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Sunday – February 5

WITH THE POOR AND THE PERSECUTED

From the writings of St. Oscar Romero

I rejoice in the fact that our church is persecuted, precisely for its preferential option for the poor, and for trying to incarnate itself in the interest of the poor. And I want to say to our people, to the government officials, to the rich and powerful: if you don't become poor, if you don't become concerned for the poverty of our people, as you would for your own family, you will not be able to save our society.

How sad it would be, in a country where such horrible murders are being committed, if there were no priests among the victims! They are the testimony of a church incarnated in the problems of its people. I am proud to be able to say that the Archdiocese of San Salvador does not want to be indifferent or in complicity with the situation of sin and structural violence that exists in our country.

It is the glory of our church to have mixed its blood – the blood of its priests, catechists, and communities – with the massacres of the people, and ever to have borne the mark of persecution.

If all this has happened to persons who are the most evident representatives of the church, you can guess what has happened to ordinary Christians, to the *campesinos*, catechists, lay ministers, and to the ecclesial base communities. There have been threats, arrests, tortures, murders numbering in the hundreds and thousands. As always, even in persecution, it has been the poor among the Christians who have suffered most.

Courage, dear friends. I know that for many the hour of testing has come, and they have fled as cowards: catechists, celebrants of the Word, people who have shared with us the joys of our meetings, have been frightened. People we thought very strong are frightened away because they have forgotten that this is a religion of life, and, as life, it must clash with the life that is not God's life but exists as the kingdom of darkness.

As a pastor, I am obligated by divine commandment to give my life for those I love – even for those who would assassinate me – for that reason I offer God my blood for the redemption and resurrection of El Salvador. Martyrdom is a grace that I don't believe I merit. But if God accepts the sacrifice of my life, may my blood be the seed of liberty and sign that this hope will soon become a reality. May my death, if it is accepted by God, be for the liberation of my people and a testimony of hope in the future.

Monday – February 6

THE MARTYRDOM OF ST. PAUL MIKI **From *Voices of the Saints* by Bert Ghezzi**

In 1596, the Japanese Emperor rounded up twenty-six Jesuits, Franciscans, and laypeople and prepared to martyr them.

Among the victims was St. Paul Miki, a Jesuit scholastic who had just completed eleven years of training. Paul's noble family was converted when he was a child and at age five he was baptized. Educated by Jesuits, the gifted youth joined their novitiate at age twenty-two. He had studied intensively the teachings of the Buddhists so as to be able to debate their priests. He welcomed his chance at martyrdom, but may have wished just a little that it would be delayed long enough for him to be ordained a priest.

Hideyoshi had the left ears of the twenty-six martyrs severed as a sign of disrespect and paraded them through Kyoto. Dressed in his simple black cassock, Paul stood out among them.

The martyrs were then taken to Nagasaki. They were tied to crosses with their necks held in place by iron rings. Beside each was an executioner with his spear ready to strike. An eyewitness gave this account:

When the crosses were set up it was a wonderful thing to see the constancy of all of them. Our brother Paul Miki, seeing himself raised to the most honorable position that he had ever occupied, openly proclaimed that he was a Japanese and a member of the Society of Jesus. And that he was being put to death for having preached the gospel. He gave thanks to God for such a precious favor.

He then added these words: "Having arrived at this moment of my existence, I believe that no one of you thinks I want to hide the truth. That is why I declare to you that there is no other way of salvation than the one followed by Christians. Since this way teaches me to forgive my enemies and all who have offended me, I willingly forgive the king and all those who have desired my death. And I pray that they will obtain the desire of Christian baptism."

At this point, he turned his eyes toward his companions and began to encourage them in their final struggle. The faces of them all shone with great gladness. Another Christian shouted to him that he would soon be in paradise. "Like my Master," murmured Paul, "I shall die upon the cross. Like him, a lance will pierce my heart so that my blood and my love can flow out upon the land and sanctify it to his name."

As they awaited death the entire group sang the canticle of Zachariah. The executioners stood by respectfully until they had intoned the last verse. Then at a given signal they thrust their spears into the victims' sides. On that day, February 5, 1597, the church of Japan welcomed its first martyrs.

Tuesday – February 7

WRITING TO A DYING FRIEND

From the letters of St. Bernard

To his very dear and intimate friend Suger, by the grace of God Abbot of Saint-Denis, Brother Bernard, wishing him the glory that is from within and the grace that comes from above.

Have no anxiety, man of God, about stripping off that man who is made of earth, the one who presses you earthward and would indeed press you down to the regions under the earth. He it is who plagues and burdens and makes war on you. What need have you of earthly garments, you who are on your way to heaven and have a robe of glory to put on? The robe is ready, but will not be given to a man still clothed. It is to cover our nakedness, not for wearing over our own clothes. And so bear patiently with being found naked and unclothed, better still, accept it gladly; for God himself wishes man to be clothed, but it must be done when he is naked, not already clad.

