

**Seventh Week in Ordinary Time**  
**Beginning of Lent**  
**February 19 – 25, 2023**

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*Sunday, February 19*

## **MILITANT FAITH**

**From a reflection by John Kavanaugh, S.J.**

The Sermon on the Mount is so baffling, we either have to ignore it or pretend we never heard it. Those tactics failing, we turn it inside out. The first time I came across such a strategy was after a lecture I gave on "Capital Punishment and Disarmament in the Light of the Gospels." My assigned task was apparently not very successfully accomplished. From the back of the room came a courageous dissenting voice. "How can you be against war and capital punishment? Even Christ said, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.'"

This man really believed in a God who gives sun and rain to the unjust as well as the just. What can one do? Why even say that the very next sentence of Jesus in Matthew continues: "but what I say to you is: offer no resistance to injury. When a person strikes you on the right cheek, turn and offer him the other"?

We've had these words since the beginning of our church, and by and large we still act as if Jesus said, "an eye for an eye." Even if we finally acknowledge that Jesus did solemnly tell us to turn the other cheek, in our more candid moments we admit that we think it's outrageous.

Sometimes I feel everything in my being recoils from the words of Jesus. I want even more than an eye for an eye. And who has a right to ask me for an extra shirt, much less a coat? I reluctantly give up a minute of service, much less a mile. Go two miles? Love enemies? It's hard enough to love those close at hand.

For myself, what got me to speak less confidently about capital punishment and forgiveness of enemies was the terrible murder of a young girl, the daughter of a friend of mine. He was a fellow professor at the university and a deacon in a local parish. I found myself avoiding him, especially after the murderers were caught and put on trial. I knew full well that he was aware of my facile arguments against capital punishment, and I was almost ashamed to have him look at me.

Finally one day we were suddenly on the same elevator; I could not escape. I murmured how difficult it must be to go through the trial, reliving his great loss once again. "Yes," he said, "but the hardest thing is trying to convince the prosecutors that we want life imprisonment without parole and not the death penalty. He doesn't understand that we follow Christ in all of this."

Here was someone, profoundly injured by an unjust aggressor, who really believed and wanted to practice the words of Jesus. He really believed in a God who gives sun and rain to the unjust as well as the just. He really aspired to a love made perfect in the Crucified who asked forgiveness for enemies. He had entered the mystery of which Paul spoke. He knew that all things were his, and he was Christ's, and Christ was God's.

"Are you not aware that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you: If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, and you are that temple."

So also, somehow, is the criminal and the enemy, despite the empty wisdom of the worldly wise.

Monday, February 20

## COME TO PRAYER AS IF ENTERING HEAVEN

From St. Bernard's *Sermon 25*

Some people, I notice, occasionally experience dryness and a certain dullness of mind in prayer, as though praying with the lips only; they don't pay enough attention to what they say or to whom they speak. That is because they have come to prayer out of a certain habit rather than worthy reverence and concern.

For what else should a brother imagine while entering into prayer than the prophetic saying, *I shall enter into the place of the wonderful tabernacle, even to the house of God?* Indeed, it altogether behooves us to enter into the heavenly court at the time of prayer, that court in which "The King of kings sits on his starry throne", surrounded by an innumerable and indescribable army of blessed spirits. Thus also the prophet who had seen them said, because he found no greater number, *Thousands of thousands ministered to him, and ten thousand times a hundred thousand stood before him.*

Therefore, with how much reverence, how much fear, how much humility should a common frog approach the heavenly court as he comes forth, crawling from his swamp? How much trembling, how suppliant, how humble, and finally how concerned and intent with one's whole soul can a wretched little human appear before God's majestic glory, *in the council of the saints and the congregation?*

Consequently, vigilance of spirit is necessary in the whole of our actions, but especially in prayer. For, just as we read in our Rule, although the eyes of the Lord observe us in every place and at every hour, yet most especially in prayer. For granted, we are always seen by him, but in addition, at prayer we present and show ourselves as though speaking *face to face with God.*

What is more, however much God is everywhere, we must nevertheless pray to him as in heaven, and we must imagine him in heaven at the time of prayer, so that our mind is not hindered by the roof of the chapel, or by the intervening space of the air, or by the thickness of the clouds, according to that formula that was handed down to us from Christ, where he says, "Thus shall you pray: *Our Father who art in heaven.* For heaven, by a certain prerogative, is even called the *seat or throne of God*, because compared to that vision by which the holy angels and the souls of the elect see God in heaven, we wretched *strangers on the earth* scarcely seem to have even the name.

