

Eleventh Week in Ordinary Time

June 18 – 24, 2023

- Sun
18** **Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time**
COMMENTARY FROM ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM
From St John Chrysostom's Last Homilies
- Mon
19** **Weekday of 11th Week in Ordinary Time**
TO SEEK GOD
From Columba Marmion in *Christ The Ideal of the Monk*
- Tue
20** **Weekday of 11th Week**
BE PERFECT, AS YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER IS PERFECT
From J. Steven Covington in *Catholic Answers* magazine
- Wed
21** **Memorial of St Aloysius Gonzaga, Religious**
THE LIFE OF ST ALOYSIUS GONZAGA, SJ
From the *Jesuits Global* website
- Thu
22** **Weekday of 11th Week**
DEFENSELESS PRAYER
From Ruth Burrows in *Letter on Prayer*
- Fri
23** **Weekday of 11th Week**
DESERT DAYS & PRAYER IN THE DESERT
From Charles Cummings in *Spirituality and the Desert Experience*
- Sat
24** **Solemnity of the Nativity of St John the Baptist**
JOHN WAS THE VOICE, NOT THE WORD
From Pope Francis' homily on this feast day in 2013

Sunday, June 18

COMMENTARY FROM ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

From St John Chrysostom's Last Homilies

All farm work is undertaken with a view to the harvest that will come at the end. How then could Jesus apply the word "harvest" to work that was only beginning? Idolatry held sway all over the world. Everywhere there was fornication, adultery, licentiousness; everywhere greed, robbery, bloodshed. When the world was filled with so many evils, when the good seed had not yet been sown, when the land had not been cleared, and there were briars, thistles and weeds everywhere, when no ploughing had been done, no furrow cut, how could Jesus speak of harvest and say it was plentiful? Why did he speak thus of the gospel?

Why, indeed, if not that with things in such a state, he was about to send out his apostles all over the world. Most likely they were bewildered and anxious; they probably asked themselves: How can we even open our mouths, let alone stand up and preach in front of huge crowds of people? How can eleven of us put the whole world to rights? Can we speak to the wise men when we are ignorant, to soldiers when we are unarmed, to rulers when we are subjects, to people of many different languages, people of foreign nations and alien speech when we have only one language? Who will tolerate us if no one can understand what we say?

It was to save them from the anxiety of such reasoning that the Lord called the gospel a harvest. It was almost as if he said: Everything is ready, all is prepared. I am sending you to harvest the ripe grain. You will be able to sow and reap on the same day. You must be like the farmer who rejoices when he goes out to gather in his crops. He looks happy and is glad of heart. His hard work and many difficulties forgotten, he hurries out eagerly to reap their reward, hastening to collect his annual returns. Nothing stands in the way, there is no obstacle anywhere, nor any uncertainty regarding the future. There will be no heavy rain, no hail or drought, no devastating legions of locusts. And since the farmer at harvest time fears no such disasters, the reapers set to work dancing and leaping for joy.

You must be like them when you go out into the world – indeed your joy must be very much greater. You also are to gather in a harvest – a harvest easily reaped, a harvest already there waiting for you. You have only to speak, not to labor. Lend me your tongue, and you will see the ripe grain gathered into the royal granary. And with this he sent them out, saying: *Remember that I am with you always, until the end of the world.*

Monday, June 19

TO SEEK GOD

From Abbot Columba Marmion in *Christ The Ideal of the Monk*

The ambition of possessing God – such is the primal disposition that St. Benedict requires of the postulant who presents himself at the door of the monastery. He sees in this a proof of a sure vocation. But this disposition must extend to the monks' whole life.

For the abbot, St. Benedict wishes that first and foremost he should seek “the kingdom of God” in charity as Christ commanded, that he should have care, above all to establish this kingdom in the souls entrusted to him. All material activity exerted in the monastery ought to have this one end in view: “that is all things God may be glorified,” for in all things love refers everything to God's glory.

Let us carefully notice these words: “in all things,” *in omnibus*. This is one of the conditions of our seeking God. In order for it to be “true,” as St. Benedict requires, our seeking after God must be constant. We must seek his face forever. You may say: but do we not possess God from the time of our baptism, and as long as we are in possession of sanctifying grace? Undoubtedly. Then why seek God, if we possess him already?

