

Twenty-First Week in Ordinary Time

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Sunday, August 27

GOSPEL COMMENTARY FROM ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

From the writings of St John Chrysostom

Peter was to be entrusted with the keys of the Church, or rather, he was entrusted with the keys of heaven; to him would be committed the whole people of God. The Lord told him: *Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* Now Peter was inclined to be severe, so if he had also been impeccable what forbearance would he have shown toward those he instructed? His falling into sin was thus a providential grace to teach him from experience to deal kindly with others.

Just think who it was whom God permitted to fall into sin – Peter himself, the head of the apostles, the firm foundation, the unbreakable rock, the most important member of the Church, the safe harbor, the strong tower; Peter, who had said to Christ, *Even if I have to die with you I will never deny you;* Peter, who by divine revelation had confessed the truth: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

The gospel relates that on the night that Christ was betrayed Peter went indoors and was standing by the fire warming himself when a girl accosted him: *You too were with that man yesterday,* she said. But Peter answered: *I do not know the man.*

Just now you said: *Even if I have to die with you,* and now you deny him and say: *I do not know the man.* Oh Peter, is this what you promised? You were not tortured or scourged; at the words of a mere slip of a girl you took refuge in denial!

Again the girl said to him: *You too were with that man yesterday.* Again he answered: *I have no idea what man you mean.*

Who was it that spoke to you, causing you to make this denial? Not some important person but a woman, a doorkeeper, an outcast, a slave, someone of no account whatever. She spoke to you and you answered with a denial. What a strange thing – a girl, a prostitute, accosted Peter himself and disturbed his faith! Peter the pillar, the rampart, could not bear the threat of a girl! She had but to speak and the pillar swayed, the rampart itself was shaken.

A third time she repeated: *You too were with that man yesterday,* but a third time he denied it. Finally Jesus looked at him, reminding him of his previous assertion. Peter understood, repented of his sin, and began to weep. Mercifully, however, Jesus forgave him his sin, because he knew that Peter, being a man, was subject to human frailty.

Now as I said before, the reason God's plan permitted Peter to sin was because he was to be entrusted with the whole people of God, and sinlessness added to his severity might have made him unforgiving toward his brothers and sisters. He fell into sins so that remembering his own fault and the Lord's forgiveness, he also might forgive others out of love for them. This was God's providential dispensation. He to whom the Church was to be entrusted, he, the pillar of the churches, the harbor of faith, was allowed to sin, so that having been forgiven himself he would be merciful to others.

Monday, August 28

ST AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

From Pope Benedict XVI's General Audience on January 8, 2008

In Milan, Augustine acquired the habit of listening, at first for the purpose of enriching his rhetorical baggage, to the eloquent preaching of Bishop Ambrose, who had been a representative of the Emperor for Northern Italy. The African rhetorician was fascinated by the words of the great Milanese Prelate; and not only by his rhetoric. It was above all the content that increasingly touched Augustine's heart. The great difficulty with the Old Testament, because of its lack of rhetorical beauty and lofty philosophy was resolved in St Ambrose's preaching through his typological interpretation of the Old Testament: Augustine realized that the whole of the Old Testament was a journey toward Jesus Christ. Thus, he found the key to understanding the beauty and even the philosophical depth of the Old Testament and grasped the whole unity of the mystery of Christ in history, as well as the synthesis between philosophy, rationality and faith in the Logos, in Christ, the Eternal Word who was made flesh.

Thus, Augustine followed his reading of the philosophers' writings by reading Scripture anew, especially the Pauline Letters. His conversion to Christianity on August 15, 386 therefore came at the end of a long and tormented inner journey and the African moved to the countryside, north of Milan by Lake Como, with his mother Monica, his son Adeodatus and a small group of friends, to prepare himself for Baptism. So it was that at the age of 32 Augustine was baptized by Ambrose in the Cathedral of Milan on April 24, 387, during the Easter Vigil.

After his Baptism, Augustine decided to return to Africa with his friends, with the idea of living a community life of the monastic kind at the service of God. However, while awaiting their departure in Ostia, his mother fell ill unexpectedly and died shortly afterwards, breaking her son's heart. Having returned to his homeland at last, the convert settled in Hippo for the very purpose of founding a monastery. In this city on the African coast he was ordained a priest in 391, despite his reticence, and with a few companions began the monastic life which had long been in his mind, dividing his time between prayer, study and preaching. All he wanted was to be at the service of the truth. He did not feel he had a vocation to pastoral life but realized later that God was calling him to be a pastor among others and thus to offer people the gift of the truth. He was ordained a Bishop in Hippo four years later, in 395. Augustine continued to deepen his study of Scripture and of the texts of the Christian tradition and was an exemplary Bishop in his tireless pastoral commitment: he preached several times a week to his faithful, supported the poor and orphans, supervised the formation of the clergy and the organization of men's and women's monasteries. In short, the former rhetorician asserted himself as one of the most important exponents of Christianity of that time. He was very active in the government of his Diocese, with remarkable, even civil, implications, in the more than 35 years of his Episcopate, and the Bishop of Hippo actually exercised a vast influence in his guidance of the Catholic Church in Roman Africa and, more generally, in the Christianity of his time, coping with religious tendencies and tenacious, disruptive heresies such as Manichaeism, Donatism and Pelagianism, which endangered the Christian faith in the one God, rich in mercy.

