

Fourth Week of Easter

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Sunday, April 30

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

From the writings of Clement of Alexandria

In our sickness, we need a savior, in our wanderings a guide, in our blindness someone to show us the light, in our thirst the fountain of living water which quenches for ever the thirst of those who drink from it. We dead people need life, we sheep need a shepherd, we children need a teacher, the whole world needs Jesus!

If we would understand the profound wisdom of the most holy shepherd and teacher, the ruler of the universe and the Word of the Father, when using an allegory he calls himself the shepherd of the sheep, we can do so for he is also the teacher of little ones.

Speaking at some length through Ezekiel to the Jewish elders, he gives them a salutary example of true solicitude. I will bind up the injured, he says; I will heal the sick; I will bring back the strays and pasture them on my holy mountain. These are the promises of the Good Shepherd.

Pasture us children like sheep, Lord. Fill us with your own food, the food of righteousness. As our guide, we pray you to lead us to your holy mountain, the Church on high, touching the heavens.

I will be their shepherd, he says, and *I will be close to them*, like their own clothing. He desires to save my flesh by clothing it in the robe of immortality and he has anointed my body. *They shall call on me*, he says, and *I will answer, "Here I am."* Lord, you have heard me more quickly than I ever hoped! *And if they pass over they shall not fall says the Lord*, meaning that we who are passing over into immortality shall not fall into corruption, for he will preserve us. He has said he would and to do so is his own wish. Such is our Teacher, both good and just. He said he had not come to be served but to serve, and so the gospel shows him tired out, he who labored for our sake and promised to *give his life as ransom for many*, a thing which, as he said, only the Good Shepherd will do.

How bountiful the giver who for our sake gives his most precious possession, his own life! He is a real benefactor and friend, who desired to be our brother when he might have been our Lord, and who in his goodness even went so far as to die for us!

Monday, May 1

THE PATH OF PROGRESS IN PRAYER

From *Difficulties in Mental Prayer* by Dom Eugene Boylan

There is one weapon – one way – that is essential for dealing with all difficulties and for making progress in prayer. That is, a firm resolution never to cease trying, never to give up praying, no matter what difficulties arise, no matter how small the measure of success, no matter what the cost is going to be. When we decide to become men of prayer, we make a declaration of war, not only on our lower selves, but on the devil himself. Nothing but resolute courage and firm unshakeable confidence in God can enable us to persist in that combat. But if we are generous and do our best, even if that be little more than to glory in our infirmities, then we can be sure of God's assistance, for it is a theological principle that to those who use what little grace they may already possess, God will not refuse His further grace.

There is one difficulty, a most common one, which will test the strength of this resolution: that is, the continual struggle against distractions. These troubles may, of course, have their origin outside prayer, in some attachment, some unmortified curiosity, some morbid brooding over humiliations, for example; they may be due to a failure to recollect oneself generously and completely at the beginning of the prayer. In these cases the remedy is obvious. They may, however, be due to fatigue; for if the powers of the mind are hard at work all day, it is not easy for them to make the effort necessary to remain attentive to what may be a very difficult task. In this case, when the distracting work is of God's appointing and not due to our own self-seeking, we can only glory in our infirmities, and hope in God's grace. Again, distractions may arise from the fact that the subject of our prayer, or the workings of God's grace, make no appeal to the imagination, to our natural tastes, or even to the more familiar part of our intellectual powers. In this latter case especially, the imagination and its attendants seem to run riot, and any attempt to recall them will only draw away the attention from the real prayer, which is going on in the depths of the soul, in what one might call the "invisible light" of faith. In all these cases, all we can do is to renew our attention to God according to the way in which we are praying to Him. This should be done gently and quietly, without vexation, or even without surprise at our own folly.

If only we could realise how much this continual turning back to God shows Him our real love for Him and pleases Him more than that rapt attention that has its roots in self-love, we should never be dissatisfied with our prayer on account of its numerous distractions. If prayer be a lifting up of the mind to God, then every time we turn away from distractions, to renew our attention to God, we pray – and we pray in the teeth of difficulty and despite ourselves. What can be more pleasing to God? What more meritorious? We should be very greatly surprised if we could get a glimpse at the account book that the recording angel keeps, and see the different values he sets on our various attempts at prayer. The prayer that pleased us, and with which we are well satisfied, would often be quite low in his estimate, while the prayer that disgusted us, which was apparently made up of nothing but distractions, might be found to have won a very high degree of his approval.