God's part in man will not return to God until that part which is of the earth, and is earth, has first gone back to earth. For these two are at war with one another, and there will be no peace until they are parted each from each; and if there were peace, it would not be the peace of the Lord, not peace with the Lord. You are not one of those who cry "Peace" when there is no peace. You are waiting for that peace which passes all understanding; the righteous are waiting for you to receive your reward; the joy of your Lord awaits you.

And I, dearest friend, have an intense desire to see you first, and so receive your dying blessing. Since man's course is not in his own control, I dare not promise what I am not sure of keeping, but what I do not yet see my way to doing I shall do my best to bring about. Maybe I shall come and maybe not. But whichever it is, I have loved you from the first and ever shall. With confidence I declare that I cannot lose a friend whom I have thus loved to the end. One with whom I am joined soul to soul in an indissoluble union and with an unbreakable bond will not be lost to me; he will go before. But remember me when you come to the place to which you are preceding me, that it may be granted me to follow you swiftly and rejoin you there. Be sure meanwhile that your dear memory will never fade for me, even though we who mourn you lose your presence. Yet God is still able to give you to us in answer to our prayers and preserve you for those who need you: of this there is not doubt.

Wednesday – February 8

MOTIVES FOR CHOOSING AND LOVING GOD

From *Interior Castle Explored* by Ruth Burrows

My mind has to supply strong motives for choosing God and his will in concrete instances. Here, I would say, lies our chief weakness. Not sufficient importance is attached to the work the mind must do to set before the heart the motives for choosing what is not immediately and sensibly appealing. This deficiency implies a lack of seriousness and an unwillingness to take trouble. Anyone who really wants God will ceaselessly be thinking of what to do in order to go forward. They will have an eagerness to learn and willingly go to endless trouble.

There is a tendency to think that good desires and strong motives will be infused; that if we remain quietly before the Lord in prayer, they will be born in on us; that when we are tempted and troubled we have only to go to the Lord and we will be changed. It seems to me that a very, very important point is being underplayed. Understandably there has been a reaction to a mistaken form of meditation which put the whole weight on the intellect as though it were a matter of achieving suitable thoughts of God, intellectual and emotional impressions.

What matters is “loving much.” Loving means choosing. I’m not “loving much” because I am in thoughtless prayer and with a feeling of love. I am loving much when I pour out my life over the feet of Jesus in his brethren. I have to bring before my mind all sorts of reasons for doing this. I have to get to know God and this will mean getting to know Jesus.

But there are other powerful incentives that perhaps have to precede the loving preoccupation with Jesus: consideration of the brevity of our life-span, its mysteriousness, what it is for, its gravity and the appalling danger of wasting it. All day long, if we take the trouble, we can glean in the field of our lives, abundant motives for surrendering ourselves to life’s whole meaning – God. We must always have in hand the sword of the spirit which is the word of God with which to combat the temptations to give up the struggle, to fall back into worldliness, to sin in one way or the other.

We have to be ready with the motives for resisting. By and large this seems badly neglected. We fall, we are sorry, but we don’t take any special precaution against the future. What we should do, if we are in earnest, is to have our sword ready in hand for the attack – some thought, some word of remembrance of Jesus which, through deep pondering, had become powerful for us.

Thursday – February 9

THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN

From an article on *Bible Odyssey* by Dr. Claudia Setzer

The status of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark's Gospel as a woman, gentile, and foreigner would render her "triple marginalized," especially as compared to the other two groups who appear in chapter 7 of Mark's Gospel. Jesus experiences opposition and misunderstanding from two groups of Jewish males. He sparred with Pharisees over the value of purity regulations, and showed frustration at his disciples' lack of understanding of his saying about food and good deeds, "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." The woman may exemplify this saying as a non-Jew who consumes ritually impure food, but whose words show wisdom and healing. Others point out that the woman may also symbolize the community of Mark's Gospel, which includes many gentiles, is outside of Palestine, and, like most early communities of believers, includes many women.

The woman is said to be from Syria-Phoenicia. Syria was the name of the Roman province that included parts of present-day Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Israel, later merging with Judea to become Syria-Palestina. Phoenicians were an ancient Semitic people related to the biblical Canaanites, who inhabited city-states throughout the Mediterranean. One of their population centers was Tyre, a coastal city in present-day Lebanon, about twelve miles north of the border with Israel. Both geographically and ethnically, the Syrophoenician woman represents someone on the borders between Jews and gentiles. The word "gentile" designates her as a non-Jew.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus praises the woman for her "word" (logos) and credits it as the reason for her daughter's healing. Interpreters have responded to this story by turning it into an example of the woman's faith, perhaps importing the idea from the story of the woman with a flow of blood in Mark 5. The earliest example of this transformation appears in Matthew's version of the story where the woman is called a Canaanite and praised for her faith.