And Augustine entrusted himself to God every day until the very end of his life: smitten by fever, while for almost three months his Hippo was being besieged by vandal invaders, the Bishop, his friend Possidius recounts in his *Vita Augustini*, asked that the penitential psalms be transcribed in large characters, "and that the sheets be attached to the wall, so that while he was bedridden during his illness he could see and read them and he shed constant hot tears." This is how Augustine spent the last days of his life. He died on August 28, 430, when he was not yet 76.

Tuesday, August 29

PASSION OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

From a homily of Pope Francis in 2019

The Memorial of the Passion of Saint John the Baptist complements the Solemnity of his birth, celebrated on June 24. John is the cousin of Jesus. He was conceived when his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, were elderly. Both his parents were descendants of priestly families. John's birth took place about six months prior to that of Christ, and coincides with the Gospel episode of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth. The liturgical celebration of his martyrdom, which occurred between 31 and 32, has ancient origins.

A woman played the primary role in his martyrdom. Herodias, the wife of Herod Antipas, was the former wife of his half-brother. John was arrested because he had denounced her illegal marriage. During the celebration of Herod's birthday, Herodias's daughter, Salome, performed a dance in honor of the king who remained enchanted and told her she could ask him for anything she wanted, even to half of his kingdom. After consulting her mother, Salome asked for the head of John the Baptist. Herod did not want to do it, but could not refuse: he had, after all, made a promise.

There are four characters: King Herod "corrupt and indecisive"; Herodias, the wife of the king's brother who "knew only how to hate"; Salome, "the vain ballerina", and the "prophet, decapitated and alone in his cell".

The king "believed John the Baptist was a prophet". Initially, he protected John and "liked to listen" to him. But he kept him in prison. He was indecisive because John had accused him of the sin of adultery. Herod "heard God's voice" in the prophet, "telling him to 'change your life'. But he did not succeed in doing that. The king was corrupt. It is difficult to get out of corruption". His corruption led him to attempt to strike a "diplomatic balance" between his own life, which was not only adulterous, but also "filled with many injustices that he kept going ahead with". He was also aware of the "holiness of the prophet that was before him". But he did not succeed in untying the knot.

The second character is Herodias, the wife of the king's brother who was put to death by Herod in order to have her. The Gospel says she "hated" John" because he spoke with clarity. "We know that hatred is capable of anything", Pope Francis commented. Indeed, "hatred is a great power. Hatred is the breath of Satan. Think about it: he does not know how to love, he cannot love. His 'love' is 'hatred'. And this woman possessed the satanic spirit of hatred" that destroys.

Finally, the third character, the daughter of Herodias, Salome, the wonderful dancer, "who so pleased the guests and the king". In his enthusiasm, Herod promised the girl, "I will give you everything". "He uses the same words that Satan used to tempt Jesus. 'If you adore me, all this is yours'." But Herod could not have known.

"Satan is behind all these characters. He sows hatred in the woman, vanity in the young woman and corruption in the king", the Pope concluded. "John, the greatest man born of a woman died alone in a cell because of the whim of a vain dancer, the hatred of a diabolical woman and the corruption of an indecisive king. The Baptist dies a martyr. Not a martyr of the faith, because he was not asked to renounce it. He is a martyr of truth. He is a martyr who allowed himself to diminish so as to leave his place to the Messiah. But John knew he had to be annihilated: "He must increase, I, instead, decrease". And, added Pope Francis, "he decreased to the point of death. John had pointed Jesus out to His first disciples, indicating that He was the Light of the world. He, instead, gave his life little by little, to the point of being extinguished in the darkness of a prison cell."

Wednesday, August 30

CONCERNING FOUR MOUNTAINS TO BE ASCENDED

From St Bernard – Sermon 61

Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord? Christ indeed bodily ascended one time above the height of heaven, but he now also ascends spiritually every day in the hearts of the elect. If therefore we wish to ascend with him, then we must ascend into the mountains of virtue from the valleys of vices.

