

FIFTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

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5 **THE GIFT OF ONE'S SELF**
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6 **ST. PAUL MIKI & COMPANIONS**
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7 **THE LIGHT SHINING ON US FROM OUR DEPARTED**
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 A Reflection in the form of a traditional prayer

Sunday

ILLNESS IS PART OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

The Angelus Message of Pope BENEDICT XVI on Sunday, 8 February 2009

The Gospel today (cf. Mk 1: 29-39) in close continuity with last Sunday's presents to us Jesus who, after preaching on the Sabbath in the synagogue of Capernaum, heals many sick people, beginning with Simon's mother-in-law. Upon entering Simon's house, he finds her lying in bed with a fever and, by taking her hand, immediately heals her and has her get up. After sunset, he heals a multitude of people afflicted with ailments of every kind. The experience of healing the sick occupied a large part of Christ's public mission and invites us once again to reflect on the meaning and value of illness, in every human situation. This opportunity is also offered to us by the World Day of the Sick which we shall be celebrating (on) 11 February, the liturgical Memorial of Our Lady of Lourdes.

Despite the fact that illness is part of human experience, we do not succeed in becoming accustomed to it, not only because it is sometimes truly burdensome and grave, but also essentially because we are made for life, for a full life. Our "internal instinct" rightly makes us think of God as fullness of life indeed, as eternal and perfect Life. When we are tried by evil and our prayers seem to be in vain, then doubt besets us and we ask ourselves in anguish: what is God's will? We find the answer to this very question in the Gospel. For example, in today's passage we read that Jesus "healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons" (Mk 1: 34); in another passage from St Matthew, it says that Jesus "went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people" (Mt 4: 23). Jesus leaves no room for doubt: God whose Face he himself revealed is the God of life, who frees us from every evil. The signs of his power of love are the healings he performed. He thus shows that the Kingdom of God is close at hand by restoring men and women to their full spiritual and physical integrity. I maintain that these cures are signs: they are not complete in themselves but guide us towards Christ's message, they guide us towards God and make us understand that man's truest and deepest illness is the absence of God, who is the source of truth and love. Only reconciliation with God can give us true healing, true life, because a life without love and without truth would not be life. The Kingdom of God is precisely the presence of truth and love and thus is healing in the depths of our being. One therefore understands why his preaching and the cures he works always go together: in fact, they form one message of hope and salvation.

Thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit, Jesus' work is extended in the Church's mission. Through the sacraments, it is Christ who communicates his life to multitudes of brothers and sisters, while he heals and comforts innumerable sick people through the many activities of health-care assistance that Christian communities promote with fraternal charity. Thus they reveal the true Face of God, his love. It is true: very many Christians around the world priests, religious and lay people - have lent and continue to lend their hands, eyes, and hearts to Christ, true physician of bodies and souls! Let us pray for all sick people, especially those who are most seriously ill, who can in no way provide for themselves but depend entirely on the care of others. May each one of them experience, in the solicitude of those who are beside them, the power and love of God and the richness of his saving grace. Mary, health of the sick, pray for us!

Monday

THE GIFT OF ONE'S SELF

A Reflection developed from a text by Carlo Cardinal Martini

The New Testament illustrates the inexhaustible richness of Jesus' words as they became the sources and guides of life for the first Christians. This witness was, and is, continued in the witness of the martyrs. In both cases what is witnessed is charity, lived out in the gift of self in service of others. The service is more often spiritual than simply material. A marvelous example is found in St. Agatha.

Agatha illustrates the sharing of goods we see in the Jerusalem community as presented in the Book of Acts. She was rich yet she became poor because she shared so much with those who were in need. She helped the Christian community of Catania in Sicily to change things for the poor in a way that prefigured the new society that faith in Christ can and will create. In Acts, this sort of giving of self is bound together with prayer and with listening to the Lord's Word in joy. It becomes more than a gift of social change. It is equally a gift of a new hope born of faith in Christ's resurrection as shared by us through our union with Him. We give things but the giving is actually rooted in the gift of self.

In Agatha's case, this was a consecration of her life and self through the preservation of her virginity as a way of saying that she was married to Jesus and wholly his. For Agatha this led to martyrdom and her steadfastness in the face of every sort of torment was her way of showing that nothing at all can destroy our hope in God, as given us in Jesus' death and resurrection. Notice that this is a free gift, perhaps even more deliberately free than the sharing of all the things she possessed.