Therefore let him who prays, pray thus: as though he had been taken up and presented to God who sits *upon a throne high* among the angels (certainly not fallen angels.) Pray as though you are raised up among human beings like the *needy*, whom God *raised up from the earth and lifted up the poor out of the dunghill.* Thus, I say, let him reckon himself and pay attention as though presented to the Lord of majesty, so that he can say with Abraham, *I will speak to my Lord, though I am dust and ashes*, and because I am so commanded by your precept and formed by your instruction, I perform it, Lord, source of loving kindness.

*Tuesday, February 21*

## **ST. PETER DAMIAN, MONK AND CARDINAL**

**From the *Catholic News Agency***

On Feb. 21, Catholics honor Saint Peter Damian, a Benedictine monk who strove to purify the Church during the early years of its second millennium.

In his Sept. 9, 2009 general audience on the saint, Pope Benedict XVI described him as "one of the most significant figures of the 11th century ... a lover of solitude and at the same time a fearless man of the Church, committed personally to the task of reform."

Born during 1007 in the Italian city of Ravenna, Peter excelled in school while also taking up forms of asceticism, such as fasting, wearing a hair shirt, and spending long hours in prayer with an emphasis on reciting the Psalms. He offered hospitality to the poor as a means of serving Christ, and eventually resolved to embrace voluntary poverty himself through the Order of Saint Benedict.

The monks he chose to join in the hermitage of Fonte Avellana, followed a rigorous rule of life.

Deeply versed in the Bible and the writings of earlier theologians, Peter developed his own theological acumen and became a skilled preacher. The leaders of other monasteries sought his help to build up their monks in holiness, and in 1043 he took up a position of leadership as the prior of Fonte Avellana. Five other hermitages were established under his direction.

Serious corruption plagued the Church during Peter's lifetime, including the sale of religious offices and immorality among many of the clergy. Through his writings and involvements in controversies of the day, Peter called on members of the hierarchy and religious orders to live out their commitments and strive for holiness.

In 1057, Pope Stephen IX made Peter Damian a bishop, a goal he accomplished only by demanding the monk's obedience under threat of excommunication. Consecrated as the Bishop of Ostia in November of that year, he also joined the College of Cardinals and wrote a letter encouraging its members to set an example for the whole Church.

With Pope Stephen's death in 1058, and the election of his successor Nicholas II, Peter's involvement in Church controversies grew. He supported Pope Nicholas against a rival claimant to the papacy, and went to Milan as the Pope's representative when a crisis broke out over canonical and moral issues. There, he was forced to confront rioters who rejected papal authority.

Peter, meanwhile, wished to withdraw from these controversies and return to the contemplative life. But Nicholas' death in 1061 caused another papal succession crisis, which the cardinal-bishop helped to resolve in favor of Alexander II. That Pope kept the Cardinal Bishop of Ostia occupied with a series of journeys and negotiations for the next six years.

In 1067, Peter Damian was allowed to resign his episcopate and return to the monastery at Fonte Avellana. In 1072, Peter returned to his own birthplace of Ravenna, to reconcile the local church with the Pope. He died a few weeks later.

In 1823, Pope Leo XII named him a Doctor of the Church and extended the observance of his feast day throughout the Western Church.

*Wednesday, February 22*

## **TWO KINDS OF REWARDS**

### **From Pope Francis' 2022 Ash Wednesday Homily**

Today, as we embark on the Lenten season, the Lord says to us: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven". It may be surprising, but in today's Gospel, the word we hear most frequently is reward. Usually, on Ash Wednesday, we think more of the commitment demanded by the journey of faith, rather than the prize that is its goal. Yet today Jesus keeps returning to that word, reward, which can appear to be the reason for our actions. Yet within our hearts, in fact, there is a thirst, a desire for a reward, which attracts and motivates us.

The Lord, however, speaks of two kinds of reward to which our lives can tend: a reward from the Father and, on the other hand, a reward from others. The first is eternal, the true and ultimate reward, the purpose of our lives. The second is ephemeral, a spotlight we seek whenever the admiration of others and worldly success become the most important thing for us, our greatest gratification. Yet the latter is merely an illusion. It is like a mirage that, once we get there, proves illusory; it leaves us unfulfilled. Beware, then, and do not let yourself be dazzled by appearances, pursuing cheap rewards that disappoint as soon as you touch them".

