

# THE FIRST WEEK OF LENT

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*Sunday*

## **UNCONDITIONAL LOVE FOR GOD**

### **A Reflection from Theology of the New Testament by Fr. J. Bonsirven**

Jesus chose to emphasize his solidarity with sinners by undergoing the travails that all of us have to pass through. *“Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.”* All the Gospel traditions record this. They want to mark its predominating importance for the Savior and for us. The One who is our leader endured temptations so that we would know without doubt that he feels for us and knows what we go through. We often find our temptations humiliating; reminding us we are not masters even of ourselves. There are certain crucial choices that all must make, and make again and again. We must keep on choosing God first and last and always, no matter what the cost or the circumstances.

The temptations of Christ are shown to us in the form of a parable. He had to choose between what the prophets had taught and what providence brings to us all and what many supposedly wise persons try to teach us. There is a divine point of view and a human one. But this human perspective is really that of the Great Adversary of God and not simply of human individuals.

We are compelled to admit that Jesus really acquired knowledge through his experience. The Letter to the Hebrews makes that very clear: *“He learned obedience in the school of suffering”*. Why, then, should we be exempt from following Our Master? Jesus passed through real temptations, just as real as his sufferings. But he didn't sin. We can follow him in this way too if we are open to God's grace. The temptations hold out alluring possibilities and they may seem irresistible. They use Biblical texts to paint a glowing picture of assured success in the Messiah's mission. Why not use God's power to appear as the person everyone is expecting and give them the freedom they seek? Why not come on the clouds as Ruler of All instead of being just a humble human individual?

Jesus' response is based on the principles that every Child of God has to use as a guide. The words of God must guide us and not the human way of understanding success. God's words come before every other guide! Trying to get one's own will done instead of God's is just wickedness. God's will doesn't emphasize material benefits or ordinary human ways of doing things. The only way anyone can gain a power that can be used as one thinks best is to enter into a pact with Satan—and then that person will find he/she has been deceived. Everyone's first duty is to worship and love God with one's entire heart and soul and strength!

Getting rebuffed didn't discourage the Tempter or end temptations. Satan left Jesus, but only for a while. He would return in the guise of an observant Pharisee or a teacher of God's law—he comes disguised as an angel of light! Temptation returned most powerfully in the Garden of Gethsemane. That was the supreme temptation undisguised: Let my will be done, Lord, rather than yours. And Jesus refused! Christ is unconditionally obedient to the Father's command and will, even when it involves death by crucifixion. This is the complete and perfect sacrifice! This is the total defeat of Satan and all the powers of anti-God. This is what we are called to, especially now as we make Lent our life.

*Monday*

## **MESSAGE FOR LENT 1984**

### **Of His Holiness John Paul II**

How many times have we read and listened to the awesome text from Chapter 25 of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew: "When the Son of man comes in his glory..., he will say... 'Come O blessed of my Father... for I was hungry and you gave me food...'"!

Yes, the Redeemer of the world experiences the hunger of all his hungry brothers and sisters. He suffers with those who cannot feed their bodies: all those people who are victims of drought or unfavorable economic conditions, all those families affected by unemployment or scarcity of work. And yet our earth can and must feed all its inhabitants, from the youngest children to the aged, and including all the categories of those who work.

Christ also suffers with those who rightly hunger for justice and for respect for their human dignity; he suffers with those who are deprived of their fundamental liberties, with those who are neglected or, worse still, exploited in their state of poverty.

Christ suffers with those who yearn for an equitable and universal peace, while this peace is being destroyed or threatened by so many conflicts and by a senseless and excessive build-up of arms. Can we be allowed to forget that the world is meant to be built, not destroyed?

In a word, Christ suffers with all the victims of material, moral and spiritual poverty.

"I was hungry and you gave me food..., I was a stranger and you welcomed me..., I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me" (*Mt 25:35-36*). It is to each one of us that these words will be addressed on the Day of Judgment. But they already challenge us and judge us.

Giving from our surplus and even from what we need for ourselves is not always a spontaneous reaction of our nature. It is precisely for this reason that we must constantly cast a fraternal glance at our fellow human beings and their lives; it is precisely for this reason that we stimulate within ourselves this hunger and thirst for sharing, for justice and for peace, so that we shall really undertake deeds that will help to assist individuals and peoples that are hard pressed.