Recall the story in Acts of Annas and Saphira, who sold property and pretended to give all to God and their community but actually kept half for themselves. They were making themselves hypocrites and this destroyed them. Agatha refused to pretend in any way. There is a multitude of stories about how she overcame every sort of test and torture. This makes her life a witness to the supreme value of genuineness in our self-giving to God. It makes the point that living hope, no matter what happens, can be a tremendous gift to our fellow Christians. Agatha never stopped hoping or putting all her trust, and so her very self, into God's hands. She witnessed to God's never-ending love for us.

Charity and the concrete ways of sharing and sharing oneself are bound together. Charity is broader than any particular act. It is the best obedience to the Lord. It is a celebration of the resurrection and of the hope we are given in the Lord's resurrection. Charity is joy at Jesus' eternal presence amid his own. But it does aim for concrete action. It searches for ways to do everything that is possible in showing the new life that is proper to believers, socially as well as personally. Every sharing is a free manifestation of the richness of charity, just as our charity is a gift that witnesses to God's never-ending love for us.

Tuesday

ST. PAUL MIKI & COMPANIONS

Letter by Peter Baptist

Christianity arrived in Japan in 1549. By the end of the century, the number of Christians was as high as 300,000. In 1587 foreign missionaries were expelled and persecution began. In 1597 twenty-six Christians were condemned to death, three Japanese Jesuits, six Franciscans, and 17 lay persons. They were crucified. From 1613 on ordinary Christians were sought out and executed. Suspects were presented with an image of Christ or the Virgin and required to stamp on it or die. Japanese Christians acquired a distinct spirituality with a fervent devotion to the cross as a symbol of hope for final victory. One of the martyrs of 1597 wrote the following letter.

“There are twenty of us all together. We are not traveling in this rather cold month of the winter and are being conducted with cavalry and a strong guard. On some days more than 200 men were assigned to keep us under guard. In spite of this, we have great consolation, and we continue to rejoice in the Lord because according to the sentence pronounced against us, we are to be crucified for having preached the law of God contrary to the king’s command. The rest were condemned because they were Christians.

Those who wish to die for Christ now have a golden opportunity. I think that the faithful of this region would have been greatly consoled if the religious of our Order (Franciscans) had been here, but they may rest assured that as long as this king rules men in our habit will not live long in Japan because he will quickly send them to eternal life. May he get us there!

The sentence pronounced against us was written on a sign and carried before us. There are six friars here and eighteen Japanese, all condemned to death, some because they are preachers, others because they are Christians. From the Society of Jesus, there is a brother, a catechist and a third, a layman. They took us out of the prison and put us on carts. Each had a part of an ear cut off and thus they conducted us through the streets. On another day they brought us out of prison again, mounted us on horses and conducted us through the streets. We were also taken to Sakai where they did the same thing.

For the love of God let your charity commend us to God that the sacrifice of our lives may be acceptable in his sight. From what I have heard here I think we will be crucified this coming Friday because it was on a Friday that they cut off a part of each one’s ear, and even we accepted as a gift from God. We all ask you then with great fervor to pray for us for the love of God.

Dearest brothers, help us with your prayers that our death may be acceptable to the majesty of God in heaven where, God willing, we hope to go. We will remember you. We have not forgotten your love. I have loved you and still love you with all my heart. I wish you the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Farewell, dearest brothers. Till we meet in heaven.”

Wednesday

THE LIGHT SHINING ON US FROM OUR DEPARTED

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

The Second Vatican Council reminds us that every intercession on the part of the saints depends on Christ and is linked to him. He is the sole mediator between God and human beings. That means we depend very much, granted our weakness, on the inseparability of our departed and Christ. They intercede for us together with Christ and in virtue of his power as mediator. It is to their total gift of self to Christ that they owe their sanctity and their intercessory power.

Those who have passed through death and are with God vividly manifest to humankind the presence and the countenance of Christ. God and Christ speak to us in and through Christ and in that way are a kind of visible manifestation of the presence of God and God's Kingdom among us. They, for instance, don't have moments of doubt or uncertainty about God and God's love. They know the truth of the Gospel's teachings and promises.

The council also reminds us that "it is in regard to death that the human condition is most shrouded in doubt". This is the anxiety and poverty, so to speak, of humanity in the presence of the mystery of death. It is not an abstraction. Death causes very painful ruptures in our relationships with those who are now departed. To think of them is to be filled with memories of days and places and their love. Even great saints, as St. Augustine, lived through this agony—as he tells us in speaking of his mother's death.

All the same Christ's Passover from death to life makes a great difference for us. By his own death, Christ has destroyed our death. Christ's resurrection has given us too the gift of never-ending life. We thus remember our departed both in sadness and in gladness. We are separated but in Christ we are not separated. In faith, we know all this. That means that it is by means of our faith that they communicate with us even now. Even now they teach us that the relationships which have made life on earth precious to us still exist in God and in Christ. This strengthens our faith even in times of doubt and distress.

