

THE TWENTY-FIRST WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

25-31 August 2024

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27 **HOW WE CAN SHOW OTHERS A PATH TO GOD**
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31 **MARY, A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST**
 From the Sermon 72 of St Augustine

Sunday

ABANDON YOUR STANDARDS FOR CHRIST'S

A reflection from a Gospel Commentary by St. Cyril of Alexandria

When Jesus asks the Twelve whether they intend to leave him because he demands too much, Peter replies: "*Lord, to whom shall we go?*" Who else can instruct us in the way we must walk? To whom can we go to find anything better? And then he adds: "*You have the words of eternal life!*"

Jesus' words seem as difficult to understand as they are lofty; they lead us to the highest of goals and to a life that is unceasing, endless and that never falls apart and ends. Jesus' words show us most obviously our need to sit at his feet and take him as our one and only teacher.

How shall we go about giving Christ our constant and undivided attention? How are we to make him our guide? We begin by recognizing that he alone knows how to lead us to everlasting life. He knows how to ascend to the divine courts of Heaven and to enter into the assembly of the firstborn who delight in blessings that surpass all merely human understanding. If we know Christ, then the desire to follow him alone and to be with him always is self-evidently good and saving.

Still, we also learn from the Scriptures of Israel. When the Israelites had shaken off Egyptian tyranny and were hurrying toward the promised land, God didn't allow them to go forward in a disorderly way. Nor did God's lawgiver allow any one of them to go wherever they might think good. All must have a guide. Without one they would certainly have lost their way completely. All were ordered to follow the cloud that stayed over the Tent of Meeting. They were to move when it did. They were to come to a halt when it did. They were to rest when it did. Staying with this guide was the Israelites' salvation.

God guided Israel using the Tent of Meeting and the cloud that showed itself by day and the fire that showed from within it by night. All Israel was commanded to follow. No one was to undertake the journey they had to make on personal initiative. All were to halt with the cloud and to abide with it. It was by this symbol that they were to understand the message we hear in the words of Christ. "*Whoever serves me must follow me, so as to be with me wherever I am*". Being always in Christ's company means being steadfast in following him. We are to be constant in clinging to Him. Yet to accompany the Savior and to be following him all the time is not at all something we can do simply with our bodies.

What we have to do can be accomplished only by deeds springing from various virtues. It is on this that the wisest disciples fix their minds. They refuse to depart from it no matter what unbelievers say. The Twelve saw that going away would be fatal. Peter's reply says: We will stay with you always and hold fast to your commands. We will accept your words without finding fault or thinking your teaching makes no sense—as the ignorant think. What shall we think? "*How sweet are your words to my mouth! They are sweeter to me than is honey or a honeycomb!*" These are to be our words at every moment as we follow Christ today and every day.

Monday

THE BACKBONE OF THE LIFE OF FAITH

A Reflection developed from a text of Sr. Dianne Bergant

The backbone of the spiritual life consists of four virtues—perseverance and responsibility, love, and compassionate mercy. We’ve all heard the saying: “You only have one chance to make a good first impression”. This is true in the life of this world but not where the life of the spirit is concerned. We don’t have to make a good first impression on God, but are called to let God make a deep and ever-lasting impression on us. Remember those who have gone before us; recall the impressions they made on us and how those changed as God’s grace formed them more and more deeply. What God did for them, God is doing for us.

From a worldly perspective, appearances can be deceiving—graciousness can be superficial and one’s words may have little to do with one’s heart and one’s true values. We know Jesus had harsh words for hypocrites—persons who act as though they love God with all their heart but actually love themselves more. Yet if we act sincerely to reveal ourselves, won’t we display the things about us that are anything but pleasing, even to ourselves? In response, Jesus invites us to bring our true selves to him and let him heal these things. We can’t be healed if we don’t let our physician see our real state.

Those who went before us spent a lifetime letting Jesus see and heal their spiritual illnesses. We need to follow in their footsteps. They persevered in taking responsibility for letting God’s Spirit breathe into them what would make them new persons in Christ. We come to God like so many grains of wheat not yet freed from the husk and threshing, at least for us human grains of wheat, isn’t pleasant. It involves what it did for those who went before us; we learn to love those we live with and with whom we form a community for mutual love and support in Christ! That fact we see one another’s weaknesses and defects is the reason why our love has to take the form of mercy. We first learn the very difficult task of being merciful to ourselves and this forms in us the capacity to show mercy to others.