“To seek God” is to remain united to him by faith. It is to attach ourselves to him as the object of our love. Now we know that this union of faith and love admits of a vast number of degrees. “God is everywhere present,” says St. Ambrose, “but he is nearest to those who love him, he swells far from those who neglect his service. When we have found God, we can still seek him, that is to say we can always draw nearer to God, by an ever intenser faith, an ever more fervent love, an ever more faithful accomplishment of his will, and this is why we can and ought always to seek God, until the day when he will give himself to us in an inadmissible manner in the glorious splendor of his indefectible light.

If we do not attain this end, we will remain useless and unprofitable. The psalmist says, and St. Benedict quotes these words in the Prologue in commenting upon them, “The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray” (Ps. 14:2-3). How many people don't understand that God is the source of all good and the supreme end of every creature? They have turned aside from the road that leads to the end. Why is this? What is a useless being? It is one that does not correspond to the end for which it was created. For instance, in order to fulfill the end for which it is purchased, a watch must show the time. It may well be of gold, studded with diamonds, encrusted with precious stones, but unless it keeps time it is useless.

We too become useless if we do not tend unceasingly to the end for which we came to the monastery. This end is to seek God, to refer all to him as to our supreme end, to place in him our sole beatitude. All the rest is vanity.

Let us seek him always, so as to be able unceasingly to put our lips to this source of beatitude. We can always drink from this source, without fear of seeing the waters exhausted, for, says St. Augustine, their abundance surpasses our need. Christ Jesus said they become in the soul “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14).

Tuesday, June 20

BE PERFECT, AS YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER IS PERFECT

From J. Steven Covington in *Catholic Answers* magazine

Matthew 5:48 – “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” – is brief and riveting. Poised at the center of the Sermon on the Mount, this Gospel exhortation is a critical moment of revelation for all his disciples. It is the moment where Jesus sums up his teaching by issuing a clarion call for us to transform ourselves into an image of God’s own holiness, that we may transform the entire world into the kingdom of God.

By telling us to “be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,” our Lord is saying we have an opportunity to become fully human by imitating the loving qualities of God. Such a conversion has many implications. It cannot be an individual affair with God. If we are to emulate the type of selfless love that radiates from God, the true hallmark of our conversion will be our ability to conduct ourselves in ways that allow our words and our deeds to show others the love of God.

The word “perfect” as used by Matthew deserves attention. “Perfect” is used just twice in all of the Gospels, both times by Matthew, who places the word again in 19:21, when Jesus explains to the rich young man that to “be perfect,” to find his true “treasure in heaven,” he must give his wealth to the poor and follow the way of Jesus. In both the Sermon on the Mount and the interaction with the rich young man, Jesus uses the word “perfect” to demand a certain type of moral behavior that will reflect our attempt to know God fully and to therefore always seek his will in our lives.

It is significant that Jesus’ exhortation to “be perfect” comes within the context of the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus teaches us the virtues essential to the Christian life: the necessity of prayer, the absence of anxiety over material things, and the incompatibility of hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and selfishness with philanthropy. But the Sermon cannot be limited to the status of a “how-to” guide for clean living. Here Jesus is offering us the opportunity to participate in something much greater than our human selves, something more vast than what we can know in the here and now.

By describing the type of perfect behavior to which we should aspire, Jesus is giving us a glimpse of what eternal life will be like in the kingdom of God: a life that is capable only of knowing peace, a life that is free from anxiety and filled with hope, a life that is loving and can only promote good. By illuminating for us the qualities that we should display to one another, Jesus is describing for us the very qualities that God himself displays toward us and all creation. The most remarkable of these qualities – and the one seemingly most beyond human reach – is God’s capacity to pour out his love upon those unworthy of it.

With the blunt admonition that we are to “be perfect” as our “heavenly Father is perfect,” Jesus in condenses the larger vision of the Sermon on the Mount, a vision that may be translated as: “You are to build the kingdom of God with love.” We who expect to find ourselves within that kingdom, he is telling us, must not only look forward to it as a future possibility but must believe that the kingdom can, in part, become a current reality and must participate in the building of that reality. Capping his extraordinary teaching that we are to express only love, even to those who may hate us in return, Jesus reminds us that, to achieve a whole, complete, unbreakable union with God, we must imitate God. We must, like Jesus, direct all the energies of our humanity into reflecting the love of the divinity. It is a pure love so overwhelming that it can only become a force for good, a love that will one day overpower the world to usher into its place the eternal kingdom of God.

