

# THE FIFTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME

9-15 February 2025

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Sunday

## **GOD CALLS US TO GO INTO DEEP WATER**

### **A Reflection from The High Green Hill by Fr. Gerald Vann**

*“Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret with a crowd pressing around him to listen to the Word of God, and he caught sight of two boats close to the shore with the fishermen who had gone out in them washing their nets. He got into one of the boats, Simon’s.”* (Lk.5:1-11) Do you remember our Lord’s words to Simon once he had finished proclaiming God’s word? Go out into the deep water, he said. There is always a temptation to think of religion as something added on to the main business of life, like an addition to a building. But if we think like that, we miss the whole meaning and adventure to which God calls us. Living our faith isn’t something added on to life but the revelation of a wholly new dimension of life. We are invited to plunge into it as a diver plunges into the sea. The temptation we face is to live on the surface of life. We concern ourselves with the jobs and joys that every day brings without bothering about what lies beneath them. But that means we don’t live fully! If we go on like that there is no depth in our lives. Our Lord says to us, Go into the deep water!

This can be a frightening thing. Remember the first time you went into the water, especially if it meant going into the sea. It can be scary. The first time you go in you find yourself in a new and strange element. But if you go on you can forget your fright and enjoy a new thrill. You find a sense of freedom; what was strange begins to seem friendly and the water buoys you up and supports you. But if it is the sea, it still has the feeling of overwhelming immensity!

That is what the life of faith is meant to feel like. It isn’t a matter of knowing more things than you would otherwise but of knowing something underneath and deeper than everything else. You know the secret heart of everything because you know that Presence which is Love Divine. You know what surrounds and is in all things. You plunge into Divine Life rather like a diver does into the water. This is why Our Lord said that he had come so that we might have life and have it ever more abundantly. If you plunge into faith, you escape the narrow confines of selfish and shallow living. You move into immensity. It can be scary. Remember what Jesus tells us: Don’t be afraid! His hand is always there to hold us up and his voice to encourage us, even as he encouraged and held up Peter when he lost faith and began to sink in the stormy waters.

Remember now what Simon said to Jesus after Jesus finished teaching and told him to go into deeper water. “Master”, he said, “We worked all night and didn’t catch anything!” Isn’t that how we often feel about prayer? Yet we know we have to go on and say what Simon did: “At your command, I will try again!” St. Luke tells us that when he did, the net brought up a huge number of fish.

Sometimes people fail because they try to pray in a way that does suit them. That is the experience we call “dryness”. It means we have more to learn. God is teaching us in a way that really makes an impression. We are learning to pray as a way of loving God rather than achieving some other result. Nobody expects an adventure to be easy. The life of faith and that of prayer are an adventure. It brings us to God and to trusting wholly in God. The adventure is always worth the effort! Obey the Lord’s word and learn the truth.

*Monday*

## **FULFILLING THE OBLIGATIONS OF THE LAW OF LOVE**

### **A Reflection based on the Dialogues of St. Gregory**

St. Benedict makes it very clear that the abbot of a monastery living under his Rule for Monks must observe all its provisions. He also makes it very clear that the objective of the Rule's provisions is that the monks' hearts be enlarged so as to find no burden in keeping God's commands but run the way they create filled with joy. The laws and observances of the Rule teach and form monks to love God, above all else!

Pope St. Gregory, also a monk, used the story of St. Benedict's final meeting with his twin sister, St. Scholastica, to reflect on these ideals and what sort of surprises can happen when one puts them into practice. The heart of the story is the seeming conflict between the obligations of the law of love for God and neighbor—with all one's heart and mind and strength, and the obligations of the Rule that exist to teach us such love. The moral of the story is that since God is first, the work of leading others deeper into the love of God trumps every other obligation.

We all know the story. Scholastica is abbess of a monastery a few miles from Benedict's monastery. Since women weren't permitted to enter his abbey the two of them met in a house near the bottom of the mountain. The mountain is very steep and the road winds back and forth upward. It's an exhausting walk for two elderly monks. Scholastica felt her death was near, but the spiritual support they gave each other made it all worthwhile.

Scholastica was filled with anticipation of the wondrous life awaiting her in God's Kingdom. It wasn't the joy she would know that was most important to her but being with God! So she wanted to share this bubbling love for God with her brother and hear about his experience of God. But he had to obey the Rule! So they had to stop in time for him to get back to the abbey before the Grand Silence.