The Gospels depict Jesus as a teacher of wisdom—for instance, in the form of parables—to teach. Like the trees, God creates us all good. But things happen and we sometimes seem to be turning out bad. Yet God so transforms us that we become able to bear good fruit, even though our hearts are at first less than good and would naturally bear bad fruit. Jesus had nothing good to say about hypocrites because they hide the weakness and illness that need to be healed; they are unwilling to see what needs healing. But many have gone before us along the path of faith that opens them to merciful inner healing, and remembering them should renew our hope in God and God’s power to transform and heal. They let our God clothe them in a new person, created in love and able to show mercy to others. We are human and at times only too human. But what God did in them, and may still be doing in them, God is also doing in us. Let us persevere in hope and trust so we may receive mercy and be transformed in Christ.

Tuesday

SAINT MONICA

From the General Audience Address of Pope Benedict XVI, 27 August 2006

Today, 27 August, we commemorate St Monica and tomorrow we will be commemorating St Augustine, her son: their witnesses can be of great comfort and help to so many families also in our time.

Monica, who was born into a Christian family at Tagaste, today Souk-Aharàs in Algeria, lived her mission as a wife and mother in an exemplary way, helping her husband Patricius to discover the beauty of faith in Christ and the power of evangelical love, which can overcome evil with good.

After his premature death, Monica courageously devoted herself to caring for her three children, including Augustine, who initially caused her suffering with his somewhat rebellious temperament. As Augustine himself was to say, his mother gave birth to him twice; the second time required a lengthy spiritual travail of prayers and tears, but it was crowned at last with the joy of seeing him not only embrace the faith and receive Baptism, but also dedicate himself without reserve to the service of Christ.

How many difficulties there are also today in family relations and how many mothers are in anguish at seeing their children setting out on wrong paths! Monica, a woman whose faith was wise and sound, invites them not to lose heart but to persevere in their mission as wives and mothers, keeping firm their trust in God and clinging with perseverance to prayer.

As for Augustine, his whole life was a passionate search for the truth. In the end, not without a long inner torment, he found in Christ the ultimate and full meaning of his own life and of the whole of human history. In adolescence, attracted by earthly beauty, he "flung himself" upon it - as he himself confides (cf. *Confessions*, 10, 27-38) - with selfish and possessive behavior that caused his pious mother great pain.

But through a toilsome journey and thanks also to her prayers, Augustine became always more open to the fullness of truth and love until his conversion, which happened in Milan under the guidance of the Bishop, St Ambrose.

He thus remained the model of the journey towards God, supreme Truth, and supreme Good. "Late have I loved you", he wrote in the famous book the *Confessions*, "beauty, ever ancient and ever new, late have I loved you. You were within me and I was outside of you, and it was there that I sought you... You were with me and I was not with you... You called, you cried out, you pierced my deafness. You shone, you struck me down, and you healed my blindness" (*ibid.*).

May St Augustine obtain the gift of a sincere and profound encounter with Christ for all those young people who, thirsting for happiness, are seeking it on the wrong paths and getting lost in blind alleys.

St Monica and St Augustine invite us to turn confidently to Mary, Seat of Wisdom. Let us entrust Christian parents to her so that, like Monica, they may accompany their children's progress with their own example and prayers. Let us commend youth to the Virgin Mother of God so that, like Augustine, they may always strive for the fullness of Truth and Love which is Christ: he alone can satisfy the deepest desires of the human heart.

Wednesday

SAINT AUGUSTINE

From the Homily of Pope Francis, 28 August 2013

“You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (*Confessions*, 1, 1, 1). With these famous words St Augustine addresses God in his *Confessions*, and these words sum up his whole life.

“Restlessness”: I would like to start with a question: what fundamental restlessness did Augustine live in his life? What kinds of restlessness does this great and holy man ask us to awaken and to keep alive in our own existence? I am proposing three kinds: the restlessness of spiritual seeking, the restlessness of the encounter with God, the restlessness of love.

1. The first: the restlessness of spiritual seeking. Augustine lived an experience that is fairly common today: common enough among today’s young people. He was raised in the Christian faith by his mother Monica, even though he did not receive Baptism. However, as he grew up he fell away from the faith, failing to find the answer to his heart’s desires, and was attracted by other proposals. He then joined a group of Manichaeans, devoted himself diligently to his studies, and did not give up carefree pleasures, and deep friendships. He experienced intense love and had a brilliant career as a teacher of rhetoric that even took him to the imperial court in Milan. Augustine was a man who had everything. Nevertheless, his heart still yearned for life’s deep meaning. I would say it had not been anaesthetized by success, by things, or by power. Augustine did not withdraw into himself, he continued his quest for the truth, for the meaning of life. He continued to seek God’s face. He retained the restlessness of spiritual seeking. He discovered that God was waiting for him, indeed, that he had never ceased to be the first to seek him. I would like to tell those who feel indifferent to God, and those who are far from God or who have distanced themselves from him, look into your own inner depths and ask yourself: do you have a heart that desires something great, or a heart that has been lulled to sleep by things? God awaits you, he seeks you; how do you respond to him?

