

TWENTY-THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

8-14 September 2024

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A Reflection from a Sermon by Fr. Lawrence of Brindisi

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A talk by Pope Francis

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13 **PRAYER IS THE LIGHT OF THE SOUL**
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A Reflection from a Meditation by Bishop Anthony Bloom

Sunday

WHAT WORDS ARE WE TO SPEAK TO OTHERS?

A Reflection based on a Sermon by Fr. Lawrence of Brindisi

Jesus, for unknown reasons, avoided Jewish Galilee and went into Gentile territory. Even there he was known and people brought the sick to him. Everyone was astounded by his power to heal. Mark's Gospel tells us that "they were beside themselves". The only reaction they could think of is preserved in words that we too should speak whenever we think of all our Savior has done for us: "He has done everything well!" Genesis says that God completed the creation and "saw all that he had made and that it was very good". What could we expect? "A good tree bears good fruit; no good tree can bear bad fruit!" It is clear that we must unite ourselves wholeheartedly with the throng of Gentiles in saying, "*He had done all things well; He has made the deaf hear and the dumb speak*". Of course, we also know that Jesus is divine as well as human. We more or less expect him to do things that only God can do. But that isn't an adequate response to Jesus or his works. He doesn't want only our praise but wants us to tell others about him in a way that will open not only their eyes but their hearts to his word and his love.

Doing a good deed is not the same as doing it well. Many do good deeds but don't do them well; they may help the poor but not (e.g.) respectfully or lovingly. Even a hypocrite may do good deeds but for the wrong reasons. Yet everything that God does is not only good but done well. "*The Lord is just in all his ways and holy in all his deeds; with wisdom, you have done them all, O Lord*"! These confessions of praise call us to imitate Jesus.

God did all this for our sake and out of love for us. He has done it to show us how we are to help one another. In Jesus, God's self-giving is like that of a good spouse giving themselves to one another. We are to be good spouses to God and one another. Again, Jesus is our good shepherd, but a shepherd can't make the same gift of self to sheep as one spouse can to the other. The gift can't be as complete or made with love and tenderness.

We aren't to care for one another as though we were caring for sheep, or even for very dear children. We are to treat one another as equals in dignity and worthy of equal respect and care. We are to love even as God has shown us in Jesus how to love another. The metaphor of spousal self-giving is intended to show us how much we have to be grateful for, and how deeply we are loved and treasured. Scripture says God does this so that we might "know him". God wants us to experience his love just as one spouse experiences the other's love, and even more fully.

We aren't called to "do for one another" distantly or coldly but in the closest and warmest way imaginable. This is part of striving to do supremely well all the good things we do for one another. God wants to say to each of us, "You have done all things well!" Come, then, spouse of God, enter into the joy of your lover and Lord. It is from that joy that we must strive to speak to others. How else can they truly "know" the Lord Jesus? The better you can see Jesus in others, and love him as He is in them, the more you will do all your deeds of love well, even very well.

Monday

SLAVERY LIVES ON

A talk by Pope Francis

My Jesuit confrere, Peter Claver, was a remarkable man. He left his homeland forever in 1610 to be a missionary in the colonies of the New World. By this time the slave trade had been established in the Americas for nearly 100 years and he dedicated his life to caring for those trapped in this terrible evil. During his 40 years of ministry, he provided medical care to them, as well as instructing and baptizing an estimated 300,000 of their number.

It would be wonderful to think that slavery was a thing of the past. Sadly, this is not so. During the Year of Mercy, I recall one of my Mercy Friday visits to a house here in Rome run by the Pope John XXIII Community for victims of human trafficking. I did not think I could find such humiliated, afflicted, and suffering women there. Truly women crucified.

I listened to the moving and very human stories of these women, some of them with their child in their arms. Afterwards I felt the need to ask forgiveness for the real torture they had to endure because of their clients, many of whom call themselves Christian.