The rite of receiving ashes on our heads is meant to protect us from the error of putting the reward received from others ahead of the reward we receive from the Father. This austere sign, which leads us to reflect on the transience of our human condition, is like a medicine that has a bitter taste and yet is effective for curing the illness of appearances, a spiritual illness that enslaves us and makes us dependent on the admiration of others. It is a true "slavery" of the eyes and the mind. A slavery that makes us live our lives for vainglory, where what counts is not our purity of heart but the admiration of others. Not how God sees us, but how others see us. We cannot live well if we are willing to be content with that reward.

The ashes bespeak the emptiness hiding behind the frenetic quest for worldly rewards. They remind us that worldliness is like the dust that is carried away by a slight gust of wind. Sisters and brothers, we are not in this world to chase the wind; our hearts thirst for eternity. Lent is the time granted us by the Lord to be renewed, to nurture our interior life and to journey towards Easter, towards the things that do not pass away, towards the reward we are to receive from the Father. Lent is also a journey of healing. Not to be changed overnight, but to live each day with a renewed spirit, a different "style". Prayer, charity and fasting are aids to this. Purified by the Lenten ashes, purified of the hypocrisy of appearances, they become even more powerful and restore us to a living relationship with God, our brothers and sisters, and ourselves.

*Thursday, February 23*

## **THE WOUNDS OF THE SAVIOR**

**From St. Bernard's *Sermon on the Song of Songs***

Where can the weak find a place of firm security and peace, except in the wounds of the Savior? Indeed, the more secure is my place there, the more he can do to help me. The world rages, the flesh is heavy, and the devil lays his snares, but I do not fall, for my feet are planted on firm rock. I may have sinned gravely. My conscience would be distressed, but it would not be in turmoil, for I would recall the wounds of the Lord: He was wounded for our iniquities. What sin is there so deadly that it cannot be pardoned by the death of Christ? And so if I bear in mind this strong, effective remedy, I can never again be terrified by the malignancy of sin.

Surely the man who said: "My sin is too great to merit pardon," was wrong. He was speaking as though he were not a member of Christ and had no share in His merits, so that he could claim them as his own, as a member of the body can claim what belongs to the head. As for me, I can appropriate whatsoever I lack from the Heart of the Lord who abounds in mercy. They pierced his hands and feet and opened his side with a spear. Through the openings of these wounds I may drink honey from the rock and oil from the hardest stone: that is, I may taste and see that the Lord is sweet.

He was thinking thoughts of peace, and I did not know it, for who knows the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? But the piercing nail has become a key to unlock the door, that I may see the good will of the Lord. And what can I see as I look through the hole? Both the nail and the wound cry out that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The lance pierced his soul and came close to his heart, so that he might be able to feel compassion for me in my weaknesses.

Through these sacred wounds we can see the secret of his heart, the great mystery of love, the sincerity of his mercy with which he visited us from on high. Where have your love, your mercy, your compassion shone out more luminously than in your wounds, sweet, gentle Lord of mercy? More mercy than this no one has than that he lay down his life for those who are doomed to death.

My merit comes from His mercy; for I do not lack merit so long as he does not lack pity. And if the Lord's mercies are many, then I am rich in merits. For even if I am aware of many sins, what does it matter? Where sin abounded grace has overflowed. And if the Lord's mercies are from all ages forever, I too will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever. Will I not sing of my own righteousness? No, Lord, I shall be mindful only of your justice. Yet that too is my own; for God has made you my righteousness.

Friday, February 21

## **ST. BASIL AND JESUS ON FASTING**

**From a reflection by Fr. Blake Britton from *Word on Fire***

Fasting is among the oldest religious practices in history and the Catholic Church uphold its dignity and assert its importance, so we must ask: Why is the Catholic Church adamant about this ancient custom?

