

Third Week of Easter

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Sunday, April 23

POPE JOHN PAUL II PREACHES TO YOUNG PEOPLE IN LEBANON **From Pope John Paul's homily on May 10, 1997**

We will listen to the Gospel passage about the disciples of Emmaus. Their experience can help you young people of Lebanon for it is like each of yours. Saddened by the events of Holy Week, disoriented by Jesus' death and disappointed that they had not realized their expectations, the two disciples decide to leave Jerusalem on Easter Day and return to their village. The hope brought by Christ during the three years they had spent with him in the Holy Land seemed to have been dispelled by his death. However, as they walk along the road, the pilgrims of Emmaus remember the Lord's message, a message of love and fraternal charity, a message of hope and salvation. In their hearts they retain the memory of the deeds and actions he had performed throughout his public life, from the banks of the Jordan to Golgotha, passing through Tyre and Sidon.

Each of them recalls words and meetings with the Lord which showed his tenderness, compassion and love for every human being. They were all impressed by his teaching and goodness. Christ looked beyond the stain of sin to the inner beauty of the being created in God's image. He could perceive the deep desire for truth and the thirst for happiness present in every person's soul. By his look, his outstretched hand and his words of comfort, Jesus called each one to pick himself up after sin, for every person has a value that goes beyond what he has done and there is no sin that cannot be forgiven. On thinking all this over, the disciples begin to meditate on the Good News brought by the Messiah.

On their way to Emmaus, as they were contemplating the person of Christ, his words and his life, the disciples are joined by the Risen One himself, who reveals to them the depth of the Scriptures and helps them discover God's plan. The events of Jerusalem, his death on the Cross and the Resurrection, bring salvation to every man and woman. Death is overcome and the way to eternal life definitively opened. But the two do not yet recognize the Lord. Their hearts are confused and troubled. Only at the end of the road, when Jesus breaks bread with them, when he re-enacts the memorial of his sacrifice as in the Upper Room, are their eyes opened to accepting the truth: Jesus is risen; he goes before them on the paths of the world. Hope is not dead. They immediately return to Jerusalem to proclaim the Good News. Fortified by these promises, we also know that Christ is living and really present among his brothers and sisters, every day and until the end of time.

Christ constantly repeats this journey to Emmaus, this synodal journey with his Church; in fact, the word "synod" means to walk together. Dear young people, he also wants to walk it again with you. With you, for you are the future. When you perform your daily tasks, in study or work, when you serve your brothers and sisters, when you share your doubts and hopes, when you reflect on Scripture, alone or in church, when you take part in the Eucharist, Christ joins you; he walks beside you; he is your strength, your nourishment and your light.

Dear young people, do not be afraid to let Christ join you like the disciples of Emmaus. In your personal life, in ecclesial life, the Lord accompanies you and puts his hope in you. Christ trusts you to be responsible for your own life and for that of your brothers and sisters, for the Church's future in Lebanon and for your country's future. Long live peace! Today and tomorrow, Jesus invites you to leave your ways to travel with him, united with all the faithful of the Catholic Church and all the Lebanese people.

Monday, April 24

LIKE AN ANGEL: THE SHINING FACE OF STEPHEN

From the writings of Rev. David Huffstutler, PhD

What did it mean that Stephen's "face was like the face of an angel", and why did it look this way?

We first meet Stephen as a deacon, "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit". He was appointed to coordinate meals for widows, but he was also an evangelist. He was "full of grace and power...doing great wonders and signs among the people". This grace and power go together and describe the boldness of Stephen and God's confirmation of his witness through wonders and signs. The mention of grace likely implies that God extended His saving grace to others through the witness of Stephen.

When opposed by others in his endeavors, Stephen refuted his aggressors, and "they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking". So, they lied, stirred up the people, arrested him, falsely tried him, and eventually stoned him, making him the first martyr of the church. His story has echoes of the final days of Jesus.

At the outset of his trial, as Stephen prepared to speak once again full of wisdom and the Spirit, the Bible records what everyone saw when looking at Stephen: "And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel". What did this angel-like face mean?

