

Third Week in Ordinary Time

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Sunday – January 22

Interrelationships in Matthew 4

From writings on the cultural context of Scripture by John Pilch

The Gospel for this Sunday proposes three topics for our consideration: the Baptizer, Jesus' ministry, and Jesus' disciples.

John is in prison; he will shortly be put to death. Matthew, Mark, and Luke make it clear that Jesus does not begin his own ministry until the Baptizer has completed his. In John's Gospel, Jesus begins his ministry before the Baptizer's imprisonment.

All the Gospels indicate that the Baptizer had a successful and effective ministry in his own right. During Jesus' ministry, people often confused Jesus with or identified him as the Baptizer.

One plausible explanation for this confusion, proposed by contemporary scholars, is this. Moved to conversion by John's preaching, Jesus became his disciple. When John was imprisoned, Jesus ventured out on his own and gathered disciples but continued to baptize and broaden his ministry. Soon he began to experience the ability to cast out demons and realized he had a distinctive ministry of his own. With this, Jesus stopped baptizing and came into his own.

After John's imprisonment, Jesus moves from Nazareth, his tiny hometown, to Capernaum, a larger crossroads town by the Sea of Galilee. He continues preaching John's message: "Repent, for the reign of heaven has approached".

Matthew encapsulates Jesus' ministry in a summary statement: Jesus was teaching in the synagogues; preaching the good news, and healing.

In Jesus' day the synagogue was a gathering place, like a modern community center, where males could meet on every day of the week to study or pray. Here Jesus read and listened to Torah, disputed and argued with others, but did not attend Sabbath services, since there were none at that time. For the ordinary first-century Jewish believer the Sabbath was not a day of worship; it was simply a day of rest.

As for his healing program, Jesus is clearly a "folk" healer and not a "professional." In contrast to the latter, Jesus attempts to heal people. He doesn't just talk about healing.

Jesus' act of calling disciples is a common event in the Middle East. Usually, a person with a grievance invites people to join him in resolving the grievance. We don't know Jesus' grievance, but the disciples certainly did. This in part explains why they dropped everything to follow him. In unified groups there is strength.

Such group orientation or connectedness permeates this reading as it does the entire Bible. The lives of the Baptizer, the disciples, and healed clients are entirely intertwined with Jesus.

Monday – January 23

TAKING CARE OF THE PRECIOUS GIFT OF LIFE IN ITS FRAILITY

From an address of Pope Francis to a conference on Life

Sometimes we hear people say, “You Catholics do not accept abortion; it’s a problem with your faith”. No, the problem is pre-religious. Faith has nothing to do with it. It comes afterwards, but it has nothing to do with it. The problem is a human problem. It is pre-religious. Let’s not blame faith for something that from the beginning has nothing to do with it. The problem is a human problem. Just two questions will help us understand this clearly. Two questions. First: is it licit to eliminate a human life to solve a problem? Second: is it licit to hire a killer to resolve a problem? I leave the answer to you. This is the point. Don’t blame religion for a human issue. It is not licit. Never, never eliminate a human life or hire a killer to solve a problem.

Abortion is never the answer that women and families are looking for. Rather, it is fear of illness and isolation that makes parents waver. The practical, human and spiritual difficulties are undeniable, but it is precisely for this reason that a more incisive pastoral action is urgently needed to support those families who accept sick children. There is a need to create spaces, places and “networks of love” to which couples can turn, and to spend time assisting these families.

I think of a story that I heard of in my other Diocese. A fifteen-year-old girl with Down syndrome became pregnant and her parents went to the judge to get authorization for an abortion. The judge, a very upright man, studied the case and said “I would like to question the girl”. [The parents answered:] “But she has Down syndrome she doesn’t understand”. [The judge replied:] “No, have her come”. The young girl sat down and began to speak with the judge. He said to her: “Do you know what happened to you”. [She replied:] “Yes, I’m sick”. [The judge then asked:] “And what is your sickness?” [She answered:] “They told me that I have an animal inside me that is eating my stomach, and that is why I have to have an operation”. [The judge told her:] “No, you don’t have a worm that’s eating your stomach. You know what you have? It’s a baby”. The young girl with Down syndrome said: “Oh, how beautiful!” That’s what happened. So the judge did not authorize the abortion. The mother wanted it. The years passed; the baby was born, she went to school, she grew up and she became a lawyer. From the time that she knew her story, because they told it to her, every day on her birthday she called the judge to thank him for the gift of being born. The things that happen in life...See what a beautiful thing happened! Abortion is never the response that women and families are looking for.

