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A Reflection taken from "My Catholic Faith & I" website

Sunday

OUR LIFE IS TO BE SHAPED BY CHRIST'S PRESENCE

A Reflection from St. Cyril's Commentary on John ch. 2

"When John saw Jesus coming toward him he said: Behold the Lamb of God; he takes away the sin of the world." Notice that he doesn't call us to "prepare" for Christ. That would be out of place because the one we were preparing for is present; we see him with our own eyes. This fact calls for an explanation and of a different type than when we were preparing.

What we need is an explanation of the one who is present, of why he has come down from Heaven to us and what we are to do because he is here. In effect, that is what John's words begin. *"Behold, the Lamb of God!"* This reminds us of Isaiah's words: *"He was like a sheep being led to the slaughter; he was like a lamb before his shearer; he didn't open his mouth."* He came to save. In the past, the Law of Moses was the instrument of salvation but it was only a foreshadowing because it was partial in not reaching out to embrace the entire world. Its mercy was extended only to Israel. But now the "true" victim lamb, one without blemish, has been led to the slaughter. What was partially prefigured is revealed to all and banishes sin from the entire world.

Think of what this means. Christ is to overthrow the one who destroyed the world; he has abolished death by dying for the entire human race; he has released us from a curse. The words *"Dust you are and to dust you shall return"* were just a statement of fact but it was made a curse by our sin. The sin was following our own will about what for us will be good or bad and not God's will. It destroyed our right relationship with God. So Christ has come as a Second Adam, not merely of earth but of Heaven. He delivers us from the death our sin brought upon us and from the corruptibility that goes with mere dust. He persuades us to be reconciled to God's word and so to God, and so secures eternal life for us.

If that is to be true in fact and for us we have to live upright lives. That is the path to the Kingdom of Heaven. One Lamb died for all of us. He died to do the Father's will when he said it would be good for him to die on the cross. He died to bring us all into reconciled harmony with God's will for us. We are now subject to God. Christ died for us "that all might live no longer for themselves but for him who died and was raised to life for them". That is who we are and how we are to accept Christ.

Our many sins made us subject to death and corruption. The Heavenly Father gave his Son as our redemption, one given for all, since all are to be in him and he is greater than all others. The one died so that all might live in Him. Death, in effect, swallowed the Lamb of God but in forcing death to disgorge him he forced it to disgorge us all with him. That is why it is so important for us to be one in and with Christ. Death was destroyed because sin was destroyed and it had been brought into being by sin.

Sin is being destroyed in us as we do the Heavenly Father's will even to the point of death. Death is, as it were, the branch of sin, which is the root. When the root is torn up the branch can't survive. *"O death, where is your victory! O Grave, where is your sting?"* As the psalmist says, *"all wickedness shall hold its tongue!"* From now on there will be no one to denounce sinners for their weakness. God is the one who acquits us! Sin caused a curse to be made of our origin in dust but "Christ has redeemed us from the curse". He took upon himself its consequence and did it for our sake. For us, there is no more curse where there is no more sin. Life by the Heavenly Father's word as Christ lived by it. He is saving us.

Monday

LIVING AS A CHILD OF OBEDIENCE

A Reflection adapted from a homily by Sr. Phyllis Hunhoff OSB

From St. Gregory the Great's writings about the life of St. Benedict we learn that the noble family of Rome gave boys to his monastery to be educated and learn to live as monks. That is how Maur and Placid came to Benedict. They regarded him as a father and as one who taught them God's word and will and the virtue of obedience. Four of the major miracles attributed to Benedict involved one of the two boys. The stories show how they trusted and relied upon him when things got difficult and how they believed that, as the Holy Rule says, Benedict was seen as another Christ for the community and its members.

When Benedict drove out a demon who was preventing a monk from praying peacefully Maur first spent two full days praying for the monk. When Benedict recovered the metal part of a bushwacker that a monk had lost in the nearby lake, it was Maur who brought the problem to Benedict's attention. When Benedict prayed that God would create a spring on a hillside where a small monastery was located, Placid prayed with him all night long for this miracle. When Maur ran on water to save Placid from drowning he was so taken up with obeying Benedict that he paid no attention to the fact that he wasn't running on dry land. Both he and Placid attributed what happened to Benedict's prayer.