In answering this question, we recall that angels can be brilliant, shining creatures. Remember the angel at Jesus' empty tomb—"His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow". Daniel 10:6 describes an angel (some say the preincarnate Son of God), "his face" is "like the appearance of lightning." Revelation 10:1 describes an angel (and again, some say the now-incarnate Son of God), "his face was like the sun." The angelic creatures who guided the heavenly chariot in Ezekiel's vision had four faces each, and as to their faces and even their whole beings, "their appearance was like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches moving to and fro among the living creatures. And the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning". The point of similarity between the face of Stephen and the face of an angel was most likely this—it was a *shining* face.

A shining face is seen on other humans in the Bible as well. In descending from Sinai with the tablets in hand, "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God...behold, the skin of his face shone". This shining apparently was somewhat frequent at this time. "Whenever" Moses spoke with God while on the mountain, "the skin of Moses' face was shining".

Consider also the face of Jesus. At the Transfiguration, while Jesus "was praying, the appearance of his face was altered", meaning "his face shone like the sun". When John saw Jesus in his vision many years later, "his face was like the sun shining in full strength".

Putting this all together, we can easily conclude that the alteration of Stephen's face was *an act of God to make it shine*. The *purpose* for doing so seems to be along the lines of what took place with Moses—just as the shining of Moses' face indicated to Israel that Moses spoke on behalf of God because he spoke directly to Him, so also the shining of Stephen's face indicated to Israel that *Stephen spoke on behalf of God as well*.

Tuesday, April 25

POPE FRANCIS REFLECTS ON MARK THE EVANGELIST

From Pope Francis' homily on April 25, 2017

Christians must “go where Jesus is not known, where Jesus is persecuted, or where Jesus is disfigured, to proclaim the true Gospel. A true preacher of the Gospel “does not seek life insurance policies” and must “go out” humbly to preach the scandal of the Cross.”

The pope reflected on St. Mark's Gospel account of the Great Commission, and said Jesus gave His disciples a mission: to proclaim the Gospel, “to not remain in Jerusalem, but to go out to proclaim the Good News to all.”

“The Gospel is always proclaimed on the road, never sitting down,” he said. Christians, the Pope said, need “to go out where Jesus is not known, or where Jesus is persecuted, or where Jesus is disfigured, to proclaim the true Gospel; to go out in order to proclaim. And the preacher risks his life in this going out. He is not safe; there are no life insurance policies for preachers. And if a preacher seeks a life insurance policy, he is not a true preacher of the Gospel: He doesn't go out, he stays in place, safe. So, first of all: Go, go out.”

Yet, this ‘going out’ does not necessarily mean leaving one's home, Pope Francis said, as cloistered contemplatives, or the sick show us. For preaching the Gospel first means going out of oneself to be united with the Lord: “The Gospel, the proclamation of Jesus Christ, goes forth on a journey, always. On a physical journey, on a spiritual journey, on a journey of suffering: we think of the proclamation of the Gospel that leads to so many sick and people who offer their sufferings for the Church, for the Christians. But they always go out of themselves.”

What is “the style of this proclamation?” the Pope asked. “St. Peter, who was St. Mark's teacher, was perfectly clear in his description of this style: The Gospel must be announced in humility, because the Son of God humbled Himself, emptied Himself.” This, the Pope said, “is the style of God”; there is no other. “The proclamation of the Gospel,” he said, “is not a carnival, a party.”

The Gospel, the Pope said, “cannot be announced with human power, cannot be proclaimed with human power, cannot be proclaimed with the spirit of climbing and advancement. This is not the Gospel.” All of us, then, are called to clothe ourselves with “humility, one towards another,” because “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble: And why is this humility necessary? Precisely because we carry forward a proclamation of humiliation – of glory, but through humiliation.