Probably the two communities lived by the same Rule but she now wanted him to ignore part of it—to ignore the Grand Silence, to spend the night away from the monastery and with women. Benedict said "No!" Did he shake his pastoral staff at her in admonition? If he did it was in vain. She wanted to keep on sharing their experiences of prayer and seeking God. She put her head in her hands and used her gift of tears to pray to God!

As we know, the resulting rain had to be seen to be believed. St. Gregory draws a lesson: Surely it is no more than right that her influence was greater than his since hers was the greater love! Is that an extraordinary thing for a monk to say? The Rule was their guide to total love of God. But he was putting the observance of the Rule ahead of helping her love God with all intensity. At that moment she was deeper in love for God than he was. Is there anything more important than helping another grow more intensely in love with God? The purpose of the Rule took priority over the means it provided. The love of sharing the love for God is the highest of all obligations. On whose authority does a pope utter this verdict? On that of God who worked the miracle.

Tuesday

**“BE MERCIFUL, EVEN AS YOUR FATHER IS MERCIFUL”**

**STANDING BESIDE THOSE WHO SUFFER ON A PATH OF CHARITY**

**Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Thirtieth World Day of the Sick**

The theme chosen for this Thirtieth World Day of the Sick, *“Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful”* (Lk6:36), makes us first turn our gaze towards God, who is “rich in mercy” (Eph2:4); he always watches over his children with a father’s love, even when they turn away from him. Mercy is God’s name par excellence; mercy, understood not as an occasional sentimental feeling but as an ever-present and active force, expresses God’s very nature. It combines strength and tenderness. For this reason, we can say with wonder and gratitude that God’s mercy embraces both fatherhood and motherhood (cf. Is49:15). God cares for us with the strength of a father and the tenderness of a mother; he unceasingly desires to give us new life in the Holy Spirit.  
Jesus, the mercy of the Father

The supreme witness of the Father’s merciful love for the sick is his only-begotten Son. How often do the Gospels relate Jesus’ encounters with people suffering from various diseases! He “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” (Mt4:23). We do well to ask ourselves why Jesus showed such great concern for the sick, so much so that he made it paramount in the mission of the apostles, who were sent by the Master to proclaim the Gospel and to heal the sick (cf. Lk9:2).

One twentieth-century philosopher suggests a reason for this: “Pain isolates in an absolute way, and absolute isolation gives rise to the need to appeal to the other, to call out to the other”. When individuals experience frailty and suffering in their own flesh as a result of illness, their hearts become heavy, fear spreads, uncertainties multiply, and questions about the meaning of what is happening in their lives become all the more urgent. How can we forget, in this regard, all those patients who, during this time of pandemic spent the last part of their earthly life in solitude, in an intensive care unit, assisted by generous healthcare workers, yet far from their loved ones and the most important people in their lives? This helps us to see how important is the presence at our side of witnesses to God’s charity, who, following the example of Jesus, the very mercy of the Father, pour the balm of consolation and the wine of hope on the wounds of the sick.  
To touch the suffering flesh of Christ

Jesus’ invitation to be merciful like the Father has particular significance for healthcare workers. I think of all those physicians, nurses, laboratory technicians, the support staff, and the caretakers of the sick, as well as the numerous volunteers who donate their precious time to assist those who suffer. Dear healthcare workers, your service alongside the sick, carried out with love and competence, transcends the bounds of your profession and becomes a mission. Your hands, which touch the suffering flesh of Christ, can be a sign of the merciful hands of the Father. Be mindful of the great dignity of your profession, as well as the responsibility that it entails.

*Wednesday*

## **HUMILITY AS THE LAMP STAND FOR GOD'S LIGHT**

### **A Reflection developed from various sources**

Blessed Humbeline was the youngest sister of St. Bernard. She married and had children but was unsatisfied with her life as a way of serving God and so decided to seek counsel from her brother. St. Bernard, misjudged the reason for her coming to him, and refused to see her until she humbly sent him a message explaining that she had come to ask his advice about her way of best serving God. His advice was that she should obtain her husband's permission to become a nun and so spend the remainder of her life seeking God above all else.

Humbeline had to work for some years before she was able to obtain her husband's permission to leave married life and enter a monastery. She went to Jully, whose abbess was the sister of her husband. She remained there for the rest of her lifetime, though she was later elected abbess, or prioress—the sources don't make it clear how the community at Troyes saw the matter. The sister-in-law went away to found a new monastery and Humbeline was elected in her place.

