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Sunday

THE DIFFERENCE CHRISTIAN VALUES MAKE **A Reflection from a homily of St. John Chrysostom**

“Blessed are you who are poor, but woe to you who are rich.” Only a Christian can have a true sense of values. What’s more, only a Christian can have the joy that comes from true values! It is not only our values that are different but our joys and sorrows. Have you ever watched a boxing match? Even if the winner is bruised and hurt, still the winner’s attention is not on pain but on the fact of being a winner. If all you could think of was the pain you would never have the least idea of the joy that fills a winner’s heart and mind. When people see what Christians suffer but know nothing of what they genuinely value, people have no idea of why Christians accept sufferings and deprivations with joy. In the eyes of those who don’t share Christian values, Christians are only suffering; they see the struggle to face danger but they can’t see what Christians are looking forward to—they can’t even imagine the rewards and sense of being victorious that fills a genuine Christian.

When Paul talked about possessing nothing and yet having everything, what did he mean by “everything”? He was talking about good things, ones that are both earthly and heavenly, physical and spiritual. Entire communities looked upon Paul as a messenger from God and received him with joy and honor. Isn’t that an earthly gift? If people were ready to sacrifice themselves, even baring their necks to the sword of an executioner for the sake of what he had taught them, wasn’t this an earthly honor? Yet these were nothing in comparison to the spiritual wealth that truly made Paul rich.

The King of the universe, the Lord of angels, loved Paul so much that he shared his secrets with him in a vision. Didn’t he surpass everyone else in riches because this was given him? Can’t we say that he possessed all things? The same was true of Peter. If it had been otherwise demons wouldn’t have been subject to him and sickness and suffering wouldn’t have been banished by his mere presence! Shouldn’t we suffer for Christ’s sake, and do it not merely with courage but even with joy?

If we have to go hungry can’t we be as glad as if we were enjoying a banquet? That’s what happens when you value what Christ values and so gain true values. We value unity with Christ more than anything else! If we are insulted, we can feel elated as though we were being showered with praise, because we value suffering with Christ. If we lose all we possess, we can consider ourselves gainers because we have Christ and that means we have all things. If we provide for the poor, we regard ourselves as receiving a great gift. When we give alms, we don’t think we are losing anything by gaining the great gift that is heaven. This is the way it is in regard to all the virtues we practice.

We don’t think of painful efforts or any negative thing but only of being with Christ and God in their life. Our struggles are for the Lord in two senses. We are struggling to let go of our old values and put on Christ’s and we are struggling to love all whom Christ loves. If we do both, we will be made able to rise above all struggle and live in the happiness of knowing we are doing and having exactly what we want. Nothing brings more happiness than this.

Monday

HOW GOD BUILDS US UP

A Reflection from a homily by Gregory Palamas

To create us God brought the entire universe into being starting from nothing. Without this we could not maintain our life. But this was not all that our God did. The entire perceptible universe was made to be a kind of mirror in which we can see divine goodness and love. In spiritual contemplation of the world around us we can reach up to heaven, as though we were climbing a wondrous ladder.

God has implanted in our minds an innate law, a kind of rule and infallible judge and unerring teacher, which we call our conscience. If we look deep within ourselves we need nothing other than this to instruct us in the knowledge of good. Even if we look outside ourselves we find the invisible God made visible through the created world, as St. Paul says.

God in this way opens a path by which we may learn what is excellent and good through our own nature and through the created world. What's more, God gave us angels to protect us, raised up the patriarchs and prophets to be our guides and showed us signs and miracles to lead us into faith. God also gave us a written law as a help to the innate law of our minds and the teaching of creation. And then, at last, when we had scorned everything given us in our apathy, God gave himself to us for our salvation.

How utterly different is God's continuing love and care as compared with our apathy. God poured the wealth of divinity into our humble state by taking our nature and becoming a human being like us. He was called our teacher and in these ways teaches us even now the greatness of his own love for us, proving it by both word and deed. At the same time, God urges us to imitate his great compassion and so break down the hardness of many hearts.