The Second Vatican Council underlined the Gospel teaching about the "universal call to holiness". All Christians are called to the fullness of life in God and to the perfection of love shown us in Christ. We know that our departed share this call to us, and we know that they have responded to it in the measure of the grace that God gave, and gives, them. Everlasting life is an everlasting gift! That means it is an everlasting grace. Our life of faith already shares in this everlasting grace. That is what our departed perpetually remind us of. As we remember them we don't simply call to mind what once was but that all the best of what was still exists and is yet to come to greater fullness than it has ever had as yet. To think of them, to intercede for them and with them, is to participate in this grace, even if only partly. We join them in giving thanks that God is bringing to fullness all the beauty and goodness that we have tasted so far only in part. To remember them is to feel this grace grow stronger in us even now.

Thursday

THE KING AND THE WOMAN

From the Morning Meditation by Pope Francis on Thursday, 13 February 2014

The “two figures” the Pope chose for his sermon were taken from the day's readings. He referred to the first Book of Kings (11:4-13) to speak about Solomon, and to the Gospel of Mark (7:24-30) to present the image of the woman “who spoke Greek and was Syro-Phoenician”, and who begged Jesus “to drive out the demon from her daughter”. The Pope explained how Solomon and the woman take two opposite paths. “Today the Church invites us to reflect on the journey from paganism and idolatry to the living God, and also on the journey from the living God to idolatry”.

The Gospel tells us that, in turning to Jesus, the woman is “brave”, like any “desperate mother” who would do anything “for the health of their child”. “She had been told that there was a good man, a prophet”, and so she went to look for Jesus, even though she “did not believe in the God of Israel”. For the sake of her daughter, “she was not ashamed of how she might look before the Apostles”, who might say amongst themselves “what is this pagan doing here?”. She approached Jesus to beg him to help her daughter who was possessed by an unclean spirit.

Essentially, it is the story of a mother who “risked making a fool of herself but still insisted,” out of love for her daughter. She left “paganism and idolatry, and found health for her daughter” and, for herself she “found the living God”. Hers is “the way of a person of goodwill, who seeks God and finds him”. For her faith, “the Lord blesses her”. This is also the story of so many people who still “make this journey”. “The Lord waits for” these people, who are moved by the Holy Spirit. “There are people who make this journey every day in the Church of God, silently seeking the Lord”, because they “let themselves be carried forward by the Holy Spirit”.

However, there is also “the opposite path”, which is represented by the figure of Solomon, “the wisest man on earth, who had received many great blessings; he had inherited a united country, the union that his father David had made”. King Solomon had “universal fame”, he had “complete power”. He was also “a believer in God”. So why did he lose his faith? The answer lies in the biblical passage: “His women made him divert his heart to follow other gods, and his heart did not remain with the Lord, his God, as the heart of David his father did”.

“The wisest man in the world” lost his faith this way, the Holy Father said. Solomon allowed himself to become corrupt because of “an indiscreet love, without discretion, because of his passions”. Yet, “having faith does not mean being able to recite the Creed: you can still recite the Creed after having lost your faith!”.

The king, therefore, takes the opposite “path than that of the Syro-Phoenician woman: she leaves the idolatry of paganism and comes to find the living God”, while Solomon instead “left the living God and finds idolatry: what a poor man! She was a sinner, sure, just as we all are. But he was corrupt”.

Referring to a passage from the Letter to the Hebrews, the Pope expressed his hope that “no evil seed will grow” in the human heart. It was “the seed of evil passions, growing in Solomon’s heart” that “led him to idolatry”. To prevent this seed from developing, “the good counsel” that was suggested in the Gospel reading of the day: “Receive with meekness the Word that has been planted in you and it can lead you to salvation”. With this knowledge, “we follow the path of the Canaanite woman, the pagan woman, accepting the Word of God, which was planted in us and will lead us to salvation”. The Word of God is “powerful, and it will safeguard us on the path and prevent us from the destruction of corruption and all that leads to idolatry”.

Friday

GOD'S GRACE AT WORK IN OUR WORKS

A reflection drawn from a Gospel commentary by Pius Parsch

In the Gospel of this past Sunday Jesus encounters a deaf mute. To bring healing to this person Jesus uses outward signs that seem strange to us. He takes the person aside, puts his fingers into the person's ears, and puts some of his spittle on the person's tongue and with a groan says, "Be opened!" Why did Christ do these things instead of healing with a word?