The families who literally gave Maur and Placid to the monastery, did this because they believed the boys would learn God's word there. The boys weren't needed by their families to produce a coming generation and might cause their father's inheritance to be divided in a way that could injure the family. They weren't "needed" in a worldly sense and so were "given to God". Clearly, Benedict's monasteries had a very good reputation and their monks were seen as living an exemplary Christian life. What better gift to give partly-unwanted children?

The reputation was confirmed by the kind of persons Maur and Placid became—abbots themselves and finally saints. They learned to love and rejoice in a life given to God. They became joyful "sons of obedience", not just to Benedict but to God. A monastery today which had a reputation for forming holy and saintly members with this character would be as attractive now as it was in Benedict's time. This reputation brought it about that the monks became educators, not in the academic sense but in the way, a Christian family or community ideally wants to form its members. Those who came to Benedict really became holy and attractive persons who knew how to love one another, and all, in Christ. This is what they passed on to the monks of the monasteries they themselves came to govern. We don't know how people became aware of the quality of the Christian lives led by Benedict's monks, and so decided to give children to God by entrusting them to Benedict's way of monastic life, as we see it in his Rule for Monks. Those who live for God surrender their future as well as themselves to God and allow him to draw others to learn from them and follow their examples. That is what we celebrate as we remember Sts. Maur and Placid, precisely as disciples of St. Benedict.

Tuesday

SAINT AND SINNER

From the Morning Meditation by Pope Francis on Tuesday, 19 January 2016

Despite their sins, every man and woman has been chosen to be a saint. This message of comfort and hope was offered by Pope Francis, inspired by passages from the Book of Samuel regarding the events in the life of King David, the “holy King David”.

In the First Reading, after seeing that the Lord had “rejected Saul because he had a closed heart”, and had considered another king because of the people’s failure to obey him, the First Book of Samuel (16:1-13) presents the account of how King David “was chosen”. God says to Samuel: “How long will you grieve over Saul, seeing I have rejected him? Let us go and seek another. Fill your horn with oil, and go”. The Prophet tries to resist his fear of Saul’s vengeance, but the Lord encourages him to be “astute” and to feign a simple act of worship, a sacrifice. The Lord says to him: “Take a heifer and go”.

Here begins the story, “Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and the Lord chose none of them”. Then, Samuel asks Jesse if he has presented all his sons. Jesse reveals that, in reality, “there is one, the youngest, who hasn’t been counted, who is now tending the flock”. Then, after Samuel sends for the boy, the Lord says to Samuel: “Arise, anoint him”. Even though he was “the youngest, the one who didn’t count in his father’s eyes”, it was “not because the father didn’t love him”, but because he thought: “Why would God choose this boy?”. He did not consider that “man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart”. Thus, “Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward”. David’s whole life “was the life of a man anointed by the Lord, chosen by the Lord”.

“So, did the Lord make him a saint? No. King David is the holy King David, this is true, but holy after a long life”. In fact he reaches a venerable age, but his life was “marked by many sins”. David was “a saint and a sinner”. He was “a man who was able to unite the kingdom, to bring forward the people of Israel” but was also a man who “had his temptations” and who committed sins. Actually, David “was also an assassin” who, “in order to cover up his lust, the sin of adultery”, ordered a man killed. David himself did this. So one would ask: “The holy King David killed?”. It’s true, but it’s also true that when God sent the prophet Nathan to “show this reality” to David who “was unaware of the violence he had ordered”, David “acknowledged, ‘I have sinned’, and asked forgiveness”.

This is how King David’s life “played out”, full of light and shadows. He suffered “his son’s betrayal in the flesh, but he never used God to win his own cause”.