Although there is love involved in the management of worldly affairs, just as there is in the relation of a shepherd to a flock, and even in the devotion of an owner of property to personal possessions, this hardly compares with the love that unites families in close relationship—especially the love that parents feel for their children. All this is based on the relationship that our Lord establishes with us and proves in his own love.

For our sake God became human and gave us a new life through baptism and the grace of the Holy Spirit. Will we respond to such love with our own love, and by cooperating with God's efforts to build us up and make us more fully the kind of persons he created us to be? Today let us begin again. His grace never leaves us.

Tuesday

DWELLING IN THE SHELTER OF GOD'S LOVE

A Reflection taken from a sermon by St. Bernard

We are called to dwell in the protection of God. We are told that to dwell under God's protection is to dwell in safety. We can understand best that to which we are called by considering three sorts of people who don't dwell there.

The first lacks hope, the second has given up hope, and the third hopes in vain. Those who lack hope trust in themselves rather than God. Those who are giving up hope are those who despair of ever getting what they seek. Those who hope in vain live in sin. They flatter themselves so much with the thought of God's mercy that they never bother to amend their sinful ways. There is no love in this and that is their downfall.

The first group mentioned dwells on personal merits, the second dwells on personal woes, and the third on personal vices. What is more foolish than to dwell in a half-built house? When a person has just begun to build a dwelling place for God, that person can't act as though it were finished. That's what one does if one doesn't live in hope. That is the situation of those who think their merits are enough to bring them to God. The only people who dwell in the shelter of God's presence are those whose sole desire is to receive it and whose sole fear is that they might lose it and who ponder it carefully day by day.

Is there under heaven anything that can harm a person whom the God of Heaven has decided to protect? So, nothing better can be sought than to dwell in the protection of the God of Heaven. We are taught not only to seek God so that we may avoid evil but to seek to be with God always so that we may do good.

Be careful to pay close attention to the saying: "The one who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide under the protection of the God of Heaven; such a one will say to the Lord, You are my protector!" This Scripture speaks of living under the protection of God and not in the presence of God. Angels rejoice in God's presence. All we ask is to be able to abide under God's protection. All I ask is to be secure in God's protection.

There is no doubt that God is everywhere. But God is in heaven in a way that makes God's presence on earth seem like nothing. So, when we pray we say "Our Father, who art in Heaven". Our soul is in the whole of our body but it seems more especially to be in the head where all the senses meet. The head seems in some way to govern the other members of a person and so the person seems to dwell in the head more than in the other members. In the same way, we say the very presence of God is in Heaven and can scarcely feel the same about the protection of God as we would about God's presence. God is our protector. We long yet for God's presence. To be in God's presence we are willing to surrender everything. We are led there by a love that counts nothing as so wonderful as coming to be in God's very presence. It is for this that we hope with all our heart and strength.

Wednesday

WAITING UPON THE LORD

A Reflection from On Conduct by St. Cyprian

How often has it been revealed to us, the least and the last as we are, that our brothers and sisters who have been summoned from this world should not be mourned in any ordinary way? How frequently, how manifestly the Lord has commanded us to bear constant witness that the dead are not “lost” in any sense but simply called by God before we are. We are to proclaim that we are all travelers, voyagers, toward something supremely worth longing for. Those who have arrived before we do are not to be lamented except that we miss their earthly presence. Why would one wear dark-colored clothing on earth when they have put on white robes in the Kingdom and stand before God? We too, long to be there. We mustn’t give non-believers reason to criticize us for acting in a way inconsistent with what we proclaim we believe!

Those who have no faith often believe that the dead are lost and gone forever. We lie about our hope and our faith if we seem to act as though we too had lost them in that way. There would be no gain if we declared our virtues only in words and didn’t act them out in truth and deeds. In a certain sense, St. Paul rebukes and blames those Christians who are sorrowful at the death of dear ones. Listen to his words: *“We wouldn’t have you ignorant about those who are asleep in death. Don’t be sorrowful like those who don’t have any hope. If we believe that Jesus died, and yet rose again, it is the same for those who have fallen asleep in Jesus; God will bring them with Him to new life.”*

We live in hope; we believe in God and have faith that Christ suffered for us and then rose again. We abide in Christ and so we rise again through Christ. Why, then, should we be unwilling to leave this world? But if we are willing then why do we mourn and grieve for those who have already left? Listen to what Christ says: *“I am the resurrection; the one who believes in me, even if dead, shall live. Everyone who believes in me shall never die!”* Since we believe in Christ, let’s have faith in his words and promises. We aren’t going to die permanently but will come to Christ in joyful security and with Him conquer death by rising to reign with Him for eternity.

