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Sunday

TRIUMPH AND THE CROSS

A Reflection by Fr. Carroll Stuhlmueller

Perhaps you are feeling exhausted. That is another call to self-surrender and to absorb the “divine ideals” the Lord Jesus shows us. We are in the cycle of life-death-life at the heart of the Gospel and Jesus’ existence.

As we celebrate Palm Sunday, it seems that Jesus has arrived at the fulfillment of his mission. He is triumphantly acclaimed as Messiah by an entire crowd of disciples. They begin to rejoice as he enters Jerusalem and praise God for the coming of God’s Messiah! It seems to them that peace and glory have come together and that even the angelic choirs are caught up in rejoicing.

Recall Jesus’ identification with the Suffering Servant spoken of by Isaiah. He too completed a long period of preparation in which he listened most intensely to God so he would know what to say to others. He possessed a heart sensitive not only to God but to others and was able to speak in ways that gave new hope to the oppressed and the neglected. Yet he helps others only by listening, morning after morning, to God’s will as revealed to him in prayer, and only then to others’ needs.

When the Suffering Servant, and Jesus, were fully prepared God asked them to accept suffering, rejection, and martyrdom. What was best was being “handed over” freely, and they were letting themselves be consecrated—not so much by their accomplishments but by the surrender of their deepest selves. Only by the collapse of their accomplishments and the silencing of their words would the world be impressed by the special depths, strengths and purity of their consecration to God. Jesus has already undergone a process of giving up everything. He was God but “*emptied himself and took the form of a slave*”. Now he was asked to accept death, “*even death on a cross*”.

Even when facing death, Jesus retains a peaceful attitude, quietly and sensitively responding to each new sorrow. Even during the solemn procession into Jerusalem “*coming within sight of the city...he wept over it and said, “If only you had known the path to peace this day!”*” Throughout the passion Jesus is absorbed in prayer to the Heavenly Father, even as he is attentive to the least needs of those around him. Think of how he looked at Peter, who had denied knowing him three times. Peter went out and wept bitterly! What strong, tender, and forgiving love must have been communicated to Peter by Jesus’ look!

We learn from Jesus that our greatest triumph lies in who we are for God and others and not in what we do. If we are for God then the cross is an opportunity to be even more ourselves! We have to be emptied of self to be filled with God! We must arrive at total absorption in God before we can confess with all our being that God is the way and the goal of life. It is this sensitivity to God that makes us sensitive to all God’s people. Our triumph will be complete in and through God. In us, Jesus will be glorified as Lord.

Monday

THE INWARD LABOR OF PRAYER

A Reflection by Fr. Karl Rahner

There are moments when our prayer seems exalted, fervent, and wonderful. But when such prayer is over – as always happens – we have to return to the slow, painful work on our inner self by which God changes and transforms us, and our often somber life of ordinariness, into a striving that never gives up. We are striving for the image of life and self we glimpsed in lofty moments of charismatic prayer. But we know that ideal can only be realized through prayer in the “everyday” – as we wrestle with gray work-a-day mornings and evening exhaustions. The fire of the Spirit that descended on us in the great moments has to divide into little flames that light up everyday hours so we can pray in whatever way that may be possible for us.

Everyday prayer is the prerequisite for hours of great grace. The Lord didn't create the exalted to replace the everyday. He also wills the petty and the insignificant that so fills our lives! We are God's servants in the fields, the workplaces, at the table, in the meeting room, behind a desk and even in bed. We are a little tattered and the worse for wear, lofty thoughts are difficult, but we are capable of a song coming from the heart; that is the prayer of the everyday. It is loyalty and reliability and selfless, unrewarded service. It is the dedication that makes gray and trivial moments great! It is all about the honor of God and not about you!

In our prayer-poor times, we are a poor and loyal heart that honestly, despite all weaknesses and discontent, seeks to dig a small shaft through which a ray of eternal light can shine on our heart buried in the everyday. From agitated haste into serenity, from narrowness into the breadth of faith, from yourself to God – that is what such prayer is all about. It is a grace, but also a matter of goodwill, an art that has to be practiced come what may. One can learn to make a prayer out of reading sacred Scripture. One can learn during Evening Prayer to give the day's experience a direction toward God. Thus, one can learn to hallow the seemingly dead moments in which one can't do anything else. One can learn to be reminded of God's presence through the vexations as well as the little joys of the day.