Wednesday, June 21

THE LIFE OF ST ALOYSIUS GONZAGA, SJ

From the *Jesuits Global* website

Aloysius Gonzaga (Luigi Gonzaga, 1568-1591) gave up a privileged life and a princely inheritance to live the vows of religious life even to the point of contacting the plague because of his selfless care for people already sick with it. He was the eldest son of the Marquis of Castiglione, and heir to the family title. The Gonzagas were known as patrons of Renaissance artists, and they ruled what amounted to a kingdom.

As a young man Gonzaga wore a suit of armor and walked at his father's side when he reviewed troops. His life began to change after he contracted malaria and suffered frequent bouts of fever. As early as age seven, he became attracted to prayer and turned away from the courtly life around him. When he was nine, he and his brother were sent to Florence to learn the customs of princes at the court of their father's friend the Grand Duke Francesco de' Medici. The Medici court was one of the grandest, most opulent in Europe, but also one full of intrigue, deceit, sex and violence. The young Gonzaga withdrew from this world and became firm in his desire to never offend God by sinning. In November 1579 he moved to Mantua to stay with the duke, a relative; in that residence he discovered a book with brief lives of the saints. He also began to pray the Psalms daily and later started meditating after he discovered a prayer book written by the Jesuit Peter Canisius. His piety included daily Mass, weekly communion and fasting three days a week.

The young heir traveled with Maria of Austria, the daughter of Charles V, on her way to Madrid in 1582. He became a page attending the duke of Asturias, the heir apparent, and was later made a knight of the Order of St. James. The higher he rose in royal society, however, the more his thoughts turned to becoming a Jesuit like his confessor in Madrid. On Aug. 15, 1583 he had an experience in prayer that confirmed his decision. When he told his confessor, that man said he would have to get his father's permission.

The marquis was enraged by the news that his heir wanted to renounce all that had been so carefully prepared for him. The marquis sent his two sons on a tour of the courts of Italy, hoping that the experience of such refined living would change his son's mind and relieve the tension that had developed between two strong-willed individuals. The son's determination proved to be stronger, and the father finally granted his assent. In November 1585 Aloysius renounced his inheritance and set out for Rome where he presented himself to the Superior General, Claudio Acquaviva, who admitted him to the novitiate of Sant'Andrea.

Although the new novice was not yet 18, his background made him mature beyond his years, and he found the novitiate less rigorous than the life he had been living by his own decision. He nevertheless obediently followed the novitiate rules and the guidance of his novice master. He enrolled in the Roman College to finish philosophy studies before taking first vows, and then went immediately into theology right after.

Plague and famine struck Italy in 1590 and Gonzaga threw himself into caring for the victims of the plague. He begged alms for the sick and carried those he found in the streets to a hospital where he washed and fed them and prepared them for the sacraments. He told his spiritual director, Robert Bellarmine (who would later be recognized as a saint), that he had a premonition he would die soon.

So many young Jesuits were becoming sick that the superior forbade Gonzaga to return to the hospital. Gonzaga did get permission to work at Our Lady of Consolation hospital which did not treat anyone with contagious diseases. Gonzaga went there but contracted the plague when he cared for a man who had the plague. The young Jesuit put himself to bed on March 3, 1591; his condition worsened. Fever and a cough set in and he slowly lingered on. He knew he was dying and asked to receive communion. Two Jesuits watched with him through the night and saw his face change as he held onto a cross and called the name of Jesus. He was only 23 when he died. His body is now kept in the church of St. Ignatius in Rome.

Thursday, June 22

DEFENSELESS PRAYER

From Ruth Burrows in *Letters on Prayer*

We can't disgust God. We might get fed up. God is never fed up, but always delights in us. So we can afford to be undefended and want this Love to enter every corner of our being because only then will everything in us be purified and transformed. When we pretend to ourselves and therefore to God, and when we are out to impress – ourselves first of all, but also God – with whatever holy sentiments, great desires or profound spirituality we think we have, God can't get at us! Again, we can arm ourselves with a plan of prayer we intend to carry through in order to make sure we don't get distracted for that, of course, would be to fail. What is more, we absolutely dread the awareness of how spiritually inadequate we really are and our ego takes subtle precautions to ward it off. The common dodge is to avoid altogether this undefended prayer. And this is understandable enough without faith in Jesus' God.