And the proclamation of the Gospel undergoes temptation: the temptation to power, the temptation to pride, the temptation to worldliness, to so many kinds of worldliness that they bring preaching or to speaking; because he does not preach a watered down Gospel, without strength, a Gospel without Christ crucified and risen. And for this reason St. Peter says: ‘Be vigilant, be vigilant for your enemy the Devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in faith, knowing that your brothers and sisters throughout the world undergo the same sufferings. The proclamation of the Gospel, if it is true, undergoes temptation.’

If a Christian says he is proclaiming the Gospel “but is never tempted,” it means that “the devil is not worried,” because “we are preaching something useless,” Pope Francis said. Therefore, the Pope continued, “In true preaching there is always some temptation, and also some persecution.” He said that when we are suffering, the Lord is there “to restore us, to give us strength, because that is what Jesus promised when He sent the Apostles”: “The Lord will be there to comfort us, to give us the strength to go forward, because He works with us if we are faithful to the proclamation of the Gospel, if we go out of ourselves to preach Christ crucified, a scandal and a folly, and if we do this with a style of humility, of true humility.

May the Lord grant us this grace, as the baptized, all of us, to take the path of evangelization with humility, with confidence in Him, announcing the true Gospel: ‘The Word is come in the flesh.’ The Word of God is come in the flesh. This is a folly, it is a scandal; but doing it with the understanding that the Lord is at our side, He works with us, and He confirms our work.

Wednesday, April 26

PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS TODAY

From Pope Francis' homily on April 12, 2016

There are two types of Christian persecution, the Pope said during Mass at Santa Marta. There is the explicit kind and the sort of persecution that is polite, disguised as culture, modernity and progress, and which ends up taking away man's freedom and even the right to conscientious objection. But in the very suffering of persecution, Francis recalled, Christians know that the Lord is always at their side.

For his meditation the Pontiff drew inspiration from the first reading, from the Acts of the Apostles. We heard about "the martyrdom of Stephen," he explained. "The tradition of the Church calls him the Protomartyr, the first martyr of the Christian community." However, even "before him there had been child martyrs" who had suffered persecution under Herod. "From that time until today there have been martyrs in the Church, there have been and there are." There are "men and women persecuted simply for confessing and for saying that Jesus Christ is Lord: this is prohibited!" Indeed, this confession "at certain times, in certain places, provokes persecution."

This is clearly manifest, the Pope stated, "We read in the Acts of the Apostles that after the martyrdom of Stephen, a great persecution broke out in Jerusalem." Then, "all the Christians fled, only the Apostles remained." Thus, persecution, Francis said, "is the daily bread of the Church: after all, Jesus said so."

Persecution, the Pope noted, "is one of the characteristics, one of the traits of Church, pervading her entire history." And "persecution is cruel, like that of Stephen, like that of our Pakistani brothers and sisters three weeks ago." It is cruel "the way Saul was cruel at the death of Stephen." Saul "went into houses, seized Christians and took them away to be judged."

There is, however, also "another kind of persecution that is not often spoken about," Francis noted. The first form of persecution "is due to confessing the name of Christ" and it is thus "a clear, explicit type of persecution." The other kind of persecution is "disguised as culture, disguised as modernity, disguised as progress: it is a kind of — I would say somewhat ironically — polite persecution." You can recognize "when someone is persecuted not for confessing Christ's name, but for wanting to demonstrate the values of the Son of God." Thus, it is a kind of "persecution against God the Creator in the person of his children."

In this way "we see every day that the powerful make laws that force people to take this path, and a nation that does not follow this modern collection of laws, or at least that does not want to have them in its legislation, is accused, is politely persecuted." This is a form of "persecution that takes away man's freedom," and even the right to "conscientious objection! God made us free, but this kind of persecution takes away freedom!" Thus, "if you don't do this, you will be punished: you'll lose your job and many other things, or you'll be set aside".

"This is the persecution of the world," the Pontiff continued. And "this persecution even has a leader." In the persecution of Stephen, "the leaders were the scribes, the doctors of the law, the high priests." On the other hand, "Jesus named the leader of polite persecution: the prince of this world." We see him "when the powerful want to impose attitudes, laws against the dignity of the children of God, persecute them and oppose God the Creator: it is the great apostasy." Thus, "Christian life continues with these two kinds of persecution", but also with the certainty that "the Lord promised not to distance himself from us: 'Be careful, be careful! Don't fall into the worldly spirit. Be careful! But go forward, I will be with you.'"