Tuesday, May 2

ST ATHANASIUS, BISHOP & DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH

From the *New World Encyclopedia*

Athanasius of Alexandria was a Christian bishop—the Patriarch of Alexandria—in the fourth century. He made three primary and integral contributions to the theory and practice of Christianity: an endorsement of the monastic lifestyle, the formulation of the New Testament canon, and a theological defense of the full divinity of Christ against the position taken up by Arius.

For these contributions to the development of the Christian faith, Athanasius is revered as one of the 33 Doctors of the Church by the Roman Catholics, is counted as one of the four Great Doctors of the Eastern Church, and is regarded as one of the greatest early leaders of the church by many Protestant sects. Further, he is also venerated as a saint by the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Church.

So great was Athanasius' public profile as a young deacon, both in popular and theological circles, that he was a natural choice to succeed the well-respected bishop Alexander—an achievement that becomes additionally notable when one takes into account the fact that he had not yet reached the age of majority, which was 30 years, thought necessary to hold such a vaunted ecclesiastical position. However, while the first four years of his episcopate were rather uneventful, the proponents of Arianism soon began to insinuate themselves back into the Christian community, eventually earning the ear of Emperor Constantine. When Athanasius continued to speak against them as heretics, pro-Arian bishops began to foment controversies against the young bishop, accusing him of various crimes against the faith. Realizing that he would not receive a fair trial at the hands of the Arian synod surrounding Alexandria, he traveled to Rome to plead his case directly to the pope, who cleared him of all charges.

However, this was just the beginning of Athanasius' tribulations. Over the next 43 years, he spent approximately 18 of them in exile, hiding from Arian supporters in the imperial court, the local churches, and even, at times, the Vatican. Despite this, he remained consistently devoted to the Christological formulation defined at Nicaea and anathematized any who refused to acknowledge the divinity of Christ.

During his various exiles, he traveled throughout Christendom, teaching the Nicene Creed and spreading the tales of the exemplary Desert Fathers, especially Saint Anthony.

Finally, in the latter half of 364 C.E. and after decades of persecution, Athanasius was officially and publicly pardoned by Emperor Valens and was invited to return to his diocese. There he spent the remaining years of his life ministering to his community and performing his various ecclesiastical duties.

There is modern criticism of Athanasius for his allegedly merciless way of treating the Arians who denied the divinity of Christ in favor of his humanity. It should be noted, however, that Athanasius himself never denied the humanity of Christ. So, a friendly dialogue between him and his Arian opponents could have happened, if he only had the mind and temperament to pursue it.

Wednesday, May 3

STS PHILIP AND JAMES, APOSTLES

From the *Franciscan Media* and *Aleteia* websites

We know nothing of James, the son of Alphaeus, except his name and the fact that Jesus chose him to be one of the 12 pillars of the New Israel, his Church. He is not the James of Acts, son of Clopas, “brother” of Jesus and later bishop of Jerusalem and the traditional author of the Letter of James. James, son of Alphaeus, is also known as James the Lesser to avoid confusing him with James the son of Zebedee, also an apostle and known as James the Greater.

Philip came from the same town as Peter and Andrew, Bethsaida in Galilee. Jesus called him directly, whereupon he sought out Nathanael and told him of the “one about whom Moses wrote.”

Like the other apostles, Philip took a long time coming to realize who Jesus was. On one occasion, when Jesus saw the great multitude following him and wanted to give them food, he asked Philip where they should buy bread for the people to eat. Saint John comments, “Jesus said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do.” Philip answered, “Two hundred days’ wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little bit.”

John’s story is not a put-down of Philip. It was simply necessary for these men who were to be the foundation stones of the Church to see the clear distinction between humanity’s total helplessness apart from God and the human ability to be a bearer of divine power by God’s gift.

