and live by accusing others, disqualifying others, acting as absent promoters of justice. But they don't realize that it's the style of the devil. In the Bible, the devil is called the "great accuser", who is always accusing others.

This was the same in the time of Jesus who in a few cases reproached the accusers: "*Instead of looking at the speck in the eyes of others, look at the beam in yours*"; or again: "*Those who have not sinned can throw the first stone.*" Living by accusing others and looking for defects, is not Christian, not new wineskin.

Worldliness is an attitude of Catholics who can recite the Creed, but live on vanity, pride and attachment to money, believing themselves to be self-sufficient.

The Lord has offered you new wine, but you haven't changed the wineskin. You did not change yourself. This worldliness is what ruins so many good people – good people who fall into the spirit of vanity, of pride, of making themselves seen. There is a lack of humility and humility is part of the Christian style. We should learn humility from Jesus, from the Virgin, from St. Joseph.

The selfish spirit is the spirit of indifference that is common in our communities. One believes oneself to be a good Catholic but doesn't worry about the problems of others, such as wars, illnesses and the suffering of their neighbors. This is the hypocrisy that Jesus reproached the doctors of the law for. What then is the Christian style?

The Christian style is that of the Beatitudes: meekness, humility, patience in suffering, love for justice, ability to endure persecution, not judging others. If Catholics want to learn the Christian style, so as not to fall into the accusatory style, the worldly style, and the selfish style, they must read the Beatitudes. And this is our style: the Beatitudes are the new wineskins, the path we must take to arrive where we are going. To be a good Christian one must have the ability to pray the Creed with the heart but also to pray the Our Father with the heart.

Tuesday

ST ANTHONY'S CHARGE TO HIS COMPANIONS

From The Life of Anthony by St. Athanasius

When Anthony grew very old he withdrew to the desert and because of his great age two companions went with him to assist him. When he felt the time of his departure was near he addressed this exhortation to them.

“I am going the way of my fathers, as Scripture says. I see myself called by the Lord. And you should be on your guard and work not to bring to nothing the asceticism you have practiced for so long. Make it your endeavor to keep up your enthusiasm as though you were only now beginning. You know the demons and their designs. You know how fierce these demons are and yet how powerless. Do not be afraid of them.

“Let Christ be your life's breath. Place your confidence in Christ. Live as if dying daily, taking heed for yourselves and remembering the counsel you have heard from me. Let there be no communion whatever between you and the schismatics, and none at all with the heretical Arians. You know how I myself have kept away from them. They attack Christ by their heresy.

“Show your eagerness to give your allegiance, first to the Lord and then to his saints. Then, after your death, they will receive you into everlasting dwellings as familiar friends of God. Give your thoughts to these things; make them your purpose; if you have any care for me and think of me as a father, don't allow anyone to take my body in Egypt, lest they should turn it into relics and keep it in their houses. This was a reason for going to the mountain and coming here.

“You know how I have always put those who practice such deeds to shame. You know I have charged them to stop this practice. You yourself are to carry out the rites of my funeral and are to bury my body in the earth. Let what I have said to you be respected by telling no one of the place where I am buried.

“At the resurrection of the dead I shall receive back my body from the Savior and it will then be incorruptible. You may distribute my few garments to Bishop Athanasius and Bishop Serapion. Keep my hair shirt for yourselves. God bless you. Anthony is going and is with you no more. More important is that God is always with you.”

Wednesday

JESUS IS ANGERED AND GRIEVED BY THE PHARISEES

From a commentary on Mark's Gospel by Fr. John McKinnon

In the story of Jesus encountering a man with a withered hand in the synagogue in the presence of the Pharisees, Mark highlighted the fact that Jesus looked around on them with anger. This would be the only occasion in his whole narrative where the deep emotional response of Jesus would be clearly identified as anger. In Mark's mind it touched close to the core of what motivated and drove Jesus.

He also noted Jesus' deep sadness. He was grieved. Both emotions opened a profound window into the mind and spirit of Jesus, and could well have been a regular backdrop to much of his life.