In his concluding prayer, Francis asked the Lord for "the grace to understand that a Christian's path must always persevere amid both kinds of persecution: a Christian is a martyr, that is, a witness, one who must bear witness to Christ who has saved us." This means "on the journey of life, bearing witness to God the Father, who created us." On this path a Christian "must suffer many times: this brings so much suffering." But "such is our life: Jesus is always beside us, with the consolation of the Holy Spirit and this is our strength."

Thursday, April 27

ST RAFAEL ARNÁIZ BARÓN, OCSO

From *God Alone* by Gonzalo Maria Fernández, OCSO

Rafael was convinced that the Lord was calling him to the monastery. Since his illness made no difference in the case of an oblate, it was not in any way a decisive element by which to discern his reentering or not. He had always been certain that he would die in his LaTrappe, and had always thought that the Lord was calling him there, no matter what. Rafael, who found nothing worthwhile in the outside world, sensed with a kind of spiritual instinct an attraction to the life in the monastery, while well aware that he would never be able to live the full community life. Perhaps he was unable to prove his strong desire to live in his LaTrappe by positive signs, but this did not mean that it was not the result of the action of the Spirit on him interiorly, giving his attraction the force of a vocation, not only intellectually but emotionally, that drove him towards monastic life, towards living in a monastery.

What reasons persuaded the Abbot to welcome Rafael again and again to the monastery? Frankly, they are now unknown, not being mentioned in any document. The most likely reason would seem to be that the Abbot in his dealings with Rafael came to know his far from ordinary greatness of soul. Proof of this would seem to be that he wished Rafael to return when he first left the monastery, a desire he expressed to him openly; and, in addition to welcoming his requests to return, despite his illness and the Civil War, he wanted to get him ordained to the priesthood and actually gave him the monastic cowl, an unusual thing to do at San Isidoro. This last detail looks like an acknowledgement by the Abbot of Rafael's virtues.

It seems right to conclude this point by stating that Rafael returned repeatedly to the monastery in answer to God's particular call to him; a special call, outside the usual norms. He was not meant to live the life *of* his LaTrappe; he was meant to live *in* his LaTrappe, and, it may be added, to suffer and die in his LaTrappe. His was an exceptional vocation, but it was acknowledged and accepted by those responsible in the monastery, even if it meant nonconformity with the normal life prescribed by the Rule. And it was accepted above all by Rafael himself, who answered it, fully aware that by going to the monastery he was shortening a life already impaired by illness, which is why it seems right to regard him as a "martyr to his vocation." And doubtless, a martyr to his love, the love that killed him, just as he himself had desired and declared over and over again.

Saint John of the Cross says that people who have reached intimate union with God do not leave this life because of illness or old age (even if they die of illness or of old age), but by the force of their love. So, although the death certificate signed by the Abbot states that "a diabetic coma" was what snatched Rafael's life away so soon, all those in the know were quite sure that it was more the fire of his charity and of his great love for God than his illness that did it. And thus that parchment that was kept in the casket containing Rafael's remains after their exhumation and removal in 1965 stated, "He breathed his last consumed by love for God."

In view of what his life was like it seems right to apply to him these words of the Book of Wisdom: "With him early achievement counted for long apprenticeship; so well did the Lord love him that from a corrupt world he granted him swift release" (Wisdom 4:13-14). Yes, Rafael was a man pleasing to God, one whose purpose was to love God as fully as possible, GOD ALONE! Like all the saints Rafael was a "friend of God," which was acknowledged by the Church at his beatification on September 27, 1992 (and his canonization on October 11, 2009.)

