

THE THIRD WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME
Solemnity of Saints Robert, Alberic & Stephen
Founders of Citeaux
26 January – 1 February 2025

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The Founding of the Cistercian Order

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Sunday

THE JOY & CROSS OF FOLLOWING ST. BENEDICT

A Reflection from the Great Exordium of Conrad of Eberbach

“Hugh, archbishop of Lyon and legate of the Apostolic See, to Robert, abbot of Molesme, and to those brothers who desire with him to serve God according to the Rule of St. Benedict. ... You want to observe more strictly and perfectly the Rule of St. Benedict, which you have professed and which is kept somewhat tepidly and imperfectly in that monastery. Because many obstacles prevent you from doing this at the aforesaid place, we give you leave to go to another.”

Relying on this authorization, Abbot Robert and his brothers returned to Molesme and chose as associates brothers who rejected the enticements of a lax life, those who burned with eager minds to keep the Holy Rule purely and simply. There were 21 who set out in the desire of keeping to the straight and narrow way of the more perfect living of the Rule of the Holy Father Benedict.

Lord Odo, Duke of Burgundy, was delighted by the fervor and devotion of the brothers and at his own cost completely furnished the wooden monastery they built and supported them abundantly with lands and livestock. But not long after, the monks of Molesme complained to the Pope and legate that Robert’s absence was damaging their community. As a result, Abbot Robert was asked to return. Deprived of their spiritual father, the newly founded church of Citeaux quickly put forward as abbot a much-respected monk named Alberic. He was a learned man, assiduous in divine and human affairs, a lover of the Rule and of the brothers. He had been prior at Molesme, and shared in the founding of Citeaux. He endured much blame from false brethren, as well as blows and imprisonment. When, after considerable resistance, he agreed to accept the pastoral charge he sent two monks to the Apostolic See and obtained the protection of the Pope as guarantee of the abbey’s peace and liberty. In the second year after the foundation of the monastery, they brought back the written privilege.

Following this, the abbot and his brothers began to arrange their new way of life in the manner prescribed in the Rule. They observed the Rule’s traditions about the manner and order of divine services, rejected supplementary psalms, prayers and litanies, because they were being performed tepidly and negligently. The Blessed Benedict declared a monk should make himself a stranger to all worldly affairs, and so the new community eliminated all that contributed only to comfort and spurned all tithes that would lead to conflict with secular clergy. They decided to receive lay brothers to help them support themselves by manual labor. The choir monks would remain within the cloister. In the tenth year of his abbacy, the blessed Alberic deserved eternal life.

By the grace of the Holy Spirit the monks elected as abbot a man named Stephen, a person of outstanding holiness and virtue, a lover of the wilderness and very zealous for holy poverty. Since the Order was newly established and its statutes still needed work, he called the brothers together and consulted them. They forbade secular authorities from holding court at the monastery and forbade any non-necessary accouterments in the liturgy. The ideal of poverty guided these decisions. Abbot Stephen and his brothers advanced day by day in virtue and witnessed to the wise bargain they had made in choosing this way of life.

Monday

JESUS THE MEDIATOR

From the General Audience Address of Pope Benedict XVI, 16 January 2013

Something completely new happened with the Incarnation. The search for God's face was given an unimaginable turning-point, because this time this face could be seen: it is the face of Jesus, of the Son of God who became man. In him the process of the Revelation of God, which began with Abraham's call, finds fulfillment in the One who is the fullness of this Revelation, because he is the Son of God, he is both "the mediator and the sum total of Revelation" (Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 2), the content of Revelation and the Revealer coincide in him. Jesus shows us God's face and makes God's name known to us. In the Priestly Prayer at the Last Supper he says to the Father: "I have manifested your name to the men... I made known to them your name" (cf. Jn 17:6; 6, 26). The phrase: "name of God", means God as the One who is present among men and women. God had revealed his name to Moses by the burning bush, that is, he had made it possible to call on him, had given a tangible sign of his "being" among human beings. All this found fulfillment and completion in Jesus: he inaugurated God's presence in history in a new way, because whoever sees him, sees the Father, as he said to Philip (cf. Jn 14:9). Christianity, St Bernard said, is the "religion of God's word"; yet "not a written and mute word, but an incarnate and living" (*Homilia Super Missus Est*, 4, 11: pl 183, 86b). In the patristic and medieval tradition, a special formula is used to express this reality: it says that Jesus is the *Verbum abbreviatum* (cf. Rom 9:28, with a reference to Is 10:23), the abbreviated Word, the short and essential Word of the Father who has told us all about him. In Jesus the whole Word is present.