Our soul in the everyday seems to be a huge barn in which everything from everywhere is unloaded haphazardly day after day – even until the hour we call our death. Then all the junk is thrown out of that barn. And then it will become a song of praise to God! It happens only through prayer, which itself is one necessary thing. The everyday can't be fled from but has to be transformed. That is the task of steadfastness in prayer. It will happen through selflessness and prayer. It is a human but divine pedagogy. It fills our hearts with a still, chaste love. What hinders us from loving God? Only ourselves.

In the everydayishness of life, we can slowly die to self without commotion or notice, until gradually, one notices that one didn't need what one had taken to be indispensable. There is only one thing needed – God. And God is with us.

Tuesday

CONFORM YOUR LIFE TO CHRIST'S

A Reflection from Being Christian by Pope Benedict XVI

The promise of the Passover Feast is fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus. One goes out, as in an exodus, leaving behind possessions and the life one has been accustomed to leading. This began with Abraham and is the foundational law of all Sacred History. We move from a purely selfish existence to one of following Christ. He himself explains this as the "law of the grain of wheat". *"I tell you most solemnly, unless a grain of wheat falls on the ground and dies it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies it can yield a rich harvest!"*

Christ, by his death and resurrection, fulfilled this law. In the Eucharist, the Bread of God, he truly becomes the hundred-fold fruit and the life of all of us – now and forever. In this mystery of the Eucharist, in which truly and fully Christ lives for us, he asks us day after day to fulfill that law with him. It is the definitive expression of the essence of true love.

The essential meaning of love can only be realized by abandoning our narrow and selfish aims and coming out of ourselves to live for others. The fundamental movement that is Christian faith can't be grasped by thinking of individual faith. Think rather of the vital position that we all occupy in relation to the whole Body of Christ. It is true that we aren't Christians for ourselves. We are Christians because God wants and needs our service in the great project that is salvation history. If we remember this we will not fall into the error of thinking that the individual is nothing more than a small cog in a great machine. It is true that God doesn't love merely the individual but loves everyone as joined together in mutual help and harmony. Yet it is true that God knows and loves each one of us. Jesus is a concrete individual, born of an individual mother and living a particular life, with its own destiny, and died his own death.

The scandal and the greatness of the Christian message is that the destiny of all history depends on an individual, Jesus of Nazareth. Seeing him as he is, it becomes clear that we are called to live for others and with their help, even while God knows and loves each particular person with an unchanging love. Both these facts should profoundly impress us. On the one hand, we should see our Christianity as a way of living for the sake of others. But, on the other hand, we should live in the tremendous security and joy springing from the fact that God loves "me", this person here and now.

God loves everyone who has a human face, however, disfigured and unrecognizable it may be. When we say, "God loves me!" we should also feel the danger of making ourselves unworthy of that love by refusing our responsibilities toward one another. So, we should accept that love and that grace in all its fullness and purity by living for others.

Wednesday

DO NOT FEAR THE CROSS

A Reflection by St. Oscar Romero

To each one of us, Christ is saying "If you want your life and mission to be fruitful like mine, do like me." Be converted into a seed that lets itself be buried. Let yourself be killed. Do not be afraid. Those who shun suffering will remain alone. No one is more alone than the selfish. But if you give your life for the love of others, as I give mine for all, you will reap a great harvest. You will have the deepest satisfaction. Do not fear misunderstandings, threats, or even death. The Lord goes with you.

Dear brothers and sisters, especially those of you who hate me, who think I am preaching violence, who defame me and know it isn't true, I ask you as I ask all -be converted. I love you deeply. I do not want you to be on the way to ruin.

I ask the faithful people who listen to me with love and devotion to pardon me for saying this, but it gives me more pleasure than my enemies listen to me. I know that the reason they listen to me is that I bear them a message of love. I don't hate them. I don't want revenge. I wish them no harm. I beg them to be converted, to come to be happy with the happiness that your faithful ones have.