Friday, April 28

THE STORY OF THE CONVERSION OF ST PAUL

From the *Franciscan Media* website

Saint Paul's entire life can be explained in terms of one experience—his meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus. In an instant, he saw that all the zeal of his dynamic personality was being wasted, like the strength of a boxer swinging wildly. Perhaps he had never seen Jesus, who was only a few years older. But he had acquired a zealot's hatred of all Jesus stood for, as he began to harass the Church: "...entering house after house and dragging out men and women, he handed them over for imprisonment" (Acts 8:3b). Now he himself was "entered," possessed, all his energy harnessed to one goal—being a slave of Christ in the ministry of reconciliation, an instrument to help others experience the one Savior.

One sentence determined his theology: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:5b). Jesus was mysteriously identified with people—the loving group of people Saul had been running down like criminals. Jesus, he saw, was the mysterious fulfillment of all he had been blindly pursuing.

From then on, his only work was to "present everyone perfect in Christ. For this I labor and struggle, in accord with the exercise of his power working within me" (Colossians 1:28b-29). "For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and [with] much conviction" (1 Thessalonians 1:5a).

Paul's life became a tireless proclaiming and living out of the message of the cross: Christians die baptismally to sin and are buried with Christ; they are dead to all that is sinful and unredeemed in the world. They are made into a new creation, already sharing Christ's victory and someday to rise from the dead like him. Through this risen Christ the Father pours out the Spirit on them, making them completely new.

So Paul's great message to the world was: You are saved entirely by God, not by anything you can do. Saving faith is the gift of total, free, personal and loving commitment to Christ, a commitment that then bears fruit in more "works" than the Law could ever contemplate.

Saturday, April 29

ST CATHERINE OF SIENA: MYSTIC AND ASCETIC

From Robert Stackpole, director of the John Paul II Institute of Divine Mercy

Catherine of Siena was clearly a mystic of the highest order, and she lived a life saturated with prayer. For example, in 1370, when she was 23 years old, Christ answered her earnest prayer that He take her heart and give her His own instead. She insisted to her confessor that a mystical exchange of hearts with Christ really happened after that, and her companions testified that they had seen the wound in her side as a sign and testimony of what Christ had done for her. Obviously, this outer sign of the wound was symbolic of a deeper, mystical union with God that Christ had given to her (not a sign of a physical heart-transplant).

Catherine's spiritual teaching can be summed up in a few lines that she wrote to one of her disciples:

Build yourself a spiritual cell, which you can always take with you, and that is the cell of self-knowledge; you will find there also the knowledge of God's goodness to you. There are really two cells in one, and if you live in one you must also live in the other, otherwise the soul will either despair or be presumptuous; if you dwelt in self-knowledge alone you would despair; if you dwelt in knowledge of God alone you would be tempted to presumption. One must go with the other, and thus you will reach perfection.

St. Catherine was also a remarkable ascetic. She wore a hair shirt until she found it impossible to keep it clean; then replaced it with a still more painful iron chain around her waist. During her adult life she usually slept less than one hour every night, and took almost no food at all: Holy Communion was often her only sustenance throughout the day. To some extent, she did all this out of penance for her sins, and in order to be the master of her bodily appetites and passions.

However, her minimal food and sleep seem not to have been voluntary penances at all: rather, she seemed to be guided by God to withdraw herself from the flesh in this way, and in any case, by His grace she did not seem to want or need much of either. She writes in a letter to a friend in Florence: "I have prayed constantly, and do pray God and shall pray Him, that in this matter of eating He will give me grace to live like other creatures, if it is His will "for it is mine."

It may be that these deprivations hastened her death (she died at only age 33), but it is also a fact that she was a woman of remarkable energy, humility, tenderness, and even, at times, holy imperiousness (i.e. "tough love"). She also crowded more "achievements" into her short life than most people who live twice as long. Today we might focus more on interior mortification of the will, and on keeping our bodies healthy for the service of the Lord, rather than on bodily mortifications.

Nevertheless, it may be that the Lord used extraordinary means with Catherine to produce a saint of extraordinary gifts including a personality of extreme toughness, who could courageously stand up to Popes, emperors and kings with the gospel truth. Moreover, the fact that her soul was *obviously* so freed from bodily distractions may have helped her to receive special guidance from the Holy Spirit in the mysteries of the spiritual life.