Dear brothers and sisters, at this season of Lent in the Jubilee Year of Redemption, let us be more deeply converted; let us be more sincerely reconciled with God and with our neighbor. Then this spirit of penance, sharing, and fasting will be translated into real action, which your local Churches will certainly urge upon you.

"Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver". This exhortation of Saint Paul to the Corinthians is extremely relevant today (*2 Cor 9:7*). May you be enabled to feel the deep joy that comes from sharing food, from giving a welcome to a stranger, from assisting in the human advancement of the poor, from obtaining work for the unemployed, from the honest and courageous exercise of your civic, social and professional responsibilities, from the peace experienced in your homes and in all your relationships with others! All of this reflects the Love of God, to which we must be converted. Love is inseparable from the so often urgent service of our neighbor. Let us desire, and let us deserve, to hear Christ tell us at the last day that inasmuch as we did good to one of the least of his brethren we did it to him!

*Tuesday*

## **PRAYER IS THE WAY OF THE WORD WHICH EMBRACES EVERYTHING**

**From the General Audience Address of Pope John Paul II on 17 March 1979**

It is necessary to pray, taking this essential concept of prayer as our basis. When the disciples asked the Lord Jesus: "Teach us to pray", he replied with the words of the prayer Our Father, thus creating a concrete model that is at the same time universal. In fact, all that can and must be said to the Father is contained in those seven requests, which we all know by heart. There is such a simplicity in them, that even a child can learn them, and also such a depth that a whole life can be spent meditating on the meaning of each of them. Is this not so? Does not each of them speak to us, one after the other, of what is essential for our existence, directed completely to God, to the Father? Does it not speak to us of our "daily bread", of "forgiveness of our trespasses as we also forgive them", and at the same time of "preservation from temptation" and "deliverance from evil"?

When in answer to the request of the disciples "teach us to pray", Christ utters the words of his prayer, he teaches not only the words, but he teaches that in our talk with the Father, there must be complete sincerity and full openness. Prayer must embrace everything that is part of our life. It cannot be something additional or marginal. Everything must find in it its true voice. Even everything that burdens us; things of which we are ashamed; what by its very nature separates us from God. This is above all. It is prayer that always, first of all, and essentially, demolishes the barrier which sin and evil may have raised between us and God.

Through prayer the whole world must find its rightful reference: that is, reference to God: my interior world and also the objective world, the one in which we live, and as we know it. If we are converted to God, everything in us is directed to him. Prayer is precisely the expression of this being directed to God; and that is, at the same time, our continual conversion: our life.

Holy Scripture says:

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it" (Is 55:10-11).

Prayer is the way of the Word which embraces everything. The way of the eternal Word which goes through the depths of so many hearts; which brings back to the Father everything that has its origin in him.

Prayer is the sacrifice of our lips (cf. Heb 13:15). It is, as St Ignatius of Antioch writes, "spring water that murmurs within us and says: come to the Father" (cf. *Letter to the Romans*, VII, 2).

*Wednesday*

## **THE FATHER'S LOVE AND MERCY**

**From the Homily of His Holiness Pope Francis on 17February2016 in Mexico**

In the second century, St Irenaeus wrote that the glory of God is the life of man. It is an expression that continues to echo in the heart of the Church. The glory of the Father is the life of his sons and daughters. There is no greater glory for a father than to see his children blossom, and no greater satisfaction than to see his children grow up, develop and flourish. The first reading that we have just heard points to this. The great city of Nineveh was self-destructing as a result of oppression and dishonor, violence and injustice. The grand capital's days were numbered because the violence within it could not continue. Then the Lord appeared and stirred Jonah's heart: the Father called and sent forth his messenger on a mission. "Go", because in "40 days Nineveh shall be overthrown" (Jon 3:4). Go and help them to understand that by the way they treat each other, ordering and organizing themselves, they are only creating death and destruction, suffering and oppression. Make them see this is no way to live, neither for the king nor his subjects, nor for farm fields nor for the cattle. Go and tell them that they have become used to this degrading way of life and have lost their sensitivity to pain. Go and tell them that injustice has infected their way of seeing the world. "Therefore, go Jonah!". God sent him to testify to what was happening, he sent him to wake up a people intoxicated with themselves.