One begins to experience faith and conversion when one has the heart of the poor and when one knows that money, political influence, and power are worthless and that without God we are nothing.

Never forget the poor and suffering of the world. Help others to understand their situation so that they might offer solidarity. This Holy Week we learn again to see the face of Christ-the face of Christ that is the face of a suffering human being, the face of the Crucified, the face of the poor, the face of a saint and the face of every person -and we love each other with the criteria with which we will be judged: "I was hungry and you gave me to eat".

Without the prophetic dimension, the language of contemplation is in danger of having no grip on the history in which God acts and where we meet God. Without the contemplative dimension, the language of prophecy can narrow its vision and weaken its perception of God who makes all things new. Our call is to be contemplatives and prophets.

Thursday

BAPTISM, THE WASHING OF FEET AND THE EUCHARIST

A Reflection taken from a Sermon by St. Bernard

These are days filled with holiness and grace by which even the wicked are provoked to repentance; even hearts of stone are broken open and people who seemed dead are raised to new life. These are days in which we think of great sacraments, of the washing away of sin, of the healing of the disfigurements sin causes, and of the marvelous food that is Christ's body and blood given to us.

A sacrament is something like a secret that has to be broken open if we are to enter into its mystery and be nourished thereby. A mother doesn't give her child a nut but breaks the shell and gives what is hidden within it. As the Lord came to his passion, he wanted to clothe his disciples with grace communicated by visible signs. This time of year reminds us that sin is cleansed away by baptism. Its grace enters the mind and heart; it begins to dissolve deep-seated corruption.

Will you ask: "If what we contracted from our first parents is erased by baptism why do our evil desires persist as fuel and incentive for sin?" Often, I have reminded you that we have fallen off a heap of stones and ended up in the mire, befouled and wounded and badly shaken. We can wash quickly enough, but it takes a while for a complete healing. The wounds aren't bleeding but a scab has formed and itches; we mustn't tear it open again by scratching.

Baptism causes us to refuse consent to temptation, and so to sin, and has taught us that sensuality isn't a path to happiness. Yet we feel passions like anger, envy and lust and want them healed.

To show us the way to health we have the sacrament of the washing of feet. How do we know it will help? Remember what Our Lord said to Peter. "What I am doing you do not understand now, but later you will". He went on: "I have given you an example, that you too may do the same as I do." He warns us, "If I don't wash you, you will have no part with me".

Something needful for salvation is hidden in this washing. Look at your feet as the symbols for the dispositions of your soul. They are always in the dust and are never entirely clean while we live. How do dispositions get cleansed and healed? This is accomplished by charity, by mutual love.

We must help each other. To humble us, the Lord allows concupiscence to live in us and we cleanse it not by indulging it, and so leading ourselves and others into sin. Instead, we lead each other to the virtue that is love and care and helpfulness. These are graces that our mother the Church opens for us so we find the nourishment and delight that are hidden within. What we do willingly we come to delight in and as our delight in loving kindness increases, so our attraction to sin decreases. At the altar we receive one food and one drink, reminding us that what we need for nourishment is only the one love shown us by Christ. We need claim nothing as our own and private to ourselves because we have together all we truly need, the Lord's love and care. We show this to each other by the way we care for and treasure one another in the freedom given us by knowing we needn't worry about the morrow or about what we will eat or wear. We have only to look for deeds of love and for being more and more for one another what the Lord is for us all. This is the grace of these days.

Friday

HOW SACRIFICE HAS BEEN TRANSFORMED

A Reflection taken from a Sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great

When our Lord was handed over to the will of his cruel enemies, they ordered his royal dignity to be mocked and forced him to carry the instrument of his torture and death. It was done to fulfill a prophecy of Isaiah. To the wicked, the sight of the Lord carrying his cross was a motive for deriding him. But to the faithful, that sight reveals a great mystery. The cross was to be made the instrument of his power and the tool by which he overthrew all the power of his enemies. It became a supreme trophy of his victory!