It is not a joke to say that to communicate with a deaf-mute Christ had to use sign language. Christ was thinking of the sacred signs the Church would use to minister the sacraments so as to heal us. When he touched the ears and tongue and said "Be opened!" the deaf-mute became able to hear and speak. This occurs through the sacraments too. Water is poured on a person and the words "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" are said. The result is both visible and invisible. What is invisible is even greater than the visible healing of ordinary deafness and muteness. The person baptized becomes a child of God in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

What happens is that a person "puts on Christ" through baptism. It is like putting on a uniform. If we actually do "put on Christ" then everyone who sees what we do knows we belong to Christ and are in a real sense Christ-for-others. Christ wanted to link this grace with a special outward and visible sign that consists in deeds. They are our Christian uniform.

The pouring of water in baptism, the laying on of hands in confirmation and the anointing with chrism as well as the eating of bread and wine in the Eucharist are signs of grace given. It could have been given in other ways without the outward signs, but it is Christ's declared will to give invisible grace through visible signs. They are not signs preserved by the Church but the sign that are life-giving and make us sure that we have received God's grace. In that grace, we become signs by our Christ-like deeds!

A human person consists of body and soul. The body acts upon the soul and the soul upon the body. They belong together and cannot be separated permanently. We say that the flesh lusts against the spirit and vice versa but Christ brings the two together in harmony. This shows itself in what we can now do in Christ. Christ took upon himself every burden or misery that comes with human flesh and brought them to the cross, offering them in sacrifice to the Heavenly Father to take away the sin of the world. What is that sin?

Outwardly it consists of all the behaviors that turn away from God or which harm self or others and impede them from living life with the fullness God intends. But if we have actually put on Christ and wear his uniform then all our works become signs and expressions of the grace that redeems and heals. Our labors become Christ's labors, for the redemption of the world. If we act as redeemed persons, we enact the redeeming liberation by living fully as Christ lived and giving life and freedom to us. This is God's gift, proclaimed as we let God's grace work in our deeds.

Saturday

INSPIRING OTHERS TO LOVE GOD

A Reflection in the form of a traditional prayer

You have left this world, Scholastica, but you have neither left nor forgotten us. Our souls don't yet have the same spiritual beauty in God's eyes as yours does. Yet we are called to the same Kingdom as you dwell in. It may be that many years have yet to pass before we are fit for the Heavenly abode where we shall see both God and your glory in God. We ask that your prayers rain down upon us as earthly water did on that night when God forced your brother to spend the night talking about the wonders of the Kingdom still to come. By your prayers may we obtain a like faith and love, and that we may indeed receive these gifts obtain for us the grace of repentance.

You sought only such conversation as was about God and eternity in God's Kingdom. Help us to love and seek only that talk which leads to God and to shun all useless and idle chatter. Your heart has mastered the secret of charity toward all, so we ask the grace to let our hearts be softened in the same way to love our neighbors fully. Let all coldness and indifference be banished from our hearts and make us love one another as God would have us love.

You are a Dove of Holy Solitude, Scholastica! You remember the cloister that, like a tree, gave shelter here on earth. All those who live a cloistered life according to the Rule of St. Benedict honor you as a spiritual daughter of St. Benedict. This tree has been filled with vigor but in our times seems to have withered. Pray that the first vigor of this monastic life be restored. Protect us by the motherly care of your prayers and cover those who seek to live in the way a shelter from storms and the blessing of honoring above all the Heavenly Father who calls us to live this life of perfection.

Blessed Scholastica, heaven has received you, and with a joyous welcome like that given to your brother, Benedict. You now live at the very source of that love which fills the holy souls in God's Kingdom. You have gained everything you asked of our Divine Master. Drink of that fount of life to your heart's eternal content and obtain this marvelous grace for us. But don't forget this lower world. For you, as is the case for us, it was a place of trial. But these trials led you to the Heavenly Homeland, and there, like a Dove in a cleft in the Holy Rock, your soul abides. Nothing on this earth succeeded in drawing you to pursue it rather than our Heavenly Spouse.

Who was it that gave you such sublime knowledge and made you so wise in love? On that last day of meeting with your brother, the Spirit made you even wiser than he was. It was God who wished to show that a holy and tender charity is dearer to Him than even the most careful fidelity to rules that are only human. So you and your brother were soon lost in contemplation of Infinite Beauty and gratitude for Divine Guidance and Providential Care. The Heavenly Lord himself had given you both a proof that he would have you neglect all else for the sake of true Heavenly Charity. Creatures could teach you no more about seeking our God above and beyond all other things. He was shortly to take you to himself, O Scholastica. By your prayers aid us in learning to seek God first and to love God and the work of helping others long for and find God and do this above every other human thing. May we learn to honor you in seeking our common Spouse. To God be glory and praise forever! Amen!