Tuesday – January 24

EVERYTHING PERTAINS TO LOVE

From the Apostolic Letter of Pope Francis on the fourth centenary of the death of St. Francis de Sales

“Everything pertains to love.” These words summarize the spiritual legacy left to us by St. Francis de Sales, who died four centuries ago, on 28 December 1622 in Lyon. Slightly more than fifty years of age, he had been the “exiled” Bishop and Prince of Geneva for some two decades, and has come to Lyon on what was to be his last diplomatic mission. Exhausted and in poor health, Francis had undertaken the journey in a pure spirit of service. Upon arrival in Lyon, he stayed at the monastery of the Visitation Sisters, in the gardener’s lodge, so as not to be a burden and to be free to meet with anyone who so desired.

He spent those final days exercising his pastoral ministry amid a flurry of appointments: confessions, conversations, conferences, sermons, and, of course, letters of spiritual friendship. The deepest reason for such a way of life, completely centered on God, had become clearer to him over time. He explained it with simplicity and precision in his celebrated *Treatise on the Love of God*: “At the very thought of God, one immediately feels a certain delightful emotion of the heart, which testifies that God is God of the human heart.” These words are a perfect synthesis of his thought. An experience of God is intrinsic to the human heart. Far from a mental construct, it is a recognition, filled with awe and gratitude, of God’s self-manifestation. In the heart and through the heart, there comes about a subtle, intense and unifying process in which we come to know God and, at the same time, ourselves, our own origins, and our fulfillment in the call to love. We discover that faith is no blind emotion, but primarily an attitude of the heart, whereby we entrust ourselves to a truth that appeals to our consciousness as a “sweet emotion” and awakens in response, as he was wont to say, an enduring benevolence towards all of creation.

In this light, we can understand why Saint Francis de Sales felt that there was no better place to find God, and to help others to find him, than in the hearts of the women and men of his time. He had learned this, from his earliest years, by developing a keen insight into himself and into the human heart.

Francis’ profound sense of God’s presence amid the events of daily life was evident in those last days in Lyon. He shared with the Visitation Sisters how he wished to be remembered by them: “I said everything in just two words, when I told you to refuse nothing and to desire nothing; I have nothing more to say to you. On 26 December, the saint spoke to the Sisters from the heart of the Christmas mystery: “Do you see the baby Jesus in the crib? He accepts all the discomforts of that season, the bitter cold and everything that the Father lets happen to him. He does not refuse the small consolations that his Mother gives him; we are not told that he ever reached out for his Mother’s breast, but left everything to her care and concern. So too, we ourselves should neither desire not refuse anything, but accept all that God sends us, the bitter cold and the discomforts of the season.” We are struck by how Francis recognized the importance of concern for the human dimension. At the school of the incarnation, he had learned to interpret history and to approach life with confidence and trust.

Wednesday – January 25

CHRIST CALLED SAUL AND CALLS EACH OF US

A reflection taken from a meditation by Henri Daniel-Rops

What had Paul done to the Christians in Jerusalem? But it wasn't enough. He had to track them down even outside Jerusalem and Palestine. Suddenly a light shone round him and he fell to the ground. He heard a voice: "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" Stammering he replied: "Who are you, Lord?" He heard: "I am Jesus!" All he could do was ask what was expected of him. "Get up, go into Damascus, and you will be told what you are to do. I have appeared to you to appoint you my witness."

This was a prodigious event. Without it the whole future of Christianity would have probably been changed. It impressed the imagination of Saul's age, as much as it astounds ours. The Book of Acts narrates it three times, the last two by the lips of Paul himself. The three narratives are identical, except for details about who fell to the ground and whether Paul's companions saw the light or heard the voice. The authenticity of the event is not disputed, and if further confirmation were needed there are references in several of Paul's Letters.

On the road to Damascus and in the mid-day sun Paul found himself face to face with Jesus and heard himself called by name. Thus, was accomplished what is ordinarily called the "conversion of St. Paul". As Paul attested all his life, though he still felt himself permeated by his Jewish convictions, he was caught up in an overwhelming event which changed him completely, at a single stroke. His transformation was radical and complete. What he had hated one day he adored the next. The cause he had fought so violently, he was to serve with the same violence. In a single second on a desert road God conquered his adversary and bound him forever in love.