A person who will come to the dwelling of Christ, that glory which is the Heavenly Kingdom, has no good reason to grieve and mourn. We are to be ready—with firm faith, with rugged virtue, and with a sound mind for every way in which God makes known to us his will. We have been freed from the terror of death that afflicts others. We think of the immortality that follows earthly death.

It is a matter of showing by our actions what we believe. When God summons us then we will answer his call without hesitation and be filled with gladness. What is better than to come to the Lord at his call? The same is true for our loved ones. It is a matter of how we think of them and ourselves. The gift of faith teaches us how to think about death and how to answer every call that comes from our Lord.

Thursday

A COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL

By Pope Paul VI

To speak of Jesus, as he appears in the course of the Gospels, has always been something that draws people and compels them to speak but is at the same time difficult. This has always been especially true of the question: Who is Jesus? It lends itself to the most varied answers, and did so even in the minds of his first disciples. It was not at all clear to them who he might be.

Recall how Jesus, traveling with his little group of disciples toward Caesarea Philippi in the north of Palestine near Mount Hermon, asked them the searching question: Who do people say that the Son of Man is? After a variety of confused answers, taken from public opinion, Jesus pressed home the point of what he was asking by putting a direct question to them as his future apostles: But who do you say that I am?

It was Peter, enlightened by God the Father, who replied, surely also in the name of the rest of them. He gave the famous, unconquerable definition of Jesus' identity: You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God! Let us all hold fast, in thought and heart and life, to this wholly certain and inexhaustible truth about our Lord, Jesus Christ.

He is one in the divine Person of the only-begotten son of God. He is eternal in the nature of the Word. He is incarnate in human nature by Mary through the operation of the Holy Spirit. Let us remember the reality of this mystery. It overshadows all history and the destiny of the human race. It is the mystery of the unique person of the Word of God, living in the divine nature and the human nature of Jesus.

This is the supreme dogma that we profess at Mass every Sunday and every feast day when we proclaim the creed. This truth is the foundation of our Christian faith and our salvation. We must all remember the confession of Peter, which we ourselves have professed and to which we have joined ourselves explicitly. Let us remember the inexhaustible joy of this as we stand here over the tomb of Peter. We also stand in the certainty that the building he is now constructing—founded upon the apostolic rock and on that cornerstone which is Christ's self—cannot fall, either with the passing of time or with death which seems to destroy all other things.

The building in which we stand is his Church. That Church is holy and immortal. We have the great good fortune to belong to it. From it we receive Christ's very self, the bread of eternal life. Here faith appears in its supreme importance and necessity. It originates in an active gift of God, for all that it is only a humble and sincere beginning that reminds us of God's Word. With an act of faith, of acceptance of a Divine Truth that transcends our cognitive or experiential powers, we salute Jesus Christ. Once again we use the words of Simon Peter: "You are the Christ, the Son of Living God."

Friday

HOW A MONASTIC WAY IS THE WAY TO LIFE

A Reflection from Letter 18 by St. Peter Damian

Who can properly describe the greatness of God's work? Both in a stand of grain and in a cluster of grapes God seems to be hiding, even while God reveals himself. Notice the leaf on a tree trembling in the wind, and perhaps about to fall. Now in fall, the ground is strewn with fallen leaves, yet a leaf that hasn't fallen bears witness to the beauty of all trees when they were in leaf. Likewise, when we remember this why should we marvel when we so often see the monastic order of life decaying? Almighty God, cares for the leaves of his tree and holds some firm while letting others fall. God strengthens those he chooses in the monastic way, and others in another way. Let us rejoice in God's grace and choice.

I give boundless thanks to my Creator who wished me to have the office of an unworthy servant in a small but good Carthusian community. I only need to keep up with the pace of my brethren. I want, then, to relate briefly a few things about our life so it may be handed down in writing. Those who come after us will be the heirs of this way of life and it should not be lost, even if they fail to imitate it.