She devoted her life to the loving service of her sisters and seems to have been a good and faithful superior. Her monastery lived the Rule of Benedict but was not joined to the new order of Cîteaux. As far as we know, St. Bernard and others had nothing but praise for the life of the nuns living under the guidance of Humbeline. She had made the humility with which she responded to her brother's harsh judgment the rule of her life and ministry to her sisters.

We are told that St. Bernard was present at his sister's death and that she told him she was tremendously grateful for his advice that she leave married life and take up instead the monastic life. She had found it a choice filled with joy and inner peace. This, no doubt, is a word for us even more than for St. Bernard. One who lives the monastic life fully, without looking back at what has been left behind, finds it a source of joy and mutual help that leads one to a spiritual fulfillment not found in any other way. That is what Humbeline experienced and what she recommended to many others.

St. Benedict presents humility as a key virtue for those who choose to walk the monastic way toward God. Humbeline gives us an example of a person who wasn't filled with self-concern or self-importance. She was willing to rely on others whom she could see were dedicated first of all to loving God and all the others who choose to seek Him as well.

She knew that Bernard had made this choice and so was fully prepared to hear and follow his advice, as long as that advice was consonant with fulfilling the obligations to God and others she had already undertaken. That her husband eventually gave his permission for her to enter monastic life meant that she had his support and his willingness to give up all the types of support he had received from her throughout their years as husband and wife. She hoped what she did would also lead him to place God even more practically at the center of his life. All of this exemplifies what humility looks like practically. Removing self from the center of one's life makes room for God to fill that place. That is what can bring us all to God and to God's light. It makes us ready to live the life of the Kingdom of Heaven. Like Humbeline, we become lamp stands from which the light of Christ shines.

*Thursday*

## **THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN**

**From an Article on Bible Odyssey by Dr. Claudia Setzer**

The status of the Syrophoenician woman in Mark's Gospel as a woman, gentile, and foreigner would render her "triple marginalized," especially as compared to the other two groups who appear in chapter 7 of Mark's Gospel. Jesus experiences opposition and misunderstanding from two groups of Jewish males. He sparred with Pharisees over the value of purity regulations, and showed frustration at his disciples' lack of understanding of his saying about food and good deeds, "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." The woman may exemplify this saying as a non-Jew who consumes ritually impure food, but whose words show wisdom and healing. Others point out that the woman may also symbolize the community of Mark's Gospel, which includes many gentiles, is outside of Palestine, and, like most early communities of believers, includes many women.

The woman is said to be from Syria-Phoenicia. Syria was the name of the Roman province that included parts of present-day Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Israel, later merging with Judea to become Syria-Palestina. Phoenicians were an ancient Semitic people related to the biblical Canaanites, who inhabited city-states throughout the Mediterranean. One of their population centers was Tyre, a coastal city in present-day Lebanon, about twelve miles north of the border with Israel. Both geographically and ethnically, the Syrophoenician woman represents someone on the borders between Jews and gentiles. The word "gentile" designates her as a non-Jew.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus praises the woman for her "word" (logos) and credits it as the reason for her daughter's healing. Interpreters have responded to this story by turning it into an example of the woman's faith, perhaps importing the idea from the story of the woman with a flow of blood in Mark 5. The earliest example of this transformation appears in Matthew's version of the story where the woman is called a Canaanite and praised for her faith.

Biblical translations invariably include a subheading to Mark's version of the story such as "the Syrophoenician Woman's Faith." Given her quick and clever response and Jesus's praise for her word, a better subtitle would be "the Syrophoenician Woman's Wit." Most interpreters have understood the story to be part of the expansion of Jesus's mission to the non-Jewish world. The story also assumes that women and non-Jews were part of the cultural milieu of the earliest communities around Jesus.

*Friday*

## **CHRIST'S LIGHT SHINES TROUGH WORLDLY EVENTS**

### **A Reflection developed from an Article on Catholic Online**

Cyril and Methodius must have often wondered, even as we do today, how God could bring spiritual meaning out of worldly concerns. Every mission they went on, every struggle they fought, was a result of political battles and not spiritual concerns. Yet the political realities have long been forgotten and the two saints work lives on in the faith and life of Slavic peoples everywhere.

We are told that Methodius and Constantine (who took the name Cyril only when he became a monk) grew up in Thessalonica as members of a prominent Christian family. They were familiar with the Old Slavonic language because many Slavic people had settled in the city. Methodius entered Imperial Service and worked without any special distinction. Constantine studied at the Imperial University in Constantinople but refused a political career and was ordained a priest. He was the official librarian for the Hagia Sophia cathedral and taught philosophy at the Imperial University for some time. He was even sent to an embassy in the court of the Muslim Caliph in order to discuss theology with his scholars.