Biblical translations invariably include a subheading to Mark's version of the story such as "the Syrophoenician Woman's Faith." Given her quick and clever response and Jesus's praise for her word, a better subtitle would be "the Syrophoenician Woman's Wit." Most interpreters have understood the story to be part of the expansion of Jesus's mission to the non-Jewish world. The story also assumes that women and non-Jews were part of the cultural milieu of the earliest communities around Jesus.

Friday, February 10

AN IMPORTANT REMINDER FROM ST. SCHOLASTICA

From a homily of Sr. Lynne Smith of Holy Wisdom Monastery

Benedict and Scholastica, each lived in their own monasteries. They were accustomed to meet once a year to talk about God and spiritual matters. On this occasion, at supper, Scholastica asked Benedict to stay longer so they could continue their conversation through the night. Benedict had strict rules about not spending the night outside the monastery and refused to stay. So Scholastica bowed her head on her hands and prayed to God with tears. When she raised her head, such a violent rainstorm erupted that neither Benedict nor his brothers with him could return to their monastery. St. Gregory explains that Scholastica's prayer and tears brought on the rainstorm.

Benedict complains, "May God almighty pardon you, sister! What have you done?" Scholastica replies, "See, I asked you and you wouldn't listen to me. I asked my God who listened. Go now, if you can. Leave me and go back to the monastery."

But Benedict is unable to leave, and they spend the night in vigil and spiritual conversation. The next day Benedict returns to his monastery and three days later Scholastica dies.

In commenting on the story, St. Gregory says, "It is no surprise that the woman who wished to see her brother for a longer time was on this occasion stronger than he, for according to the words of St. John, 'God is love,' and by an altogether fair judgment, she was able to do more because she loved more."

If those last words sound familiar, you might remember the story in St. Luke's Gospel of the 'sinful' woman who anoints Jesus' feet at table in Simon the Pharisee's house. Simon objects, so Jesus tells a parable of two debtors and asks Simon which of the two debtors will love the creditor more. Simon answers, "The one to whom he forgave more." Jesus says of the woman, "Her many sins are forgiven because she has loved much."

For Benedictines, the *Rule of Benedict* is our guide for living the Gospel life in community. However, living the *Rule* without love or being a Christian and following the commandments without compassion is not enough. This story is an important corrective when we are tempted to put rules above mercy or separate the will of God from love. We know how easily we humans turn religion and living a "good, moral" life into following the rules. Christians have often made the leap from following rules to assuming God relates to us on a merit system. Time and again, we need to be called back to the priority of mercy, love, and compassion. Often we are called back to this mercy by those who "love us more" as Scholastica did Benedict.

Saturday, February 11

THE APPARITION OF MARY TO ST. BERNADETTE

From a reflection by Jean Heimann on *Catholic Fire*

February 11 marks the first apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary in 1858 to St. Bernadette Soubirous. Between February 11 and July 16, 1858, the Blessed Mother appeared eighteen times to a poor, uneducated, sickly fourteen-year-old Marie Bernarde (St. Bernadette) in the hollow of the rock at Lourdes.

On March 25, the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1858, Mary said to the little shepherdess who was only fourteen years of age: "I am the Immaculate Conception." Because the dogma of the Immaculate Conception had been officially proclaimed less than four years earlier, and Bernadette could not have even known of its existence, when she repeated the words, it gave credibility to her apparitions.

During one of these apparitions, when Bernadette was told by Mary to begin digging in the ground; she obediently did so, to the townspeople's scorn. Water immediately began flowing from the spot where Bernadette dug, a tiny stream that has since has grown to the size of a small river. Thousands of healings have been reported as the result of people bathing in or drinking this miraculous water. The walls of the grotto where the Blessed Mother appeared are lined with the crutches of the lame who have walked away from the waters, totally healed.

The message of Lourdes is three-fold. First, we are called to look at the grace and holiness of Christ in Mary, become converted, and be healed spiritually. It is a call to enter fully into the mystery of the redemption.

The second message was that of prayer. In order to be more fully conformed to the will of God, we must pray without ceasing. Prayer leads us to the Spirit of God.

The third part of the message was Bernadette herself – simple Bernadette. She was uneducated and poor. She could not explain things very well. But, she had a pure heart. And, it was this purity of heart that opened her up to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit and to experience the fruits of the redemption.

Mary's appearance and Bernadette's response present a picture of what it means to love God with our whole heart, mind, and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is a visible expression of purity of heart that calls us to say, "Be it done unto me completely and fully according to your word. Accomplish in my life fully what you want to accomplish." This is in contrast to our culture where one's own will, pleasures, desires, and interests take precedence. In our self-centered culture, the motto is, "Be it done according to my will."

Let us follow the example of Bernadette in her purity of heart, obedience to God's will, and love for God and neighbor. May our hearts be purified by the Holy Spirit, as we follow in the footsteps of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