A person can never be offered for sale. I am deeply touched by those who, in the spirit of Peter Claver, conduct the precious and courageous work of rescue and rehabilitation. This work is dangerous, because it runs the risk of possible retaliation by crime syndicates for whom these women represent an inexhaustible source of illegal and shameful profit.

If we are to combat the exploitation and humiliation of human lives effectively, we need to tell the stories behind the shocking numbers of people trafficked.

Corruption is a disease that does not stop on its own. We need to raise awareness individually and collectively about racism and slavery, and in the Church as well.

Any form of prostitution is a reduction into slavery, a criminal act, a disgusting vice that confuses love-making with venting one's instincts by torturing a defenseless woman.

It is pathological to think that a woman can be exploited like a commodity to be used and thrown away. Prostitution is a disease, a wrong way of thinking. To free these modern slaves is to continue the work of Peter Claver, and is a gesture of mercy, a duty for all people of good will. We cannot be indifferent before their cry of pain, nor can we turn away and wash our hands of the innocent blood that is shed on the roads of the world.

Tuesday

CHRIST AND THE CHURCH

From the General Audience Address of Pope Benedict XVI, 15 March 2006

An evident sign of the intention of the Nazarene to gather together the community of the Covenant, to demonstrate in it the fulfillment of the promises made to the Fathers who always speak of convocation, unification, and unity, is *the institution of the Twelve*. We heard about this institution of the Twelve in the Gospel reading. I shall read the central passage again: "And he went up into the hills and called to him those whom he desired, and they came to him. And he appointed twelve to be with him and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons. The names of the twelve Apostles are these..." (Mk 3:13-16; cf. Mt 10:1-4; Lk 6:12-16).

On the site of the revelation, "the mount", taking initiative that demonstrates absolute awareness and determination, Jesus establishes the Twelve so that, together with him, they are witnesses and heralds of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

There are no doubts about the historicity of this call, not only because of the antiquity and multiplicity of witnesses but also for the simple reason that there is also the name of Judas, the Apostle who betrayed him, notwithstanding the difficulties that this presence could have caused the new community.

The number 12, which evidently refers to the 12 tribes of Israel, already reveals the meaning of the prophetic-symbolic action implicit in the new initiative to re-establish the holy people. As the system of the 12 tribes had long since faded out, the hope of Israel awaited their restoration as a sign of the eschatological time (as referred to at the end of the Book of Ezekiel: 37: 15-19; 39: 23-29; 40-48).

In choosing the Twelve, introducing them into a communion of life with himself, and involving them in his mission of proclaiming the Kingdom in words and works (cf. Mk 6:7-13; Mt 10:5-8; Lk 9:1-6; 6:13), Jesus wants to say that the definitive time has arrived in which to constitute the new People of God, the people of the 12 tribes, which now becomes a universal people, his Church.

With their very own existence, the Twelve - called from different backgrounds - become an appeal for all of Israel to convert and allow herself to be gathered into the new covenant, the complete and perfect fulfillment of the ancient one. The fact that he entrusted to his Apostles, during the Last Supper and before his Passion, the duty to celebrate his Pasch, demonstrates how Jesus wished to transfer to the entire community, in the person of its heads, the mandate to be a sign and instrument in the history of the eschatological gathering begun by him. In a certain sense, we can say that the Last Supper itself is the act of foundation of the Church because he gives himself and thus creates a new community, a community united in communion with himself.

In this light, one understands how the Risen One confers upon them, with the effusion of the Spirit, the power to forgive sins (cf. Jn 20:23). Thus, the Twelve Apostles are the most evident sign of Jesus' will regarding the existence and mission of his Church, the guarantee that between Christ and the Church, there is no opposition: despite the sins of the people who make up the Church, they are inseparable.

Wednesday

THE DAY AFTER 9/11

From the General Audience Address of St John Paul II

Dear Brothers and sisters,

Praise be Jesus Christ!

I cannot hold this audience without expressing my profound sorrow at the terrorist attacks that yesterday brought death and destruction to America, causing thousands of victims and injuring countless people. To the President of the United States and to all American citizens I express heartfelt sympathy.