In this text, we find ourselves before the mystery of divine mercy. Mercy, which always rejects wickedness, takes the human person in great earnest. Mercy always appeals to the goodness of each person, even though it be dormant and numbed. Far from bringing destruction, as we so often desire or want to bring about ourselves, mercy seeks to transform each situation from within. Herein lies the mystery of divine mercy. It seeks and invites us to conversion, it invites us to repentance; it invites us to see the damage being done at every level. Mercy always pierces evil in order to transform it. It is the mystery of God our Father: he sends his Son who pierced into what was evil, he took on sin in order to transform evil. This is his mercy.

The king listened to Jonah, the inhabitants of the city responded and penance was decreed. God's mercy has entered the heart, revealing and showing wherein our certainty and hope lie: there is always the possibility of change, we still have time to transform what is destroying us as a people, what is demeaning our humanity. Mercy encourages us to look to the present, and to trust what is healthy and good beating in every heart. God's mercy is our shield and our strength.

Jonah helped them to see, helped them to become aware. Following this, his call found men and women able to repent, and able to weep. To weep over injustice, to cry over corruption, to cry over oppression. These are tears that lead to transformation, that soften the heart; they are the tears that purify our gaze and enable us to see the cycle of sin into which very often we have sunk. They are tears that can sensitize our gaze and our attitude hardened and especially dormant in the face of another's suffering. They are the tears that can break us, capable of opening us to conversion. This is what happened to Peter after having denied Jesus; he cried and those tears opened his heart.

This word echoes forcefully today among us; this word is the voice crying out in the wilderness, inviting us to conversion. With you here, I beg for God's mercy; with you, I wish to plead for the gift of tears, the gift of conversion.

Thursday

## **THE BEAUTY OF LIVED CHRISTIAN FAITH**

### **A Reflection from The See of St. Peter by Bishop Jacques Bossuet**

What is the principle of the Church's unity and of the Church's beauty? True beauty comes from health. What makes the Church strong makes her lovely. Unity makes her lovely and that unity makes her strong. United from within by the Holy Spirit she has a common bond of outward communion and must remain united with those God has appointed to govern her. This is the one unity that guards all these realities.

We find in the Gospel that Jesus Christ wills to begin the mystery of unity in his Church by choosing twelve disciples. But to consummate that unity he chose one. The first of them is Simon called Peter. Then he told those he had chosen: Go, preach; I send you". Jesus Christ, Son of God, speaks to Simon, son of Jonas. It is by him that Christ speaks and in speaking acts and stamps first upon Peter his own immovable loyalty to the Father. He never moved from his confession: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*" The Word of God makes out of nothing, what pleases him, and gives strength to a mortal to do what is otherwise impossible. And Peter's confession lives on in his successors.

Jesus Christ pursues his design. He says to Peter: "I will give to you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven". These keys mark the authority of governance. All are subject to these keys; all, my brothers and sisters. We declare this with joy because we love unity and hold obedience to be our glory. It is Peter who is first called to love Jesus before all others. And he, by charity, is to be servant of all.

I have presented this unity in the Holy See. Would you see it in the entire episcopal order? It must appear in St. Peter here too. Jesus said, whatsoever you shall bind shall be bound. These great words have also set up bishops because the force of their ministry consists of binding and losing those who believe. What was said to Peter was said to all the Apostles. The one who gives the power to Peter gives it also to all the Apostles. So Christ breathes equally on all, so he sends the Spirit with that breath.

It was, then, clearly the design of Jesus Christ to give to one alone at first what he afterward meant to give to many. But the sequence doesn't reverse the beginning nor does the first lose its place. The promises of Jesus Christ, as well as his gifts, are without repentance. And what is once given to several carries its restriction in its division. Power given to one alone, however, is without exception and carries with it plenitude. It need not be divided any further and shared with any other. It has no bounds except those which its terms convey.

Is this not beautiful? Is this not a path to health and strength for the Church? Do you see in it God and God's beauty? Then follow Christ in the work of building up his Church as an instrument of salvation for the whole world.

*Friday*

## **PRAYING FOR GOD'S HELP IN LENT**

### **A Prayer from the Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis**

O My Lord Jesus Christ, most loving spouse, most pure lover and governor of every creature, who will give me the wings of perfect liberty so that I may fly high and rest in you? Oh, when will I fully tend toward You and see and feel how sweet You are? When shall I recollect myself so perfectly that I will no longer recognize myself but only see you in me? When will I see only you in all physical things? Please visit me in the same way you visit your genuinely faithful lovers!