In Jesus too the mediation between God and man attains fulfillment. In the Old Testament, there is an array of figures who carried out this role, in particular Moses, the deliverer, the guide, the "mediator" of the Covenant, as he is defined in the New Testament (cf. Gal 3:19; Acts 7:35; Jn 1:17). Jesus, true God and true man, is not simply one of the mediators between God and man but rather "the mediator" of the new and eternal Covenant (cf. Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24); "for there is one God", Paul says, "and there is one *mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5 cf. Gal 3:19-20). In him we see and encounter the Father; in him we can call upon God with the name of "Abba, Father"; in him, we are given salvation.

The desire to know God truly, that is, to see God's face, is innate in every human being, even in atheists. And perhaps we unconsciously have this wish simply to see who he is, what he is, who he is for us. However this desire is fulfilled in following Christ, in this way we see his back and, in the end, we see God too as a friend, in Christ's face we see his face. The important thing is that we not only follow Christ in our needy moments or when we find a slot in our daily occupations, but in our life as such. The whole of our life must be oriented to meeting Jesus Christ, to loving him; and, in our life we must allocate a central place to loving our neighbor, that love which, in the light of the Crucified One, enables us to recognize the face of Jesus in the poor, in the weak and in the suffering. This is only possible if the true face of Jesus has become familiar to us through listening to his word, in an inner conversation with him, in entering this word so that we truly meet him, and of course, in the Mystery of the Eucharist. In the Gospel of St Luke the passage about the two disciples of Emmaus recognize Jesus in the breaking of bread is important; prepared by the journey with him, by the invitation to stay with them that they had addressed to him and by the conversation that made their hearts burn within them, in the end they saw Jesus. For us too the Eucharist is the great school in which we learn to see God's face, we enter into a close relationship with him; and at the same time, we learn to turn our gaze to the final moment of history when he will satisfy us with the light of his face. On earth when we are walking towards this fullness, in the joyful expectation that the Kingdom of God will really be brought about.

Tuesday

WE MUST WORSHIP ONLY THE ONE TRUE GOD

A Reflection from a Discourse by St. Thomas Aquinas

The first commandment has to do with loving the One True God: *"You shall not have strange gods in my presence"*. Scripture tells us some of the many reasons why people have worshipped something or someone other than the One God. For instance, some have thought demons more important or helpful than the True God. Some have worshipped the sun and the moon, mistaken for divine beings. In other words, people are deceived about who God is. Some imagine that natural things are the sources of life and goodness and so, in effect, worship them. Some have worshiped the dead or their ancestors and some have worshiped powerful living, though no salvation is from them. Some others have treated themselves, or things like pleasures, as though they were the sources of goodness. None of these should be worshipped as the True God is worshiped.

Scripture gives us a number of reasons why our worship should all be directed to the True God. The first is that one should reverence anything only according to its genuine dignity. We must not *"exchange the glory of the incorruptible God for the image of a corruptible thing"*, as the Letter to the Romans tells us. Everything else is passing and won't always be there for us. The One God alone is omniscient and so knows all and cares for all. That is essential to God's dignity as supreme. *"All things are open and naked in his sight"*, as the Letter to the Hebrews says.

We should worship God because it is from God that we receive everything good. God is the maker of all things. God fills all things with goodness. We would be very ungrateful indeed if we did not appreciate what has been given us. To look to anyone else would be to treat them as gods and so do exactly what we are forbidden to do. We have to put all our trust in God. *"Blessed is the one whose hope is in the name of the Lord"*. St. Paul asks, *"Now that you have known God ... how can you turn to what is weak and needy?"*

Yet again, remember that we have made a solemn promise to worship only the True God. We have renounced the devil and promised fidelity to God alone. This is a promise we must not break! *"One who breaks the Law of Moses can be put to death on the evidence of two or three witnesses, so how much more does one who treads underfoot the Son of God deserve punishment!"* We have made a choice and must not try to undo it.