The person whom the Lord struck down upon the road was conquered but in this defeat his heart's most profound desires had been fulfilled. How can we regard him without emotion, and, we must admit, without a sort of envy? Saul of Tarsus, more sinful than we ourselves, the executioner whose hands were stained with the blood of the faithful, had this inconceivable fortune of meeting Christ personally. Why? Why was this one person singled out? We find ourselves in the midst of the Pauline mystery of grace, where, in the secret design of Providence, all is obscure and yet all leads to one goal, which is the decisive Light.

It is toward this goal, towards this Light, that Saul will henceforward move. The Christ who conquered him will parade him on the highways of the world, as though a captive and slave. As for Saul, he will find the hours of his life always too few to witness adequately his love for the One who had loved him enough to strike him to the heart. And we are offered the same stupendous opportunity, and right now. Christ has called us by name. We can, by God's grace, respond as Paul did.

Thursday – January 26

A LEAP OF FAITH – FEAST OF THE OUR THREE FOUNDERS **A 2021 homily of Fr. Stephen Muller, OCSO of the Abbey of the Genesee**

Today we celebrate the feast day of the three founders of our Order: Robert, Alberic, and Stephen. What strikes me when I think about them leaving Molesme is their great faith. It was a daring move; a leap of faith; a leap into the void. If their attempt failed they would be looked on with scorn for many years.

Not making the move, and choosing rather to remain at Molesme represented the status quo, the familiar, the comfortable, the predictable. I'm sure there were some among their Benedictine brethren who thought about going with this breakaway group but then decided to stay instead. Molesme was a well-established monastery with a venerable reputation. Everything about it suggested security. There was plenty of money in the bank; they had a lot of land holdings and livestock and belongings; its members were looked up to by the people in the area. To choose to stay at Molesme meant that all your needs would be met. You wouldn't have to do much manual labor if that didn't suit you. There were plenty of servants to do the work.

It wasn't that life at Molesme was decadent. Because of its good reputation St. Bruno had at first settled there with his little band of hermits before moving on to found the Carthusians at the Grande Chartreuse. It was just that along with the prosperity Molesme was enjoying, a certain amount of laxity had crept in. Things were no longer as rigorous and austere as its founders had established in 1075.

So, in 1098 Sts. Robert, Alberic, and Stephen and the little group of 17 other monks struck out into the great unknown. Where they were headed was described as a vast wilderness. Renaud, the viscount of Beaune, had given them a desolate valley in a deep forest. They experienced their fair share of hardships as they struggled to tame that wilderness and establish a settlement and new monastery. Their food supply would have been hit and miss. As the saying goes, "chicken today; feathers tomorrow." Like the Israelites in the desert under Moses, I'm sure there were times when they longed for what they had left behind. And until St. Bernard arrived with his band of 30 recruits and vocations started flooding in, I'm sure there were times when our founders questioned whether God was blessing their endeavor or not. During those first lean years the thought of failure probably taunted them on more than one occasion.

Those monks who left Molesme and founded Citeaux had to make a tough decision. Do you abandon the "bird in the hand" for the "bird in the bush"? Molesme was safe, but if they stayed there would they grow? Would they end up stagnating instead? I think there's always the temptation in our lives to settle into a comfortable groove. And then, without realizing it, we end up being stuck in a rut. We're too lazy to do anything about it. Inertia sets in. Any attempts at change fall victim to procrastination. We have to be on our guard against this tendency and periodically take inventory of our situation. Sometimes, too, God has a way of turning our world upside down with illness or some other calamity.

I guess it boils down to "our plan" versus "God's plan." Our plan probably gravitates toward what is safe, what is comfortable, what is predictable. God loves us so much that he wants us to grow to our fullest potential. His plan probably entails uncomfortable stretching and growing pains. We give God honor when we relinquish our plan for his.

Friday – January 27

UNIFORMITY WITH GOD'S WILL

From the writings of St. Alphonsus Maria de Liguori

To do God's will - this was the goal upon which the saints constantly fixed their gaze. They were fully persuaded that in this consists the entire perfection of the soul. Blessed Henry Suso used to say: "It is not God's will that we should abound in spiritual delights, but that in all things we should submit to his holy will." "Those who give themselves to prayer," says Saint Teresa, "should concentrate solely on this: the conformity of their wills with the divine will. They should be convinced that this constitutes their highest perfection. The more fully they practice this, the greater the gifts they will receive from God, and the greater the progress they will make in the interior life." A certain Dominican nun was vouchsafed a vision of heaven one day. She recognized there some persons she had known during their mortal life on earth. It was told her these souls were raised to the sublime heights of the seraphs on account of the uniformity of their wills with that of God's during their lifetime here on earth. Blessed Henry Suso said of himself: "I would rather be the vilest worm on earth by God's will, than be a seraph by my own."