As he outlined the figure of the saint and sinner, Francis recalled that in the “very difficult time of war”, when he had to “flee Jerusalem”, David had the strength to send the ark back: “No, Lord, let it stay there; I shall not use the Lord in my defense”. And again, when David encountered the man who called him a “man of blood” he stopped one of his own men who wanted to kill the man who insulted him, saying: “If he curses me it is because the Lord bid him to curse me”. In fact, “in his heart David felt: ‘I deserve it’, because he ordered it. ‘Let him alone. It may be that the Lord will look compassion upon my humiliation and will forgive me of more”. In his life David then knew “victory” and the great “magnanimity” that led him not to kill Saul even though he could. In sum, the Pontiff said, “Is this the holy King David? Yes, the saint, chosen by the Lord, chosen by the People of God” was also a “great sinner, but a penitent sinner”. Francis then commented: “This man’s life moves me and makes me think about our own”. In fact, “we were all chosen by the Lord in Baptism, to be among his people, to be saints”. All of us “have been consecrated by the Lord, in this journey of holiness”, yet, the Pope concluded, reading the history of this man — a “journey that he began as a boy and continued until he was an old man” — who did many good things and other things not so good. “I have come to think that in the Christian journey”, in the journey that the Lord calls us to make, “there are no saints without a past, nor sinners without a future”.

Wednesday

ST. ANTHONY'S CHARGE TO HIS COMPANIONS

A Reflection from The Life of Anthony by St. Athanasius

When Anthony grew very old he withdrew to the desert, and because of his great age, two companions went with him to assist him. When he felt the time of his departure was near he addressed this exhortation to them.

"I am going the way of my fathers, as Scripture says. I see myself called by the Lord. And you should be on your guard and work not to bring to nothing the asceticism you have practiced for so long. Make it your endeavor to keep up your enthusiasm as though you were only now beginning. You know the demons and their designs. You know how fierce these demons are and yet how powerless. Do not be afraid of them.

"Let Christ be your life's breath. Place your confidence in Christ. Live as if dying daily, taking heed for yourselves and remembering the counsel you have heard from me. Let there be no communion whatever between you and the schismatics, and none at all with the heretical Arians. You know how I myself have kept away from them. They attack Christ by their heresy.

"Show your eagerness to give your allegiance, first to the Lord and then to his saints. Then, after your death, they will receive you into everlasting dwellings as familiar friends of God. Give your thoughts to these things; make them your purpose; if you have any care for me and think of me as a father, don't allow anyone to take my body in Egypt, lest they should turn it into relics and keep it in their houses. This was a reason for going to the mountain and coming here.

"You know how I have always put those who practice such deeds to shame. You know I have charged them to stop this practice. You yourself are to carry out the rites of my funeral and are to bury my body in the earth. Let what I have said to you be respected by telling no one of the place where I am buried.

"At the resurrection of the dead, I shall receive back my body from the Savior and it will then be incorruptible. You may distribute my few garments to bishop Athanasius and bishop Serapion. Keep my hair shirt for yourselves. God bless you. Anthony is going and is with you no more." More important, God is always with you.

Thursday

From the ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS

At the Plenary of the Pontifical Council For Promoting Christian Unity, 6 May 2022

A first significant ecumenical result of the pandemic was the renewed awareness of belonging to one Christian family, an awareness rooted in the experience of sharing the same fragility and of being able to trust only in the help that comes from God. Paradoxically, the pandemic, which forced us to keep a distance from each other, has made us understand how close to each other we really are, and how responsible we are for one other. It is fundamental to continue to cultivate this awareness, and to give rise to initiatives that make explicit and nurture this spirit of fraternity. And regarding this issue, I would like to emphasize that today, for a Christian, it is not possible or feasible to go about alone with one's own denomination. Either we go together, all the fraternal denominations, or we do not go ahead at all. The awareness of ecumenism today is such that one cannot think of journeying on the path of faith without the company of brothers and sisters from other Churches or ecclesial communities. And this is a great thing. Never alone. We cannot do it. Indeed, it is easy to forget this profound truth. When it happens to Christian communities, it exposes us to the serious risk of the presumption of self-sufficiency and self-referentiality, which are grave obstacles to ecumenism. And we see this. In some countries, there are certain egocentric revivals — so to speak — of some Christian communities that either go backwards, or cannot advance. Today, either we all walk together or we do not walk. This awareness is a truth and a grace from God.