It is a terrible burden to try and find a good life by serving the devil and doing evil. The prophet Jeremiah reminded his contemporaries that if they chose other gods, they would have to work at serving them day and night and get nothing from it anyway. That is one reason why one who sins has to sin again; sin never gives us a good life but keeps us seeking it in vain. Jesus, on the other hand, tells us that his burden is light and his yoke pleasant to bear. You have entrusted yourself to Jesus. Don't turn back. Think of the greatness of the reward promised us for serving God. There is no law that brings with it such promises. In Matthew's Gospel, we are told that *"we shall be as the angels of God in heaven"*. Think of St. Peter's question: *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life!"*

Wednesday

OUR RESPONSIBILITIES

A Reflection from The Parables of the Gospels by Leopold Fonck

By his many parables, Our Lord teaches us manifold lessons. He most often teaches us that God works in people's life in quiet, almost unnoticed ways, but in doing this simultaneously teaches us about the responsibilities God gives us, both individually and as a community.

Consider the parable of the mustard seed, initially a seed so small one can hardly see it. Yet it becomes something great and important. Yes, the fact that God begins small explains why many don't accept what comes to them as God's gift. So the parable teaches us to look for God in everything and not put many obstacles in the way of a seed's growth because we don't think it can come to anything great.

It helps us if we interpret the parables about growth in terms of the growth of the unbelief that is so common in our world. It was also common enough in ancient Israel. What are its causes? Take the instance of the parable of the sower as an answer to this question.

By his explanations of the parable the Lord simultaneously explains why there is unbelief and shows us what God expects us to do in response to unbelief. Because we have not always believed, or believed whole heartedly, we should be able to sympathetically enter into the situation of those who openly declare their unbelief, and perhaps help God make them receptive to his gifts and calls.

So the words of our Divine Master contain for each of us an exhortation to self-examination as well as a call to evangelization. Take, for example, the hardness of the soil upon which God's seed falls. Why are people's hearts so often hard? Why are our own hearts sometimes hard and impervious to what God says to us? Because we can work so hard to make their lives good, by means of our own plans, that no other ways of living can win acceptance and put down roots in their hearts. Or one may have such deeply ingrained ways of thinking that anything which goes contrary to them isn't allowed to take root or can't be understood in a way that makes its goodness apparent. Often times people don't want to consider anything that isn't part of their present understanding of how life works; they won't even take God's words seriously because it doesn't fit how they are living.

Such causes of unbelief afflict all to a greater or lesser extent. We have a responsibility to help and seek help in such situations. We are responsible for how our human "soil" responds to God's seeds. We need one another's help to do this. It is a basic form of mutual love of neighbor.

Thursday

OUR SACRIFICE TO GOD

A Reflection from a Sermon by St. Augustine

If you want to please God you need only turn to Scripture to know what you should do. The fiftieth psalm says: *“Had you desired a sacrifice I certainly would have offered one, but you take no delight in burnt offerings”*. These negative words need to be complemented by positive ones: *“A sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite spirit, a broken and contrite heart God will not despise”*. We can always find something to offer.

Indeed, we are not asked to offer animals as in the days of the patriarchs. But you people through generations have the same faith even though the sacramental signs have been modified. Changes in the outward signs of faith have not affected the underlying truth. Rams, lambs, calves, and goats—whatever the victim once was it foreshadowed Christ. He is the one who leads his flock, and it is Christ who offers himself instead of the son of Abraham. Both the ram and Isaac were foretypes of Christ. As Isaac carried the wood for sacrifice so Christ carried his cross, but whereas the ram whose horns were caught in a thicket was offered in place of Isaac there was no substitute for Christ.

Behold the Lamb of God; behold Christ! He takes away the sins of the world. The ancient patriarchs believed in Christ, their Lord, and ours. Not only did they believe him to be the Word of God, but they also believed that the man Christ Jesus is the mediator between God and humanity, and by word and prophecy they handed on that faith to us. That is what St. Paul means when he says: *“We have the same spirit of faith and therefore it is written: I believed and I have spoken accordingly.”*

King David, in the psalm I have already quoted, spoke of sacrifices that are no longer offered to God. However, he showed the vision of a prophet in that same psalm. Setting aside the practices of his own day, he looked into the future and taught us that *“The sacrifice acceptable to God is a contrite spirit”*.

Well, then, we have a sacrifice to offer. No need to go in search of a flock of sheep or sail to distant lands to bring back spices. Search your own heart and let it be broken and contrite. Are you afraid that such breakage will be the death of your heart? Don't be afraid! In the very psalm, I have been quoting we find the words: *“A pure heart create in me, O God”*. Yes, create a pure heart in me, Lord. And that it may be created let the old, unclean heart within me indeed be broken!

Friday

LEADING OTHERS TO CHRIST IN FREEDOM

A Reflection by Henri Gheon

People think that a work founded on authority has a better chance for survival since authority can be passed on. They think a work founded on liberty is likely to descend into chaos. Yet Don Bosco's work was founded on liberty.