2. In Augustine it was this very restlessness in his heart that brought him to a personal encounter with Christ, brought him to understand that the remote God he was seeking was the God who is close to every human being, who was “more inward than my innermost self” (cf. *ibid.* III, 6, 11). However, even in the discovery of and encounter with God, Augustine did not stop, but continued his search. The restlessness of seeking the truth, of seeking God, became the restlessness to know him ever better and of coming out of himself to make others know him.

3. It was precisely the restlessness of love. He would have liked a peaceful life of study and prayer but God called him to be a Pastor in Hippo. And Augustine let God make him restless, he never tired of proclaiming him, of evangelizing with courage and without fear, he sought to be the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd who knows his sheep (cf. Jn 10:14). Augustine lived as St Paul had instructed Timothy and each one of us: he proclaimed the word, he insisted in season and out of season, he proclaimed the Gospel with a magnanimous heart, with a great heart (cf. 2 Tim 4:2), that of a Pastor who is anxious about his sheep. Augustine’s treasure is this very attitude: always going towards God, always going out towards the flock.... He was a man constantly stretched between these poles; never “privatizing” love... always journeying on! Always be on the way, the Father said. As for you, always be restless!

And this is the peace of restlessness. We may ask ourselves: am I anxious for God, anxious to proclaim him, to “step out” of myself towards others?

Thursday

THE PASSION OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

From the General Audience Address of Pope Benedict XVI, 19 August 2012

John the Baptist did not limit himself to teaching repentance or conversion. Instead, in recognizing Jesus as the “Lamb of God” who came to take away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29), he had the profound humility to hold up Jesus as the One sent by God, drawing back so that he might take the lead, and be heard and followed. As his last act, the Baptist witnessed with his blood to faithfulness to God’s commandments, without giving in or withdrawing, carrying out his mission to the very end. In the 9th century, the Venerable Bede says in one of his Homilies: “St John gave his life for [Christ]. He was not ordered to deny Jesus Christ, but was ordered to keep silent about the truth” (cf. Homily 23: CCL 122, 354). And he did not keep silent about the truth and thus died for Christ who is the Truth. Precisely for love of the truth he did not stoop to compromises and did not fear to address strong words to anyone who had strayed from God’s path.

We see this great figure, this force in the Passion, in resistance to the powerful. We wonder: what gave birth to this life, to this interiority so strong, so upright, so consistent, spent so totally for God in preparing the way for Jesus? The answer is simple: it was born from the relationship with God, from prayer, which was the thread that guided him throughout his existence. John was the divine gift for which his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for so many years (cf. Lk 1:13); a great gift, humanly impossible to hope for, because they were both advanced in years and Elizabeth was barren (cf. Lk 1:7); yet nothing is impossible to God (cf. Lk 1:36). The announcement of this birth happened precisely in the place of prayer, in the temple of Jerusalem, indeed it happened when Zechariah had the great privilege of entering the holiest place in the temple to offer incense to the Lord (cf. Lk 1:8-20). John the Baptist’s birth was also marked by prayer: the Benedictus, the hymn of joy, praise and thanksgiving which Zechariah raises to the Lord and which we recite every morning in Lauds, exalts God’s action in history and prophetically indicates the mission of their son John: to go before the Son of God made flesh to prepare his ways (cf. Lk 1:67-79).

The entire existence of the Forerunner of Jesus was nourished by his relationship with God, particularly the period he spent in desert regions (cf. Lk 1:80). The desert regions are places of temptation but also where man acquires a sense of his own poverty because once deprived of material support and security, he understands that the only steadfast reference point is God himself. John the Baptist, however, is not only a man of prayer, in permanent contact with God, but also a guide in this relationship. The Evangelist Luke, recalling the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, the Our Father, notes that the request was formulated by the disciples in these words: “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his own disciples” (cf. Lk 11:1).

Dear brothers and sisters, celebrating the martyrdom of St John the Baptist reminds us too, Christians of this time, that with love for Christ, for his words and for the Truth, we cannot stoop to compromises. The Truth is Truth; there are no compromises. Christian life demands, so to speak, the “martyrdom” of daily fidelity to the Gospel, the courage, that is, to let Christ grow within us and let him be the One who guides our thought and our actions. However, this can happen in our life only if we have a solid relationship with God. Prayer is not time wasted, it does not take away time from our activities, even apostolic activities, but exactly the opposite is true: only if we are able to have a faithful, constant and trusting life of prayer will God himself give us the ability and strength to live happily and serenely, to surmount difficulties and to witness courageously to him. St John the Baptist, intercede for us, that we may be ever able to preserve the primacy of God in our life.