There are, however, twin species of these vices. For there are some that hurt us, others that hurt our neighbors. The first are called scandals; the second are called crimes. And all these are referred to as a valley of tears, because everyone must lament a life of sins with a river of tears.

From the valley of scandals one ascends to the mountain of chastity by a threefold self-control: control of one's members, of one's senses, of one's thoughts. In the first, action is restrained by self-control. In the second, looking is avoided. In the third, feeling is curtailed.

Likewise, from the valley of crimes one ascends into the mountain of innocence. Here a ladder is erected: *See that you not do to another what you would not have done to yourself.* And three steps of fear are placed on the ladder: of those who suffer, of course, lest they pay back in retaliation – either of superior power, lest they inflict revenge, or of the internal Judge, *who renders to every person according to his works.* When, however, people have ascended to this mountain, they are already just and life [by faith], but it is necessary for them, according to the apostle, to suffer persecution.

And so one must flee from the mountain of innocence to the mountain of patience, and here also is erected a ladder of three steps. The first step is suffering of the Lord; second is the courage of martyrs; third is the importance of the reward. These steps can sensibly be called steps of shame, just as they were [called steps] of innocence and of fear.

And note that this mountain of patience, according to these steps, is steep, thorny, and arid. It is steep on account of the difficulty of imitating the Lord's passion. It is thorny on account of barbs of temptations, which happen in many ways: by the loss of property, by verbal insults, by bodily pains, by all sufferings that test the holy martyrs. It is arid on account of the payment of the rewards; they are not [paid] in this world, but entirely hoped for in the future.

After this mountain remains another mountain to be ascended, indeed the mountain of mountains. When one has arrived at this mountain, then God already rests in that person. This it is written, *His place was made in peace.* But in this mountain of peace the ladder of charity is erected; thus the Lord says: *Whatever you would have other people do to you, do you also to them.* We do indeed want to be rewarded, we want to be pardoned, we want gifts to be freely given.

Thursday, August 31

WE HAVE STRAYED BUT CAN RETURN

From Esther De Waal in *The Way of Simplicity: The Cistercian Tradition*

The first step in the Cistercian return to God, this God who is love, is for the monk to know himself. The root idea is announced by Bernard by an appeal to the Song of Songs 1:7: to know whence we came, where we stand, where we go is to know what we were, what we are, and what we are to be – to know ourselves. This is the true science and one that the Cistercian needs if he wants to walk in the way of love. From the outset of his teaching, therefore, Bernard turns aside from speculative philosophy to go more deeply into this interior study – which is of course a long tradition formed amongst the Greeks and continued by the Church Fathers, above all by Augustine. For how can we strip away these layers which have covered the divine likeness and overlaid our true greatness until we recognize them, until we know ourselves for what we have become?

So we are faced with this task: the need to know our own selves as we set out to make our way back to God. We have to understand how our human nature works, and what is natural to a human being made in the image and likeness of that triune God. This is perhaps the most significant and inescapable of human undertakings. But it is also one that is likely to be both hard and long, probably a lifetime's work, for it means uncovering layer after layer of our innermost selves. If we have to face the truth about ourselves we have to recognize the extent of our own duplicity, and to overcome the temptation to make excuses for ourselves. If, however, we are to seek the God of love who is seeking us it is the one task that we must take seriously, and this is where I have found myself so greatly helped by the twelfth-century Cistercians, for whom the question held such a particular fascination.

Bernard's treatment of the fall can be summed up: man lost his likeness to his creator and exemplar but retained the image, ingrained in and inseparable from the very essence of his soul. His teaching on this theme of image and likeness is above all a spiritual anthropology of return to God. There is human tragedy: the constant of self-contradiction generated in us by the confrontation between the essential image of God and the lost likeness, or the disfigurement by sin. But there is this promise, the possibility of regaining the wholeness of the image and likeness in which we were originally created. In the first chapter of Genesis we are told that God made each one of us in his own image and likeness. But through sin, through the fall, we lost that likeness. The sin was the sin of pride, to think that human beings could become gods by natural right, not by grace. This image was not destroyed; but remains, hidden in the soul, however disfigured.

Although we have retained the image we are not of course the Image itself, for only Christ is that; we are a copy of the Image. Here is the basis of the possibility of recovery. We are *capax Dei*, capable of God, capable of union with him. The image in us is indestructible. At one point Bernard used the marvelous phrase, calling the image 'this manifest sign of the divine generosity.' Here is a perpetual reminder from the Word that we have strayed but can return. So if we now live with disequilibrium we also live with the possibility, through conversion, of making a return.

The divine image which we have retained consists of three things: our freedom, that is to say our inborn freedom of will, which is where we are most like God; our natural simplicity, and our natural immortality. The greatness of the human being consists not merely in our own simplicity but in our ability to rise to participation in the infinitely perfect simplicity of the Word.