St. Basil the Great in his Lenten homilies notes that fasting is as old as humanity itself. As a matter of fact, it was the first command human beings received from God: “You shall not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” According to Basil, it was a failure to fast that led to the fall in Eden. As such, fasting is among the remedies to reacquire the original dignity of our identity as God’s children: “It is because we did not fast that we were banished from paradise. So let us fast that we may return to it.” In this primordial mandate to fast, Basil recognizes a dual-faceted purpose. Firstly, it aids the soul in acquiring maturity. As any psychologist will recognize, lack of discipline and self-control are clear signs of immaturity. The failure to be patient, make wise decisions, and responsibly enjoy food, drink, or relationships represents a severe lapse in human development. This is why practicing self-restraint on a regular basis through fasting is so crucial to the spiritual life. It is not just about giving something up because the Church says so. The more we practice abstinence, the more mature we become, passing from the immaturity of immediate gratification to the maturity of regulated consumption. For fasting is, as Basil wrote, “the companion of sobriety and the craftsman of self-control”.

Thus, fasting helps to foster one virtue in particular—namely, self-control, a quality not often spoken about in our own time. St. Paul identifies it as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” To have self-control is literally “to perfect oneself from within.” This definition helps us better appreciate St. Basil’s second assertion about the consequences of fasting.

According to Basil, fasting properly orders the appetites of our body to the good of our soul: “The more you deny the flesh, the more you render the soul radiant with spiritual health.” Here we see the influence of the Desert Fathers on Basil’s spirituality. These early Christians were adamant on reclaiming the dignity lost by Adam in Eden. They recognized Adam’s fault to be a failure of discipline. He gave into his baser desires and lost sight of humanity’s lofty vocation as *imago Dei* (the “likeness and image of God”). Thus, monks like Abba John, therefore, will warn: “One should always guard against attachment [to worldly things]; for this is what is harmful to the soul.”

Jesus himself teaches that “man does not live on bread alone” (Matt. 4:4). Human beings are not animals. We have appetites beyond the carnal. Our wills are not driven by mere instinct. There is supposed to be a deeper reason for our actions. When my stomach hungers from fasting, it is a reminder of the spiritual hunger my soul experiences at every moment of my existence.

We know that fasting was an integral part of Jesus’ life, so much so that he spent forty days in the desert abstaining from worldly sustenance. Nothing the Lord does is coincidental or unplanned. Every event of his life teaches us something profound about our own existence as persons and our vocation as Christians. In Christ’s fasting, we see a way by which to share in the divine life of God. By growing in self-control from our immature impulses and properly nourishing our souls through fasting, we will surely grow in intimacy with the Lord who loves us.

*Saturday, February 25*

## **JOURNEYING THROUGH LENT WITH MARY**

**A reflection by Teresa Armstrong from *Catholic Lane***

Lent is a journey. Mary made the journey alongside Jesus during his earthly life. As his mother, she carried him in her womb and experienced the pain of Joseph planning to divorce her. She had no place to stay but a stable when it was time for him to be born, and then had to put her beloved baby Jesus in a manger for a crib.

Mary trusted in God's will for her Son, just as we need to trust in God's will for our lives. She was just as human as we are, feeling physical pain, disappointment and all kinds of heartache. Yet, she had an intimate relationship with God, so she must have turned everything over to him.

Lent is a time to become more faithful disciples of our Lord. Mary was Jesus' first and most faithful disciple. She stayed with him during every moment of His life. She was there at the scourging of Jesus at the pillar. During his walk to Golgotha, Mary followed his footsteps and was at the foot of his cross.

In John's Gospel we read about the disciples taking in Mary. "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold, your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.' By putting ourselves into Mary's hands, she can help form us as a disciple.

Mary learned to surrender her will to God's will. From the moment the Angel Gabriel came to announce that she was to be the mother of Jesus, Mary said, "Let it be done to me according to thy word." Lent is about learning to surrender our desires and trust in God.

Meditating on the times in Mary's life when she had to blindly trust shows me the way to trust. From the Annunciation, Nativity, Presentation, to the Wedding at Cana and finally with Our Lord's Passion and death, Mary died to her desires and trusted in God's plan.

She, who loved Jesus most, teaches us how to love Christ more each day and to do whatever he tells us to do. I often think my life is filled with stress and chaos, until I look at the life of Mary and reflect on all the stress and chaos of her life even though she was the mother of God.

Ultimately, the entirety of Mary's discipleship of her Son was through her model of surrender. And so, there's nothing better I can do this Lent than to surrender to Jesus and there's no better teacher than his mother.