The occasion of both his anger and grief was the hardness of heart of those present. He felt himself powerless to penetrate to their innermost selves and to sensitize them to the image of God imprinted on their deepest being. He felt the frustration of knowing that every effort he made to reveal to people the compassionate heart of God resulted simply in their closing off their minds in rejection. He felt himself to be almost the occasion of their sin.

As Mark would note later in the narrative, hardness of heart was not a failing peculiar to some of the Pharisees. The disciples themselves would be accused, with a similar depth of feeling, of the same fault. The tendency is indeed inherent in the human psyche, no doubt as much a danger in the Marcan community (as in disciples reading the story in any age). It was not simply a lack of compassion. It was a rigidity of mind and heart, a lack of inner flexibility, an unwillingness to change, to open the mind to new possibilities and to think differently, to move beyond the familiar, the definite and the clear cut. It was a refusal to move forward to a new level of personal growth and maturity.

In this case Jesus confronted his critics, and perhaps almost in desperation, he publicly restored the man's hand on the Sabbath.

His confrontation did not bring about a rapprochement. It hardened their hearts even further. A group of Pharisees resolved on the final solution. They would work for his eventual arrest and killing.

Thursday

OUR SACRIFICE TO GOD

A reflection taken from a sermon by St. Augustine

If you want to please God you need only turn to Scripture to know what you should do. The fiftieth psalm says: "*Had you desired a sacrifice I certainly would have offered one, but you take no delight in burnt offerings.*" These negative words need to be complemented by positive ones: "A sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite spirit, a broken and contrite heart God will not despise." We can always find something to offer.

Indeed, we are not asked to offer animals as in the days of the patriarchs. But you people through generations have the same faith even though the sacramental signs have been modified. Changes in the outward signs of faith have not affected the underlying truth. Rams, lambs, calves, and goats – whatever the victim once was – foreshadowed Christ. He is the one who leads his flock, and it is Christ who offers himself instead of the son of Abraham. Both the ram and Isaac were foretypes of Christ. As Isaac carried the wood for the sacrifice so Christ carried his cross, but whereas the ram whose horns were caught in a thicket was offered in place of Isaac, there was no substitute for Christ.

Behold the Lamb of God; behold Christ! He takes away the sins of the world. The ancient patriarchs believed in Christ, their Lord and ours. Not only did they believe him to be the Word of God, but they also believed that the man Christ Jesus is the mediator between God and humanity, and by word and prophecy they handed on that faith to us. That is what St. Paul means when he says: "*We have the same spirit of faith and therefore it is written: I believed and I have spoken accordingly.*"

King David, in the psalm I have already quoted, spoke of sacrifices which are no longer offered to God. However, he showed the vision of a prophet in that same psalm. Setting aside the practices of his own day, he looked into the future and taught us that "*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite spirit.*"

Well, then, we have a sacrifice to offer. No need to go in search of a flock of sheep or sail to distant lands to bring back spices. Search your own heart and let it be broken and contrite. Are you afraid that such breakage will be the death of your heart? Don't be afraid! In the very psalm I have been quoting we find the words: "*A pure heart create in me, O God.*" Yes, create a pure heart in me, Lord. And that it may be created let the old, unclean heart within me indeed be broken!

Friday

SERVING GOD IN HIS PEOPLE

A reflection from “My Catholic Faith and I” web site

Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi was the second son of a father obsessed by getting his family out of poverty. As part of this effort, he sent Michael to a mission school. There Michael learned about Jesus and decided to be baptized. He used this education to become a teacher and worked his way up to being the head of a local school. At this point he decided he wanted to be a priest, which his father opposed for economic reasons, and which required twelve years of schooling under exceedingly strict discipline. Black seminarians were mistrusted because their cultures were seen as pagan and those who lived them were mistrusted. Nevertheless, he managed to stay in the seminary and was ordained in 1937.