In the face of such unspeakable horror, we cannot but be deeply disturbed. I add my voice to all the voices raised in these hours to express indignant condemnation, and I strongly reiterate that the ways of violence will never lead to genuine solutions to humanity's problems.

Yesterday was a dark day in the history of humanity, a terrible affront to human dignity. After receiving the news, I followed with intense concern about the developing situation, with heartfelt prayers to the Lord. How is it possible to commit acts of such savage cruelty? The human heart has a depth has depths from which schemes of unheard-of ferocity sometimes emerge, capable of destroying the normal daily life of a people. But faith comes to our aid when words seem to fail. Christ's word is the only one that can give a response to the questions that trouble our spirit. Even if the forces of darkness appear to prevail, those who believe in God know that evil and death do not have the final say. Christian hope is based on this truth; at this time our prayerful truth draws hope from it.

With deeply felt sympathy I address myself to the beloved people of the United States in this moment of distress and consternation, when the courage of so many men and women of good will is being sorely tested. In a special way, I reach out to the families of the dead and the injured and assure them of my spiritual closeness. I entrust to the mercy of the Most High, the helpless victims of this tragedy, for whom I have offered Mass this morning. May God give courage to the survivors; may he sustain the rescue workers and the many volunteers who are presently making an enormous effort to cope with such an immense emergency.

Thursday

LOVE AND THE COMMON GOOD

From the General Audience Address of Pope Benedict XVI, 9 September 2020

God loves us first. He always precedes us in love and in solutions. He loves us unconditionally and when we welcome this divine love, then we can respond similarly. I love not only those who love me — my family, my friends, my group — but also those who do not love me, I also love those who do not know me and I also love those who are strangers, and even those who make me suffer or whom I consider enemies.

This is Christian wisdom, this is the attitude of Jesus. And the highest point of holiness, let's put it that way, is to love one's enemies, which is not easy. Certainly, to love everyone, including enemies, is difficult. I would say it is an art! But an art that can be learned and improved. True love that makes us fruitful and free is always expansive and inclusive. This love cares, heals and does good. Often, a caress does more good than many arguments, a caress of pardon instead of many arguments to defend oneself. It is inclusive love that heals.

So, *love* is not limited to the relationship between two or three people, or to friends or to family, it goes beyond. It comprises civil and political relationships (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 1907-1912), including the relationship with nature (cf. Encyclical *Laudato Si'* [LS], 231). Since we are social and political beings, one of the highest expressions of love is specifically social and political, which is decisive for human development and in order to face any type of crisis.

We know that love makes families and friendships flourish; but it is good to remember that it also makes social, cultural, economic and political relationships flourish, allowing us to construct a "civilization of love", as **Saint Paul VI** loved to say and, in turn, **Saint John Paul II**. Without this inspiration the egotistical, indifferent, throw-away culture prevails — that is, to discard anyone I do not like, whom I cannot love or those who seem to me as not useful in society.

True love does not know the throw-away culture. In fact, when we love and generate creativity, when we generate trust and solidarity, it is then that concrete initiatives for the common good emerge.

And this is true at both the level of the smallest and largest communities, as well as at the international level. What is done in the family, what is done in the neighborhood, what is done in the village, what is done in the large cities and internationally is the same; it is the same seed that grows and bears fruit. If you in your family, in your neighborhood start out with envy, with fights, there will be "war" in the end. Instead, if you start out with love, sharing love, forgiveness, there will be love and forgiveness for everyone.

Saint Thomas Aquinas used to say that the promotion of the common good is a duty of justice that falls on each citizen. Every citizen is responsible for the common good. And for Christians, it is also a mission. As Saint Ignatius of Loyola taught, to direct our daily efforts toward the common good is a way of receiving and spreading God's glory.