Even before the healthcare emergency had come to an end, the entire world found itself facing another tragic challenge: the war currently underway in Ukraine. Since the end of the Second World War there has never been any lack of regional wars, many of them! Think of Rwanda, for example, 30 years ago, to mention just one; but think of Myanmar, let's think... But since they are far away, we do not see them, whereas this one is close by and it makes us react. So much so that I have often spoken about a piecemeal third world war, scattered everywhere. However, this war, cruel and senseless like every war, has a greater dimension and threatens the entire world, and cannot but question the conscience of every Christian and every Church. We must ask ourselves: what have Churches done, and what can they do, to contribute to "the development of a global community of fraternity based on the practice of social friendship on the part of peoples and nations" (Encyclical Letter *Fratelli tutti*, 154)? It is a question we must think about together.

In the last century, the awareness that the scandal of the division of Christians had historical relevance in generating the evil that poisoned the world with grief and injustice, had moved communities of believers, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to desire the unity for which the Lord prayed and gave his life. Today, faced with the barbarism of war, this longing for unity must once again be nurtured. Ignoring the divisions among Christians, out of habit or resignation, means tolerating that contamination of hearts that creates fertile ground for conflicts. The proclamation of the Gospel of peace, that Gospel that disarms hearts even before armies, will be more credible only if it is announced by Christians who are finally reconciled in Jesus, Prince of Peace; Christians inspired by his message of universal love and fraternity, which transcends the boundaries of their own community and nation. Let us return to what I said: today, either we walk together or we stand still. We cannot walk alone. But not because it is modern, no: because the Holy Spirit has inspired this sense of ecumenism and brotherhood.

Friday

THE TWELVE PILLARS

From the Morning Meditation by Pope Francis on Friday, 22 January 2016

“There is a word, in this passage of today's Gospel (Mark 3:13-19), which draws our attention: Jesus ‘appointed’”. This word “appears twice”. Mark writes: “He appointed twelve, whom he also named Apostles”. And then again Mark repeats: “‘He appointed the twelve’, and he named them, one after another”. Hence, “from among the people who followed him, Jesus called to him those that he wanted. There is a choice: Jesus chose those he wanted”. And, of course, “he appointed the twelve, whom we call Apostles”. Indeed, “there were others: there were disciples”, and on one occasion “the Gospel speaks of 72”.

The “twelve were appointed ‘that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach and have authority to drive out demons’”, the Pope explained. “It is the most important group that Jesus chose, so ‘that they might be with him’, closer, and that ‘he might send them forth to preach’ the Gospel” and “to have the authority to drive out demons.” These very “twelve are the first bishops, the first group of bishops”.

These twelve “elected ones were conscious of the importance of this election, such that after Jesus was assumed into heaven, Peter spoke to the others and explained to them that, in light of Judas’ betrayal, something had to be done”. Thus, those who had been with Jesus, from the Baptism of John until the ascension, chose “a witness ‘with us’ — Peter says — to the Resurrection”. This is how, the Pope continued, “Judas’ place is filled, it is taken by Matthias: Matthias was elected”.

Then, “the liturgy of the Church”, referring to “certain expressions of Paul”, calls the twelve “the pillars of the Church”. Yes, the Pontiff affirmed, “The Apostles are the pillars of the Church. And the bishops are the pillars of the Church. The election of Matthias was the Church’s first episcopal ordination”.

“Today I would like to say a few words about bishops. We bishops have the responsibility of being witnesses: witnesses that the Lord Jesus lives, that the Lord Jesus is risen, that the Lord Jesus walks with us, that the Lord Jesus saves us, that the Lord Jesus gave his life for us, that the Lord Jesus is our hope, that the Lord Jesus always welcomes us and forgives us”. This is “the witness”. As a result, “our life must be this: a witness, a true witness to the Resurrection of Christ”.