On the shoulders of his unconquerable patience, he carried the sign of salvation for everyone. It became something all nations of the earth would worship. It would be used to strengthen all Christ's disciples in their work for God's Kingdom. He said: "Anyone who doesn't take up a cross and follow me isn't worthy of me!"

The Jerusalem temple was built to be a place of sacrifice. But that meant in practice that people went there to offer something of their own – ideally something that cost them dear – as the symbol of offering themselves to God. Now symbols have been replaced by realities. Christ shows the whole world the new and authentic sacrifice that reconciles all peoples – if they will accept it – to God and God's rule over our world.

O marvelous power of the cross, the glory of the Lord's passion. No tongue can fittingly or fully describe this. Here is the judgment seat of the Lord. All now come before him and all have seen how they have or have not offered themselves really with Christ to God. Christ's example of love is the sovereign judgment passed on to the entire non-loving world. Here the sovereignty of the Crucified is revealed.

You drew all things to yourself, Lord, when you stretched out your hands all day long to a people that denied and opposed you. And now, at last, the whole world is brought to proclaim your majesty. You have drawn all things to yourself, to your love, and shown them the new world created according to God and God's will. The veil of the Temple was torn in two and the Holy of Holies given to a worthy priest who knew how to offer sacrifice in spirit and truth.

You drew all things to yourself so that the whole human race could worship you in spirit and in truth, a worship celebrated everywhere in sacramental form, a worship that fulfills and proclaims what you enacted by offering your own body and blood. No other victim is needed. We are to offer our hearts and our lives as Christ bids us. As there is now a single sacrifice so now there is a single Kingdom formed of all the peoples of the earth. Now we know clearly and fully all that we need to do to please our God. Now we see the path to his eternal peace and joy. It is eternal love with all our hearts, minds, and strength.

Saturday

LET CHRIST'S RESURRECTION SHAPE YOUR LIFE

A Reflection from a Sermon by St. Bernard

St. Paul tells us that Christ dwells in our hearts through faith. As long as faith lives in us, Christ lives in us. Our works testify that our faith is alive. We discern the aliveness of faith from good works. The life of the body is the soul and the life of faith is love. Faith works through love. Now it is the Spirit that gives life, faith and love. St. Paul teaches us once more, "If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live". If faith is dead in the soul, for that person Christ is still in the tomb.

What restores a person to life if faith has died within? One needs to imitate the holy women who bought spices to anoint Jesus' body. They didn't think they were going to bring him to life again but were only trying to ward off the stink of death. So when faith seems to have died, let spices be sought. Above all I mean the spices which are affectionate compassion, zeal for uprightness, and discretion. They give birth to good deeds; they mean life and a living faith.

Remember first what Jesus said to the women who wept for him as he bore his cross: "Do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children." Notice that they are to begin by weeping for themselves; if you can't be compassionate to yourself how will you be compassionate to others? If you can't reprove yourself in a spirit of gentleness you can't reprove others effectively. Example is more effective and impressive than words.

But what if one to whom we show compassion won't respond? We must show compassion to rightness. That is zeal for rightness. We must not rest in seeking ways to persuade another to turn to the Lord. We must not quench the smoldering wick but we must never cease to seek ways to love others compassionately but effectively. When one has compassion and a zeal for rightness then one needs discretion. We must appropriately match circumstances with ways of being zealously compassionate. Discretion does it.

Where will we obtain such spices? They don't grow up in us spontaneously. We need to buy them. What money have we? We have that of self-will. That is what we must let go of in order to obtain the spices that allow us to love each other truly and effectively. By losing it we lose nothing important and gain very great things. We can't be compassionate to ourselves if we're filled with self-will. We need a common will and that is called love. If you only love yourself how would you love rightness and hate iniquity? Love is kind. The spirit of discretion discloses this. Perhaps you have to buy this with confession of your own sins.

What you need is efficacious persuasion. This comes from a holy life and that from humble confession. Such a person has the power of the angel who rolled away the stone from the Lord's tomb. Those whose faith has died don't need to enter the tomb but to leave it. Seek holiness from the Lord that you may acquire the spices needed for holiness, and pray for the grace to use them in a way that leads others into new life. That is the gift of Resurrection.