How often I have mourned and complained about the miseries of my present life. With sorrow and woe, I have born them with great melancholy. Many evil things happen daily and they trouble me, they darken my understanding and seem greatly to hinder me and drag my mind and heart away from you, so I seem never to have a truly free mind or heart to clearly desire only You. I so long for the sweet embrace that is always given the saints.

I beseech you, Lord, that the singing and inward desire of my heart, together with my desolations, may move You to hear me. O Jesus, light and brightness of everlasting glory. You are the joy and comfort of all Christian people, of all who are pilgrims in this world. My heart cries to you in silent desire: How long will my Lord delay his coming to me? Truly, I trust that you will indeed come and come soon. Make me joyful and glad in your presence! Come, Lord, for without you I have no single glad day or hour. You are all my joy and gladness!

Let others seek what they will but there is nothing I will seek or that will please me but You. O my Lord and my Hope and my Everlasting Help! I will not stop praying until your grace comes to me and You speak inwardly to my soul. Lord, I have called you and have desired to have you. I am ready to forsake all things for You. You have stirred me to seek you, after all. Be always blessed for all the goodness you have shown me.

What has your servant, Lord, to do or say beyond humbling myself before You? I always remember my own iniquities, and your forgiveness. There is none like you, Lord, in heaven or on earth. Your works are good, Your judgments are wise and just. Your providence governs all things! That is why I pray constantly to You. You are the wisdom of the Father, so be everlasting joy and glory. I humble myself and beseech you that my body and my soul, my heart and my tongue, and all your creatures, may praise and bless you always. Amen!

*Saturday*

## **THE CHRISTIANS IN THE WORLD**

### **From A Letter to Diognetus (Nn. 5-6)**

"Christians are indistinguishable from other men either by nationality, language or customs. They do not inhabit separate cities of their own, or speak a strange dialect, or follow some outlandish way of life. Their teaching is not based upon reveries inspired by the curiosity of men. Unlike some other people, they champion no purely human doctrine. With regard to dress, food and manner of life in general, they follow the customs of whatever city they happen to be living in, whether it is Greek or foreign.

And yet there is something extraordinary about their lives. They live in their own countries as though they were only passing through. They play their full role as citizens, but labor under all the disabilities of aliens. Any country can be their homeland, but for them, their homeland, wherever it may be, is a foreign country. Like others, they marry and have children, but they do not expose them. They share their meals, but not their wives.

They live in the flesh, but they are not governed by the desires of the flesh. They pass their days upon earth, but they are citizens of heaven. Obedient to the laws, they yet live on a level that transcends the law. Christians love all men, but all men persecute them. Condemned because they are not understood, they are put to death, but raised to life again. They live in poverty, but enrich many; they are totally destitute but possess an abundance of everything. They suffer dishonor, but that is their glory. They are defamed, but vindicated. A blessing is their answer to abuse, deference their response to insult. For the good they do they receive the punishment of malefactors, but even then they rejoice, as though receiving the gift of life. They are attacked by the Jews as aliens, they are persecuted by the Greeks, yet no one can explain the reason for this hatred.

To speak in general terms, we may say that the Christian is to the world what the soul is to the body. As the soul is present in every part of the body, while remaining distinct from it, so Christians are found in all the cities of the world, but cannot be identified with the world. As the visible body contains the invisible soul, so Christians are seen living in the world, but their religious life remains unseen. The body hates the soul and wars against it, not because of any injury the soul has done it, but because of the restriction the soul places on its pleasures. Similarly, the world hates the Christians, not because they have done it any wrong, but because they are opposed to its enjoyment.

Christians love those who hate them just as the soul loves the body and all its members despite the body's hatred. It is by the soul, enclosed within the body, that the body is held together, and similarly, it is by the Christians, detained in the world as in a prison, that the world is held together. The soul, though immortal, has a mortal dwelling place; and Christians also live for a time amidst perishable things, while awaiting the freedom from change and decay that will be theirs in heaven. As the soul benefits from the deprivation of food and drink, so Christians flourish under persecution. Such is the Christian's lofty and divinely appointed function, from which he is not permitted to excuse himself."