He thought for himself and was totally dedicated to what he saw as right. Most priests in his area were Irish missionaries who insisted living in the same comfort they would have at home. Thus, it was expensive for people to have a priest and support his lifestyle. Michael lived at the poverty level of his people and learned how to help them, for instance, to build better houses. He identified with his people, shared their poverty, and visited his large parish on foot or riding a bicycle, and worked to help them live better and for these reasons he was a very successful pastor. He refused to follow those who became priests or nuns in order to live more comfortably. His lifestyle amazed and even shocked other priests and many Catholics. He, however, went on to become a community organizer and promoter of development. He worked very hard to help the poor and needy.

He was widely known for opposing cultural practices that abused women or used them sexually and taught women parishioners to fight back against those mistreating or trying to rape them. He physically helped one parishioner fight off such an attack and then persuaded her to take the attackers to court. She won the case and this came to be considered a milestone in the Nigerian struggle for women’s rights. He opposed traditional beliefs in witchcraft—his own mother had been accused and killed as a witch. On the other hand, he was considered a perfectionist and this caused resentments.

At the beginning of the 1950s Fr. Michael felt drawn to monastic life and his bishop helped him join a British Trappist monastery with the hope that he would return and found such a monastery in Nigeria. Even in this he was seeking to serve God’s people. He did succeed in making solemn vows, though he found the system in the novitiate psychologically painful in a way that led him to reject his previous perfectionism. He was still a person who went his own way — for example, he didn’t memorize the psalms as he was asked to do, but made up words for himself as he sang quietly in choir. In the end, he wasn’t able to return to Nigeria due to serious illness. He bore this with great fortitude. One of his doctors sought help in working with him. “This man”, the doctor said, “must be in terrific pain but will only admit that he has “a little” pain.” Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi died in 1964 and was beatified in 1998. He died as a monk of Mt. St. Bernard Monastery.

Saturday

ST AGNES GAVE HERSELF ENTIRELY TO GOD

A reflection from *Catholic Online*

St. Agnes of Rome was born in 291 AD and raised in a Christian family. Agnes was very beautiful and belonged to a wealthy family. Her hand in marriage was highly sought after, and she had many high ranking men chasing after her. However, Agnes made a promise to God never to stain her purity. Her love for the Lord was great and she hated sin even more than death.

Whenever a man wished to marry Agnes, she would always say, "Jesus Christ is my only Spouse." According to legend, the young men she turned away became so angry and insulted by her devotion to God and purity that they began to submit her name to authorities as a Christian follower.

In one incident, Procop, the Governor's son, became very angry when she refused him. He tried to win her for his wife with rich gifts and promises, but the beautiful young girl kept saying, "I am already promised to the Lord of the Universe. He is more splendid than the sun and the stars, and He has said He will never leave me!"

In great anger, Procop accused her of being a Christian and brought her to his father, the Governor. The Governor promised Agnes wonderful gifts if she would only deny God, but Agnes refused. He tried to change her mind by putting her in chains, but her lovely face shone with joy.

Next he sent her to a place of sin, but an Angel protected her. At last, she was condemned to death. Even the pagans cried to see such a young and beautiful girl going to death. Yet, Agnes was as happy as a bride on her wedding day. She did not pay attention to those who begged her to save herself. "I would offend my Spouse," she said, "if I were to try to please you. He chose me first and He shall have me!" Then she prayed and bowed her head for the death-stroke of the sword.

Another story explains that at first Agnes was tied to a stake, but either the wood would not burn or the flames parted away from her. This prompted an officer to draw his sword and behead the girl. It is believed that her blood, which poured out to the stadium, was soaked up with cloths by Christians.

Agnes died a virgin-martyr at the age of 12 or 13 on January 21, 304.

On St. Agnes' feast day, it is customary for two lambs to be brought in to be blessed by the pope. On Holy Thursday the lambs' wool is removed and woven into the pallium the pope gives to a newly consecrated archbishop as a sign of his authority and union with the pope.