This God longs and longs to give, not just gifts, but himself; and it is only this supreme Gift that makes us utterly happy. We don't have to bribe him with our good works or make ourselves desirable and "worthy." His love makes us lovely. The little story of Martha and Mary expresses the truth graphically. What Jesus is saying is that, when he enters our house, that is, when we are indirect contact with him, then it is for him to give to us, to serve and feed us, not the other way round. This, I believe, represents the reality of Christian existence: receiving God, All-Love, in Christ, letting God love us, nourish us, bring us to our total fulfillment. Well nourished, we turn to our neighbors and share our nourishment with them. Freely we have received and freely we must give.

It is hard for us to hold onto this underlying truth. We turn it upside down, don't we? This is where I see the utmost importance of the prayer we are talking about: it expresses this truth as nothing else does. The Martha in us who wants to do things for God, wants to be the big one, the giver, must let go and childlike sit down with Mary at the feet of Jesus to receive. In doing so, her attitude will gradually change and her whole life, her serving, be purged of self-seeking and become in itself prayer. Our inmost heart must choose to remain a little one receiving its food from Jesus.

It is not easy to persevere faithfully in this solitary, defenseless prayer. We can be faced with seeming nothingness. What we have to realize is that the silence, the emptiness, if such be our experience, are filled with a love too great for human heart and mind to grasp. They are what seems, not what is.

Faith tells us that Love works and its work is Love. We have but to stay there in quiet trust even if we suffer. This is not to say that methods are barred. Yet they must be used with a light touch and not become a screen behind which we hide our spiritual impotence. Their purpose must be to help us to maintain our undefended aloneness before our God.

I don't want to end by giving the impression that the sort of prayer we are discussing is necessarily bleak. At times it might be enrapturing. The point I want to emphasize is the unprotectedness, the naked exposure to "the length, the breadth, the height, the depth" of reality which is the love of God that comes to us in Christ Jesus Our Lord. We are, each one, enfolded in a love so overwhelming that it escapes conception.

It seems to me that this unoccupied prayer is faith at its purest, refusing to stand on our own perception and casting our whole weight on the Father of Jesus. Also, it is very, very selfless: our love for God overcoming self-love. Prayer is self-surrender in faith and here, I believe, we have its purest personal expression.

Friday, June 23

DESERT DAYS & PRAYER IN THE DESERT

From Charles Cummings, OCSO in *Spirituality and the Desert Experience*

I believe there is a healthy instinct, deep within our hearts, that periodically draws us to seek solitude, to seek the desert where we can be alone with God. That call of the desert was the propelling force that came upon Jesus after his baptism and on other occasions during his public ministry. The prophet Hosea heard the same compelling call spoken to Israel: "I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart" (Hosea 2:16). The habit of allowing time in our schedule for periodic desert days or desert hours will provide opportune periods when God may speak to our listening heart. With practice, our prayer of listening may become a part of us, a prayer experience into which we can enter frequently during the course of an ordinary day. The essential desert is interior, within our heart. By entering the desert of the heart to adore God in a silent act of listening love, we can have a desert moment in the midst of our daily occupations, and in the company of other people.

Prayer becomes an all-pervading part of our life when we give free rein to the Spirit's sanctifying action in us. Once we have set out on the journey of periodic meditation, we cannot foresee where the journey will take us. In the present section our special interest is in the journey of prayer that has gone down a desert path into the experience of emptiness, aridity, and doubt. In this desert we can begin to doubt God himself. And as the desert experience is prolonged we eventually realize that there is nothing we can do to make anything happen in our prayer or to force God to reveal himself and remove our doubts. The Israelites had to spend forty years in the desert learning the lesson that there was nothing they could do to save themselves; their situation was fundamentally beyond their control and they had to place all their trust in a God who would provide for them and lead them day by day. In our own desert experience of emptiness in prayer we too will have to learn to accept and even prefer our state of helplessness, poverty, and nothingness so that God can fill us with his own fullness, in his own good time.