John Bosco appreciated the minds of children and refused to try to constrain them. There must be a minimum of discipline but individual liberty is observed and not really controlled. He approached each boy with an interest in all that was his—family, jobs, tastes—in so far as possible just as one of the boy's peers would do this. In this way he won confidence and liking and used them, seemingly without effort, to teach the knowledge of good and evil, a desire for the best, and a taste for prayer.

Above all, prayer must not be reserved for certain times and places because God is always present. For evening prayer, he brought the boys out of church for this precise reason. What he said was short, familiar, illustrated and within the grasp of all. The boys gathered in a yard for evening prayer and it lasted two or three minutes. It was designed as part of their play. Since the master had taken such an interest in whatever games the boys chose to play it was natural for them to take an interest in his sermonettes. He would make some incident in their day the occasion of a reflection and was listened to with pleasure.

His idea was to place a child's life on what he called the "level of joy" and make this a path to the love of God. They never went to sacraments en mass because Don Bosco saw his job as winning individuals to want them.

If a boy behaved badly then he was punished but only when it was really necessary and without humiliation or violence. He wanted the worst punishment to be his own displeasure and sorrow at the bad thing done. Of course, this could only be effective when there was genuine affection binding the boys to him. And he was careful to keep this from being a "sentimental" thing. If a boy was incorrigible and had to be expelled then it had to be done without uproar and for a reason that wouldn't damage the boy's reputation with peers. All of this was part of his Method of Liberty. The goal was to win the trust and liking of a majority.

He looked for ways and make this happen. That was what he thought of as the method of love, and it is a method that works among adults just as it does among children. Love is not an approach that requires the special genius of Don Bosco in dealing with others but "works" for all. Don Bosco's goal was that the children he worked with should learn to use it with one another and in their dealings with adults. That it worked with adults is witnessed by his marvelous success in winning support, not only financially but as personal involvement. He created an institution dedicated to caring for street children and sought to turn everyone's attention from self and personal affairs to caring for and helping others. When one lives the love of Christ wonderful things happen. We are invited to do just this, day by day.

Saturday

OUR NEED FOR MARY

A Reflection by Leon-Joseph Cardinal Suenens

Our world is living a marvelous human adventure. One has only to become aware of everything that the space adventures represent: men on the moon, in a jeep digging the soil of the moon, discovering a certain green stone that might very well go back four billion years and more. It is a dazzling triumph of human science.

And there are not only these discoveries outside ourselves: science is also penetrating more and more deeply into the human soil: tomorrow perhaps, it may succeed in molding and remaking humans according to its own plan.

All that is at once grandiose and redoubtable. But if science opens horizons indefinitely, it does not, however, solve the vital, essential questions that every human being raises: what is, in the end, the ultimate meaning of this human adventure and of my life here below? What is there beyond death, even if it is delayed artificially? This is where real human concern lies, the mystery that humankind is ever probing.

Those questions need an answer, they need an answer at all costs. It is not enough to multiply means of living and techniques; the world needs reasons for living even more fundamentally, as Cardinal Marty so rightly said, not long ago.

It is here that Mary appears, offering us her Son, as the One who alone possesses the words of eternal life. Mary is at the heart of the mystery of the Incarnation: she is the Mother of him who will be "the way, the truth and the life" for all time to come. On the threshold of men's search to solve the mystery of life, Mary offers to us, with a unique qualification, as THE INTRODUCER. The story of the Wise Men is not just a story of the past; it is also the symbol of this permanent human quest. The Wise Men set out through the desert and the nights, watching out for the light that was to take them in the end to Bethlehem. The Scriptures tell us, with regard to them, that "going into the dwelling, they found the child there, with his mother Mary, and fell down to worship him."

The discovery of Christ is made through meeting the Savior's Mother: the Mother cannot be dissociated from the Child, nor the Child from the Mother, because the very mystery of the Incarnation takes on its whole significance only through the faithful and humbly consenting collaboration of her whom Tradition will call "Theotokos".

I asked the German theologian, Karl Rahner, how he explained the present drop in Marian piety in the Church. His reply deserves attention: "Too many Christians," he answered, "whatever their religious obedience may be, tend to make Christianity an ideology, an abstraction. And abstraction does not need a mother."

What Mary offers the world of today is the living and concrete reality of the Savior of the world in his Incarnation. She forces us to believe that Christ is not, as we sometimes unconsciously imagine, a being partly God and partly man, but that he is completely divine and completely human.