On another occasion, we can almost hear the exasperation in Jesus’s voice. After Thomas had complained that they did not know where Jesus was going, Jesus said, “I am the way. If you know me, then you will also know my Father. From now on you do know him and have seen him.” Then Philip said, “Master, show us the Father, and that will be enough for us.” Enough! Jesus answered, “Have I been with you for so long a time and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”

Possibly because Philip bore a Greek name or because he was thought to be close to Jesus, some gentile proselytes came to him and asked him to introduce them to Jesus. Philip went to Andrew, and Andrew went to Jesus. Jesus’s reply in John’s Gospel is indirect; Jesus says that now his “hour” has come, that in a short time he will give his life for Jew and gentile alike.

As in the case of the other apostles, we see in James and Philip human men who became foundation stones of the Church, and we are reminded again that holiness and its consequent apostolate are entirely the gift of God, not a matter of human achieving. All power is God’s power, even the power of human freedom to accept his gifts. “You will be clothed with power from on high,” Jesus told Philip and the others. Their first commission had been to expel unclean spirits, heal diseases, announce the kingdom. They learned, gradually, that these externals were sacraments of an even greater miracle inside their persons—the divine power to love like God.

Philip and James the Lesser were not related by blood and they share the same feast day simply because their relics were transferred to Rome to the same church. May 1, the saints’ feast day prior to the 1950s, celebrates the solemn translation of their relics to the church of the Holy Apostles at Rome, which is dedicated to them, and where they still rest.

While their remains are interred in the same church in Rome, the two apostles had gone their separate ways after the Ascension of Jesus, with St. James staying in Jerusalem and St. Philip preaching in Turkey.

Thursday, May 4

A NEW COMMANDMENT

From a treatise on John by St Augustine

The Lord Jesus declares that he is giving his disciples a new commandment, that they should love one another: *I give you a new commandment: love one another.*

But wasn't this commandment already part of the ancient law of God, where it is written *You shall love your neighbour as yourself*? Why, then, is it called a new one by the Lord, when it is really so old? Is it new because he has divested us of our old humanity and clothed us with the new? It is true that love renews those who listen to it (or rather, those who act in obedience to it) but it is that particular love which the Lord distinguished from all carnal affection by adding *love one another as I have loved you.*

This is the love that renews us, making us new men, heirs of the New Testament, singers of the new song. It was this love, my beloved brethren, that renewed the patriarchs and prophets of old, and later renewed the blessed apostles. This is the love that is now renewing the nations, and from among the universal race of man, which overspreads the whole world, is making and gathering together a new people, the body of the newly-married spouse of the only-begotten Son of God. Of her the Song of Songs says, *Who is she who is coming up, clothed in white?* Clothed in white because she has been renewed; and how else can she have been renewed but by the new commandment?

Because of this, the members of the people of God have a mutual interest in one another; and if one member suffers then all the members suffer with it; and if one member is honoured then all the members rejoice with it. For this they hear and this they observe: *I give you a new commandment: love one another:* not as people who pretend to love in order to corrupt one another, nor indeed as people love one another genuinely but in a human way. Rather, they love one another as those who belong to God. All of them are children of the Most High and consequently brethren of his only Son. They share with each other the love with which he leads them to the end that will bring them fulfilment and the true satisfaction of their real desires. For when God is all in all, there is no desire that is unfulfilled.

This love is bestowed on us by him who said, *Just as I have loved you, you also must love one another.* He loved us so that we should love one another. By loving us he bound us to one another in mutual love, and by this gentle bond united us into the body of which he is the most noble Head.

Friday, May 5

THE EUCHARIST, PLEDGE OF OUR RESURRECTION

From the treatise “Against the Heresies” by St Irenaeus

If our flesh is not saved, then the Lord has not redeemed us with his blood, the eucharistic chalice does not make us sharers in his blood, and the bread we break does not make us sharers in his body. There can be no blood without veins, flesh and the rest of the human substance, and this the Word of God actually became: it was with his own blood that he redeemed us. As the Apostle says: *In him, through his blood, we have been redeemed, our sins have been forgiven.*

We are his members and we are nourished by creatures, which is his gift to us, for it is he who causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall. He declared that the chalice, which comes from his creation, was his blood, and he makes it the nourishment of our blood. He affirmed that the bread, which comes from his creation, was his body, and he makes it the nourishment of our body. When the chalice we mix and the bread we bake receive the word of God, the eucharistic elements become the body and blood of Christ, by which our bodies live and grow. How then can it be said that flesh belonging to the Lord’s own body and nourished by his body and blood is incapable of receiving God’s gift of eternal life? Saint Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians that *we are members of his body*, of his flesh and bones. He is not speaking of some spiritual and incorporeal kind of man, *for spirits do not have flesh and bones*. He is speaking of a real human body composed of flesh, sinews and bones, nourished by the chalice of Christ’s blood and receiving growth from the bread which is his body.