Friday

LAMP OF FAITH, OIL OF CHARITY

From the Angelus Address of Pope Francis, 8 November 2020

In Jesus' time, it was customary for weddings to be celebrated at night; so the procession of guests took place with lit lamps. Some of the bridesmaids are foolish: they take their lamps but do not take the oil with them; the wise ones instead take the oil with them together with their lamps. The bridegroom is late, late in coming, and they all fall asleep. When a voice alerts them that the bridegroom is about to arrive, at that moment, the foolish ones realize that they do not have oil for their lamps; they ask the wise ones for some, but the latter reply that they cannot give away any oil, because there would not be enough for them all. While the foolish maidens go to buy oil, the bridegroom arrives. The wise maidens enter the banquet hall with him, and the door is closed. The others arrive too late and are turned away.

It is clear that with this parable, Jesus wants to tell us that we must be prepared for the encounter with him. Not only for the final encounter, but also for the every day great and small encounters, with a view to that encounter for which the *lamp of faith* is not enough; we also need the *oil of charity* and good works. As the Apostle Paul says, the faith that truly unites us to Jesus is, "faith working through love" (*Gal 5:6*). It is what is represented by the behavior of the wise maidens. Being wise and prudent means not waiting until the last moment to correspond to God's grace, but to do so actively and immediately, starting right now. "I... yes, I will convert soon...". "Convert today! Change your life today!". "Yes, yes, tomorrow". And the same thing is said tomorrow, and so it never arrives. Today! If we want to be ready for the final encounter with the Lord, we must cooperate with him now and perform good deeds inspired by his love.

We know that unfortunately, it happens that we forget the purpose of our life, that is, the definitive appointment with God, thus losing the sense of expectation and making the present absolute. When one makes the present absolute, one looks only to the present, losing the sense of expectation, which is so beautiful and so necessary, and also pulls us away from the contradictions of the moment. This attitude — when one loses the sense of expectation — precludes any view of the hereafter: we do everything as if we will never depart for the other life.

And so we care only about possessing, about emerging, about establishing ourselves... And always more. If we allow ourselves to be led by what seems most attractive to us, by what we like, by seeking our interests, our life becomes sterile; we do not accumulate any reserve of oil for our lamp, and it will be extinguished before the encounter with the Lord. We must live today, but a today that goes towards tomorrow, towards that encounter, a present full of hope. If, on the other hand, we are vigilant and correspond to God's grace by doing good, we can serenely await the bridegroom's coming. The Lord will be able to come even while we are sleeping: this will not worry us, because we have the reserve of oil accumulated through our daily good works, accumulated with that expectation of the Lord, that he may come as soon as possible and that he may come to take us with him.

Saturday

MARY, A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST **From the Sermon 72 of St Augustine**

"But look here, my brothers and sisters, concentrate more, I beg you, on what follows, concentrate more on what Christ the Lord said as he stretched out his hand over his disciples: *This is my mother and these are my brothers; and whoever does the will of my Father who sent me, that person is a brother to me and a sister and a mother* (Mt 12:49-50). Didn't the Virgin Mary do the will of the Father? I mean, she believed by faith, she conceived by faith, she was chosen to be the one from whom salvation in the very midst of the human race would be born for us, she was created by Christ before Christ was created in her. Yes, of course, holy Mary did the will of the Father. And therefore it means more for Mary to have been a disciple of Christ than to have been the mother of Christ. It means more for her, an altogether greater blessing, to have been Christ's disciple than to have been Christ's mother. That is why Mary was blessed because even before she gave him birth, she bore her teacher in her womb.

Just see if it isn't as I say. While the Lord was passing by, performing divine miracles, with the crowds following him, a woman said: *Fortunate is the womb that bore you*. And how did the Lord answer, to show that good fortune is not really to be sought in mere family ties? *Rather blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it* (Lk 11:27-28). So that is why Mary, too, is blessed, because she heard the word of God and kept it. She kept truth safe in her mind even better than she kept flesh safe in her womb. Christ is truth, Christ is flesh; Christ as truth was in Mary's mind, Christ as flesh in Mary's womb; that which is in the mind is greater than what is carried in the womb.

Mary is holy, Mary is blessed, but the Church is something better than the Virgin Mary. Why? Because Mary is part of the Church, a holy member, a quite exceptional member, a supremely wonderful member, but still a member of the whole body. That being so, it follows that the body is something greater than the member. The Lord is the head, and the whole of Christ is the head and body. How shall I put it? We have a divine head, we have God as our head."