I believe the experience of emptiness and aridity in prayer is fairly common in the spiritual life. This desert feeling may have many causes, not all of them due to God's action. For instance, I may experience a temporary period of aridity because of physical illness, fatigue, absorbing duties and responsibilities, and over-involvement in manual or intellectual labor. Also, I may find myself in the desert because of my own sinful attachments, infidelity to God's will, laziness, sensuality, pride, mediocrity, or negligence in prayer.

Yet there is an emptiness that is the work of God in my heart and leads to a beatifying communion with him in "the world of Jesus." It is the teaching of St. John of the Cross that union with God is often preceded by a desert experience of emptiness and doubt in prayer. "The soul," he writes, "must first be set in emptiness and poverty of spirit and purged of every natural support, consolation, and apprehension, earthly and heavenly."

It seems to me that there are two stages or degrees of the desert experience of emptiness in prayer, two deserts to cross. We may cross them successively or alternately or both at the same time: the distinction is useful only for purposes of description. The first desert might be called "the desert of truth" because it is here that I discover a more realistic and mature manner of relating to God, from the basis of my poverty and misery. I think there are many sincere and faithful people in the first desert, which corresponds to the nights of the senses. The second desert, crossed by a smaller number, corresponds to the night of the spirit. Dereliction and anguish are experienced in the second desert, which might be called "the desert of God's silence."

Saturday, June 24

JOHN WAS THE VOICE, NOT THE WORD

From Pope Francis' homily on this feast day in 2013

June 24th is the Solemnity of the Birth of Saint John the Baptist, whom the Gospels indicate as the forerunner or precursor of Jesus. Dedicating his homily to him on that day in 2013 Pope Francis said the Church is called to proclaim the Word of God, even to martyrdom.

Pope Francis began his homily by addressing best wishes to all who bear the name John. The figure of John the Baptist, the Pope said, is not always easy to understand. "When we think of his life, we think of a prophet, a man who was great and then ends up as a poor man." Who is John? The Pope said John himself explains: "I am a voice, a voice in the wilderness," but "it is a voice without the Word, because the Word is not him, it is an Other." Here then is the mystery of John: "He never takes over the Word," John "is the one who indicates, who marks." The "meaning of John's life – he added – is to indicate another."

Pope Francis then spoke of being struck by the fact that the "Church chooses to mark John's feast day" at a time when the days are at their longest in the year, when they "have more light." And John really "was the man of light, he brought light, but it was not his own light, it was a reflected light." John is "like a moon" and when Jesus began to preach, the light of John "began to decline, to set." "Voice not Word" – the Pope said – "light, but not his own."

"John seems to be nothing. That is John's vocation: he negates himself. And when we contemplate the life of this man, so great, so powerful – all believed that he was the Messiah – when we contemplate this life, how it is nullified to the point of the darkness of a prison, we behold a great mystery. We do not know what John's last days were like. We do not know. We only know that he was killed, his head was put on a platter, as a great gift from a dancer to an adulteress. I don't think you can lower yourself much more than this, negate yourself much more. That was the end that John met."

Pope Francis noted that in prison John experienced doubts and anguish and he called on his disciples to go to Jesus and ask him, "Are you the One, or should we expect someone else?" His life is one of "pain and darkness." John "was not even spared this", said the Pope, who added: "the figure of John makes me think so much about the Church."

"The Church exists to proclaim, to be the voice of a Word, her husband, who is the Word. The Church exists to proclaim this Word until martyrdom. Martyrdom precisely in the hands of the proud, the proudest of the Earth. John could have made himself important, he could have said something about himself. 'But he felt himself to be the voice, not the Word. This is John's secret. Why is John holy and without sin? Because he never, never took a truth as his own. He would not be an ideologue. The man who negated himself so that the Word could come to the fore. And we, as a Church, we can now ask for the grace not to become an ideological Church."

The Church, he added, must hear the Word of Jesus and raise her voice, proclaim it boldly. "That – he said – is the Church without ideologies, without a life of its own: the Church which is the *mysterium lunae* which has light from her Bridegroom and diminishes herself so that He may grow."

This is the model that John offers for us and for the Church today. A Church that is always at the service of the Word. A Church that never takes anything for herself. Today we asked for the grace of joy, we asked the Lord to cheer this Church in her service to the Word, to be the voice of this Word, preach this Word. We ask for the grace, the dignity of John, with no ideas of their own, without a Gospel taken as property, only one Church that indicates the Word, even to martyrdom. So be it!