The slip of a vine planted in the ground bears fruit at the proper time. The grain of wheat falls into the ground and decays only to be raised up again and multiplied by the Spirit of God who sustains all things. The Wisdom of God places these things at the service of man and when they receive God’s word they become the eucharist, which is the body and blood of Christ. In the same way our bodies, which have been nourished by the eucharist, will be buried in the earth and will decay, but they will rise again at the appointed time, for the Word of God will raise them up to the glory of God the Father. Then the Father will clothe our mortal nature in immortality and freely endow our corruptible nature with incorruptibility, for God’s power is shown most perfectly in weakness.

Saturday, May 6

MARY, WOMAN OF THE EUCHARIST

From Pope John Paul II's 2003 encyclical *Ecclesia Eucharistia*

If we wish to rediscover in all its richness the profound relationship between the Church and the Eucharist, we cannot neglect Mary, Mother and model of the Church. Mary can guide us towards this most holy sacrament, because she herself has a profound relationship with it.

At first glance, the Gospel is silent on this subject. The account of the institution of the Eucharist on the night of Holy Thursday makes no mention of Mary. Yet we know that she was present among the Apostles who prayed "with one accord" in the first community which gathered after the Ascension in expectation of Pentecost. Certainly Mary must have been present at the Eucharistic celebrations of the first generation of Christians, who were devoted to "the breaking of bread."

But in addition to her sharing in the Eucharistic banquet, an indirect picture of Mary's relationship with the Eucharist can be had, beginning with her interior disposition. Mary is a "woman of the Eucharist" in her whole life. The Church, which looks to Mary as a model, is also called to imitate her in her relationship with this most holy mystery.

If the Eucharist is a mystery of faith which so greatly transcends our understanding as to call for sheer abandonment to the word of God, then there can be no one like Mary to act as our support and guide in acquiring this disposition. In repeating what Christ did at the Last Supper in obedience to his command: "Do this in memory of me!", we also accept Mary's invitation to obey him without hesitation: "Do whatever he tells you". With the same maternal concern which she showed at the wedding feast of Cana, Mary seems to say to us: "Do not waver; trust in the words of my Son. If he was able to change water into wine, he can also turn bread and wine into his body and blood, and through this mystery bestow on believers the living memorial of his passover, thus becoming the 'bread of life'".

In a certain sense Mary lived her Eucharistic faith even before the institution of the Eucharist, by the very fact that she offered her virginal womb for the Incarnation of God's Word. The Eucharist, while commemorating the passion and resurrection, is also in continuity with the incarnation. At the Annunciation Mary conceived the Son of God in the physical reality of his body and blood, thus anticipating within herself what to some degree happens sacramentally in every believer who receives, under the signs of bread and wine, the Lord's body and blood.

As a result, there is a profound analogy between the Fiat which Mary said in reply to the angel, and the Amen which every believer says when receiving the body of the Lord. Mary was asked to believe that the One whom she conceived "through the Holy Spirit" was "the Son of God." In continuity with the Virgin's faith, in the Eucharistic mystery we are asked to believe that the same Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, becomes present in his full humanity and divinity under the signs of bread and wine.

"Blessed is she who believed." Mary also anticipated, in the mystery of the incarnation, the Church's Eucharistic faith. When, at the Visitation, she bore in her womb the Word made flesh, she became in some way a "tabernacle" – the first "tabernacle" in history – in which the Son of God, still invisible to our human gaze, allowed himself to be adored by Elizabeth, radiating his light as it were through the eyes and the voice of Mary. And is not the enraptured gaze of Mary as she contemplated the face of the newborn Christ and cradled him in her arms that unparalleled model of love which should inspire us every time we receive Eucharistic communion?