When Jesus, as Mark tells us, makes “this choice” of the twelve, he has two reasons. First of all “that they might be with him”. This is why “the bishop is obliged to be with Jesus”. Yes, “it is a bishop’s first duty: to be with Jesus”. It is also true “at that point, in the early times, when the problem arose that the orphans and widows were not well looked after, the bishops — these twelve — gathered and pondered what to do”. And “they introduced the figure of the deacon, saying: ‘let the deacons look after the orphans and the widows’”. Meanwhile, Peter says that the twelve have “two tasks: praying and proclaiming the Gospel”.

“The bishop’s first task is to be with Jesus in prayer and not making pastoral plans. The second task is being a witness, that is, preaching: preaching the salvation that the Lord Jesus brought us”.

The two tasks are not easy, but “it is precisely these two tasks that strengthen the pillars of the Church”. In fact, “should these pillars weaken, because the bishop doesn’t pray or he prays very little, or forgets to pray; or because the bishop does not proclaim the Gospel, occupying himself with other things, the Church also weakens; she suffers. The People of God suffer”. This happens “because the pillars are weak”.

For this reason, “I would like to encourage you today to pray for us bishops: because we too are sinners, we too have weaknesses, we too run the risk Judas had: he too was chosen as a pillar”. Yes, the Pope continued, “we too run the risk of not praying, of doing something other than proclaiming the Gospel and driving out demons”. This is why the Pope encouraged prayer “that the bishops might be what Jesus wanted and that we all might bear witness to the Resurrection of Jesus”.

Saturday

SERVING GOD IN HIS PEOPLE

A Reflection taken from “My Catholic Faith & I” website

Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi was the second son of a father obsessed with getting his family out of poverty. As part of this effort, he sent Michael to a mission school. There he learned about Jesus and decided to be baptized. He used this education to become a teacher and worked his way up to being head of a local school. At this point, he decided he wanted to be a priest, which his father opposed for economic reasons, and which required twelve years of schooling under exceedingly strict discipline. Black seminarians were mistrusted because their cultures were seen as pagan and those who lived them were mistrusted. Nevertheless, he managed to stay in the seminary and was ordained in 1937.

He thought for himself and was totally dedicated to what he saw as right. Most priests in his area were Irish missionaries who insisted on living in the same comfort they would have at home. Thus, it was expensive for people to have a priest and support his lifestyle. Michael lived at the poverty level of his people and learned how to help them, for instance, build better houses. He identified with his people, shared their poverty, and visited his large parish on foot or riding a bicycle, and worked to help them live better and for these reasons was a very successful pastor. He refused to follow those who became priests or nuns in order to live more comfortably. His lifestyle amazed and even shocked other priests and many Catholics. He, however, went on to become a community organizer and promoter of development. He worked very hard to help the poor and needy.

He was widely known for opposing cultural practices that abused women or used them sexually and taught women parishioners to fight back against those mistreating or trying to rape them. He physically helped one parishoner fight off such an attack and then persuaded her to take the attackers to court. She won the case and this came to be considered a milestone in the Nigerian struggle for women’s rights. He opposed traditional beliefs in witchcraft—his own mother had been accused and killed as a witch. On the other hand, he was considered a perfectionist and this caused resentment.

At the beginning of the 1950s Fr. Michael felt drawn to monastic life and his bishop helped him join a British Trappist monastery with the hope that he would return and found such a monastery in Nigeria. Even in this, he was seeking to serve God’s people. He did succeed in making solemn vows, though he found the system in the novitiate psychologically painful in a way that led him to reject his previous perfectionism. He was still a person who went his own way—for example, he didn’t memorize the psalms as he was asked to do, but made up words for himself as he sang quietly in the choir. In the end, he wasn’t able to return to Nigeria due to serious illness. He bore this with great fortitude. One of his doctors sought help in working with him: “This man”, he said, “must be in terrific pain but will only admit that he has “a little” pain.” He died in 1964 and was beatified in 1998. He died as a monk at Mt. St. Bernard Monastery.