Friday, September 1

WHAT IS A “FIRST FRIDAY”?

From Fr. Francis Hoffman at *Simply Catholic*

A “First Friday” is the first Friday of the month and is often marked by special devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus since Jesus died for us and won our salvation on a Friday. Every Friday of the year, and not only the Fridays in Lent, is a special day of penance as stipulated in the Code of Canon Law: “The penitential days and times in the universal Church are every Friday of the whole year and the season of Lent” (Canon 1250).

St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1647-1690) reported visions of Jesus Christ directing her to promote devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus on nine consecutive First Fridays in reparation for sins and in order to show love to Jesus. In return for this act of devotion, which usually includes Mass, Communion, confession and even an hour of Eucharistic Adoration on the eve of the first Friday of the month, our blessed Savior reputedly promised St. Margaret Mary the following blessings:

“In the excess of the mercy of my Heart, I promise you that my all powerful love will grant to all those who will receive Communion on the First Fridays, for nine consecutive months, the grace of final repentance: they will not die in my displeasure, nor without receiving the sacraments; and my Heart will be their secure refuge in that last hour.”

The devotion is officially sanctioned, but it was not so at first. In fact, St. Margaret Mary met with resistance and incredulity from the start in her own religious community, and not until 75 years after her death was the First Friday devotion to the Sacred Heart officially recognized. Almost 240 years after her death, Pope Pius XI stated that Jesus had appeared to St. Margaret Mary in his encyclical *Miserentissimus Redemptor* (1928), fully eight years after she was formally canonized a saint by Pope Benedict XV.

Saturday, September 2

MARY HAS CHOSEN THE BETTER PART

From Gueric of Igny – Sermon 50: 1-2

Mary has chosen the best part. This was said of Mary, the sister or Martha, but it was realized today (the Feast of the Assumption) with greater fullness and holiness in Mary, Mother of the Lord. For today, the blessed virgin Mary chose the best part; or rather she entered today into unending possession of what she had chosen long before: to keep close to the Lord, to be inseparable from him, and to enjoy God's Word for all eternity. Neither is it strange or inappropriate if what was said of the one Mary is transferred to the other; since the aptness of the application is borne out by similarity not only in name but also in deed. The one welcomed the Lord to the shelter of her roof, the other to the bridal chamber of her womb. "And he who created me," we read, "rested in my tent." The one sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his word; the other, carefully tending his humanity, kept all the words which concerned him, pondering them in her heart.

But also when Jesus was going round towns and villages preaching the Gospel Mary was his inseparable companion, clinging to his footsteps and hanging upon his words as he taught, so much so that neither the storm of persecution nor dread of punishment could deter her from following her Son and Master. By the Lord's cross, there stood Mary, his Mother. Truly a Mother, who did not abandon her Son even in the face of death. How could she be frightened of death, when her love was as strong as death, or rather stronger than death? Truly she stood by Jesus' cross, when at the same time the pain of the cross crucified her mind as manifold a sword pierced her own soul as she beheld the body of her Son pierced with wounds. Rightly therefore was she recognized as his Mother there and by his care entrusted to a suitable protector, in which both the mother's unalloyed love for her Son and the Son's kindness toward his Mother were proved to the utmost.

On other occasions he seemed as it were to ignore his Mother, whether at the wedding feast when she asked for a miracle and he answered, "Nay, woman, why dost thou trouble me with that?" or in the midst of his preaching the Gospel when someone told him: "Behold your Mother and your brethren are standing outside, asking for you," and he answered: "Who is my mother?" But he had to give such an answer to his Mother when she asked for a miracle in order to show that miracles came to him not from his Mother but from another source. And he could give no better answer to the man who interrupted the words of the Gospel by announcing his relatives than to demonstrate that spiritual things must come before those of the flesh. It was as if, in the same way as before, he were to say to his relatives seeking him while he was busy with the work of the Gospel: "Why do you seek me? Do you not know that I must concern myself with my Father's business?"

It could not be that he spurned his Mother, he who was so careful to lay down the law that parents should be honored. It could not be that on earth he showed disgust for his Mother when he had desired her beauty from heaven. Rather he was setting charity in order in us both by his words and by his example teaching us to put before our affection for carnal attachments not only the love of God but also the love of those who do God's will.

For the affection which is demanded from the hearts of all of us whom the supreme Father has deigned to adopt is one which will make us say in faith together with his Only-begotten: "Whoever does the will of my Father who is in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother." Indeed those words belong to God's sons; neither does the Spirit himself bear any more faithful witness to our spirit that we are God's sons than that this utterance of God's Only-begotten should sound from our hearts.