Ordinarily we fast four days a week. We consider those to be fasting who take bread with salt and water. It is customary for the brethren on all Sundays to have two warm meals, but on others only one. Concerning the recitation of psalms, it is customary that when two brethren live together in one cell, they recite two complete psalters daily, one for the living and the other for the dead. There are three lessons, one for each fifty psalms. We observe continual silence in the cells, just as in the chapel. All year round neither shoes nor stockings are worn in the cells. In regard to other monastic practices, whatever is done in monasteries of strict and regular observance we also do.

One practice exceeds all the rest in importance—love among the brethren. Unanimity of will, forged by the fire of mutual charity, so that each sees self as born to serve all and not to serve self. If one appears ill, all will at once inquire about his condition so that the sick person won't hesitate to give up his usual rigor, and so he will be promptly furnished all the necessities and so all may take joy in offering themselves as willing nurses. Likewise, if someone dies all fast for seven days for that person and takes the discipline seven times, each with a thousand blows, and then performs seven hundred prostrations, chants thirty psalters, and offer Mass for the deceased.

Strive, then, to persevere in the good work you have begun by your way of life. Do not deviate from the rule of life you have established, or which has been given you as a member of a community. This is how we enter the narrow gate that leads to life. This we should seek to do each day that God gives us. God has given us today and we should rejoice and be glad in it because he has shown us how to live it in his service and for his glory. Help one another do this. That is how we love one another in God and in imitation of Christ.

Saturday

FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF PETER

A Reflection from a homily by St. Pope John XXIII

The Apostolic Chair of St. Peter is a wonderful symbol of that unity of the great human family which God wishes to give us. The Church draws many Peoples into unity, or at least into its beginnings. From Jerusalem and Antioch and Rome, the light of Christ is seen to beat most fully upon this "Chair" of Peter. Light is reflected from the words addressed by Jesus to Peter in one of the most beautiful and touching passages in the New Testament. "On this rock I will build my Church... I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt.16:18ff).

What is the meaning of the keys entrusted personally to Simon son of John, to "Peter"? Aren't they a sign that the universal leadership of the earthly Church had been given into his hands? From Jerusalem to Antioch, and then to the heart of the Roman Empire, the way lay open to the Apostle through Christ's command. Christ is to be preached throughout the world under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the Lord has entrusted the task of maintaining the unity of all in Christ to Peter. To him, the Lord entrusted his sheep and lambs, his flock: "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep!" (Jn.21: 15f).

Peter was to be the leader and shepherd of all, even of other shepherds. He was to lead the flock to Christ in the name of Christ himself. This primacy was to be claimed by all Peter's successors and acknowledged by the united care of souls on the part of his brother bishops all over the world. From this Chair bishops all over the world are forever consecrated. It must remain One, Holy, Apostolic, and Catholic!

From Christ to Peter and from Peter to every shepherd of the Christian flock, the power of the keys, bestowed from Heaven upon the person of the Roman Pontiff, is handed on. It comes through the bishops and the entire Christian community for the unification and sanctification of humankind as redeemed by Christ's blood. Think now of Christ's chosen and reflect on his loving care for all.

St. Matthew tells us that one evening, after a tiring day, Jesus went alone to a hilltop to pray. The boat, with the disciples in it, was on the lake and was blown about by the winds. At nightfall, Jesus came upon the waves and called to the disciples: "Take heart! It is I! Don't be afraid!" Peter responded: "Lord, if it is you command me to come to you on the water." Jesus' reply was, "Come!" Peter got out of the boat and tried to get nearer to the divine Master. But the violence of the wind alarmed him and he felt he was sinking. He cried out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus reached out and caught hold of him. "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

When Jesus speaks to us his words are enough to save us and to give us victory over fear. This is a message for all of us. This is how the Church is led and how those who lead and help others are given strength for their task. We must all come to Jesus. Who but Peter, with all his doubts, can show us how to trust our Lord? That's what those who follow Peter are charged to do. That is how one feeds the lambs and the sheep—the entire flock of God! Follow your leader. Cry out to Jesus! Let him reach out and save you!