Meanwhile, Methodius became a monk in Bythnia, across the Bosphorus from Constantinople and shortly Constantine decided to join him. Four years later the Patriarch of Constantinople sent them to Russia to strengthen the faith of the Khazar people. Soon afterward the King of Moravia (modern Check Republic) asked for Byzantine missionaries because he feared the political influence of Charlemagne's Western Empire. Its authority was spread by Latin-speaking missionaries and local rulers opposed this.

The two brothers worked hard to build up a Christian community but were accused by Rome and had to go there to defend their work, especially the liturgical use of Old Slavonic. The issue behind the scenes was political but ecclesiastical issues were raised to conceal this fact. Cyril and Methodius, however, won the support of Pope Nicholas I and he approved their liturgical practice and ordained them bishops. But Cyril died before they could return to their mission and left Methodius to face the continuing difficulties with Latin missionaries. This went on for the rest of his life, due primarily to the political power issues that shaped the thinking of missionaries from the Western empire.

Keep it in mind that all the struggles against Western missionaries were political and the political infighting used liturgical differences between East and West as so many excuses. The Latin missionaries wanted to bring Eastern Europe into the empire of Charlemagne while Constantinople, and its patriarch, opposed this. Indeed, it is thought that Pope Nicholas ordained the two brothers to give him more influence in Eastern Europe, as competing with the Patriarch of Constantinople for influence.

Methodius was given jurisdiction over Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian and Moravian territories. The German bishops intriguing against him got him imprisoned and he was only released when German military forces were defeated in Moravia. But to appease the German bishops the Pope forbade Methodius to use the vernacular (Old Slavonic) in the liturgy. His opponents failed to appreciate how important vernacular liturgy and preaching could be to strengthen a people's faith.

A culture and its language can serve as a kind of lamp stand for the Light of Christ even while it renews that culture. Political power cannot do this, though missionaries from Germany were very slow to admit it. The Gospel prospered through Methodius' recognition of these facts and it became an integral part of Slavic culture.

*Saturday*

## **THE MAGNIFICAT AND GOD'S PEOPLE OF FAITH**

### **A Reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini**

It is important that we notice the Magnificat begins with a reference to Mary's individuality. "My soul" proclaims the greatness of the Lord and "my spirit" exults in God "my Savior". It is Mary, an individual and historical person who speaks of herself and her destiny in a way that involves us all. Yet, this canticle, so rigorously individual in its beginning, ends with a "collective" reference to the entire People of God.

Mary expresses the historic consciousness of God's People. "God has come to the help of Israel, his servant, mindful of his mercy—according to the promise he made to our ancestors—of his mercy to Abraham and his descendants forever". Mary is the glorious slave girl of the Lord and her destiny is what we sing of in this hymn. But that means she has become the "servant of Israel", which means the servant of all who are united with her faith and are thus Children of Abraham. We are all God's People and inheritors of the Covenant.

These facts are the reason why we read in the Magnificat the prophecy of the Church to come. This is exactly what the Fathers of the Church saw in this part of Scripture, and, indeed, in many pages of Scripture. They believed that the mystery of the Church was in Scripture from its very beginning. This mystery comes to light in a special way through Mary. She reminds us that our perfect completeness has to come to be through history and within God's People.

The Magnificat isn't only a lyric expression of a personal grace. It is about the epic of a people. In the same way as the Assumption isn't merely Mary's personal destiny, the hymn is a promise and prophesy of what all members of the Church are called to. Notice that we are called to this destiny as a Church, and so was Mary. The Assumption shows us ourselves as God's New Creation. We see the new community as reconciled and at peace with God; all are living in "shalom"; i.e., a right relationship with God and with one another. Mary has attained to this fullness and peace in and with Jesus as we must.

What do we pray for? We pray that all humanity—call them Mary's people and the historic People of Israel—can now understand the ways of God and of God's peace. We pray in order that each of us may collaborate in this work of making peace. We are called to put aside all resentment and to realize the promise of God's mercy for all. God promised it to our ancestors—e.g., to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob—and to their offspring not only of flesh but of faith. It is the mystery of the one for all; of Jesus for all and of Mary and each of us as in Jesus. How can we fail to rejoice and give thanks and pray with jubilation, just like Mary did and we hear her doing each time we pray the Magnificat.