During our sojourn in this world, we should learn from the saints now in heaven, how to love God. The pure and perfect love of God they enjoy there, consists in uniting themselves perfectly to his will. It would be the greatest delight of the seraphs to pile up sand on the seashore or to pull weeds in a garden for all eternity, if they found out such was God's will. Our Lord himself teaches us to ask to do the will of God on earth as the saints do it in heaven: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Because David fulfilled all his wishes, God called him a man after his own heart: "I have found David, a man according to my own heart, who shall do all my will." David was always ready to embrace the divine will, as he frequently protested: "My heart is ready, O God, my heart is ready." He asked God for one thing alone - to teach him to do his will: "Teach me to do thy will."

A single act of uniformity with the divine will suffices to make a saint. Behold while Saul was persecuting the Church, God enlightened him and converted him. What does Saul do? What does he say? Nothing else but to offer himself to do God's will: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" In return the Lord calls him a vessel of election and an apostle of the gentiles: "This man is to me a vessel of election, to carry my name before the gentiles." Absolutely true - because he who gives his will to God, gives him everything. He who gives his goods in alms, his blood in scourgings, his food in fasting, gives God what he has. But he who gives God his will, gives himself, gives everything he is. Such a one can say: "Though I am poor, Lord, I give thee all I possess; but when I say I give thee my will, I have nothing left to give thee." This is just what God does require of us: "My son, give me thy heart." Saint Augustine's comment is: "There is nothing more pleasing we can offer God than to say to him: 'Possess thyself of us'." We cannot offer God anything more pleasing than to say: Take us, Lord, we give thee our entire will. Only let us know thy will and we will carry it out.

Saturday – January 28

A Dominican writes to his brothers about St. Thomas Aquinas **From a reflection on St. Thomas Aquinas by Fr. Vincent Bernabé Dávila**

What is certainly true is that St. Thomas is a larger-than-life character, a massive figure in the Church and in our own tradition: one of the greatest theologians in the history of the Church, a mystic, a preeminent philosopher, a poet. His dimensions are such that he is frankly inescapable: we all have some well-cemented opinions about him, our own sense for what he thought, what his contribution is to our Church today, or what threat he or his interpreters pose, whether the Order or our province should be more or less Thomistic and what that even means, etc. But I fear that at times we are too familiar with our brother Thomas to really know him. He becomes a well-worn legend, no longer able to surprise or challenge us, let alone be a model of following Christ in the way of St. Dominic. Eight centuries later, he continues to be able to form minds and hearts in the Christian tradition so that they can bear fruit in their engagement with their own time. He is still a master teacher, still initiates believers into the task of theology (and philosophy, for that matter) with astounding dexterity and results.

Doubtless through the centuries (and before him, too) he has been surpassed in particular areas of his thought: we might argue that St. John of the Cross (himself trained in the thought of St. Thomas!) has a more developed theology of the spiritual life, or that the Salamanca school of Francisco de Vitoria, Bartolomé de las Casas and companions (themselves, too, trained in the thought of St. Thomas!) have a more developed political theology that more explicitly spells out the dignity of all human beings, or that Congar has a more developed ecclesiology. And as a good teacher, I think Aquinas would rejoice to see his students flourishing and excelling him in these ways! Aquinas certainly is not the only doctor of the Church, nor did he mark the end of theological development; quite the contrary, his thought has served as the springboard for many of the theological developments that have come after him. This is not to say that Aquinas is only a springboard, or that he has been surpassed in everything: his theological insights continue to be among the keenest and most fruitful in Christian history, and his vision of the whole Christian life—an integrated whole rather than a mere conglomeration of particular teachings—is still breathtaking. But what I have become convinced of in these past months is that his distinctive mark as a doctor of the Church, the contribution that has never been surpassed, is in being the master teacher of theology, the great pedagogue of the tradition. And this gift that Aquinas—and through him the entire Dominican Order—has offered to the Church and to the world was born of a lifelong act of humble obedience, of the work he produced not by simply doing what he wanted to do, or what he thought he should do, but in responding to his pastoral setting and the work he was asked to undertake.

In that, my dear brothers, he can be a model for us all—whether we are scholars or not. He can teach us now how to live in the footsteps of St. Dominic by living out our vow of obedience, which is at the heart of our religious life as Dominicans. Our brother Thomas Aquinas can teach us to trust that God is at work in putting us where we are, and that our task is to preach the Gospel there, however we can.