Friday

PRAYER IS THE LIGHT OF THE SOUL

From the Homilies of St John Chrysostom (Hom 6 on Prayer)

"There is nothing more worthwhile than to pray to God and to converse with him, for prayer unites us with God as his companions. As our bodily eyes are illuminated by seeing the light, so in contemplating God our soul is illuminated by him. Of course, the prayer I have in mind is no matter of routine, it is deliberate and earnest. It is not tied down to a fixed timetable; rather it is a state which endures by night and day.

Our soul should be directed in God, not merely when we suddenly think of prayer, but even when we are concerned with something else. If we are looking after the poor, if we are busy in some other way, or if we are doing any type of good work, we should season our actions with the desire and the remembrance of God. Through this salt of the love of God, we can all become a sweet dish for the Lord. If we are generous in giving time to prayer, we will experience its benefits throughout our life.

Prayer is the light of the soul, giving us true knowledge of God. It is a link mediating between God and man. By prayer the soul is borne up to heaven and in a marvelous way embraces the Lord. This meeting is like that of an infant crying on its mother, and seeking the best of milk. The soul longs for its own needs and what it receives is better than anything to be seen in the world.

Prayer is a precious way of communicating with God, it gladdens the soul and gives repose to its affections. You should not think of prayer as being a matter of words. It is a desire for God, an indescribable devotion, not of human origin, but the gift of God's grace. As Saint Paul says: we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

Anyone who receives from the Lord the gift of this type of prayer possesses a richness that is not to be taken from him, a heavenly food filling up the soul. Once he has tasted this food, he is set alight by an eternal desire for the Lord, the fiercest of fires lighting up his soul.

To set about this prayer, paint the house of your soul with modesty and lowliness and make it splendid with the light of justice. Adorn it with the beaten gold of good works and, for walls and stones, embellish it assiduously with faith and generosity. Above all, place prayer on top of this house as its roof so that the complete building may be ready for the Lord. Thus he will be received in a splendid royal house and by grace his image will already be settled in your soul.

Saturday

TO BE SAVED BY THE CROSS IS TO CARRY IT **A Reflection from a Meditation by Bishop Anthony Bloom**

“No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from there—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that all who believe may have eternal life in Him” (Jn 3:13ff). The Lord himself has taken upon his shoulders the first cross, the heaviest and most appalling cross. But after him, thousands and thousands of people, even children, have taken their own crosses upon themselves. These crosses, which seem lesser than Christ’s, remain so frightening for those who have to carry them.

Such innumerable crowds have lovingly, obediently, walked in the footsteps of Christ, treading a long tragic way that leads from earth to the very throne of God and into God’s Kingdom. They walk on, following Jesus, crowd after crowd, and with innumerable kinds of crosses—some of them fashioned by the sin or malice of fellow Christians. In this way, the disciples of Christ are crucified.

However far we look backward we see crosses and more crosses, one after the other. We see the bodies of martyrs and other heroes of the spirit, we see monks and nuns, we see priests and pastors, and we see many, many ordinary, simple, humble people of God who have willingly taken upon themselves crosses made by others as well as by themselves. They walk through the centuries knowing Christ foretold the sorrow all share on this earth. Yet the Kingdom of God belongs to them!

They walk with heavy crosses, rejected, hated because of truth, because of the name of Christ. They walk as pure victims—of God and one another. They are old and young, children and grown-ups. And where are you and I? Are we standing and looking, watching this long procession, this throng of people with shining eyes and with hope unquenched and yet with unfaltering love, or are we joining them? They seem to have an unbelievable joy in their hearts as they pass by us, by why?

Isn’t it our turn to join all these and find the answer? Aren’t we to take up our cross and follow Christ and all those who love him? Christ has commanded us to follow him. He is inviting us to the celebration, the party of parties, that is his Kingdom. Is this a nightmare? How can flesh and blood endure what seems a tragedy, and is? We can because Christ is Risen! We don’t see the Christ who walks before us as his tormentors saw him, as a defeated prophet. We know him even now to be in glory. We know his every word and promise is true. We know that the Kingdom of God is ours if we simply follow him. Each day we are given the grace to make that decision.