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Sunday

IT IS THE WAY THAT LEADS US

From a Commentary by St. Ambrose

Let us march forward intrepidly to meet our Redeemer, Jesus, pursuing our onward course without swerving until we come to the assembly of the saints and are welcomed by the company of the just. It is to join our Christian forebears that we are journeying, to those who taught us our faith – that faith which comes to our aid and safeguards our heritage for us even when we have no good works to show. In the place we are making for the Lord will be everyone's light; the true light which enlightens every human person will shine upon all. In the house where we are going, the Lord Jesus has prepared many dwelling-places for his servants, so that where he is, we also may be, for this was his desire. Hear his own words about them: *In my Father's house are many dwelling-places*, and about his desire: *I will come again*, he says, *and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be*.

“But he was speaking only to his disciples,” you say, “and so it was to them alone that the many dwelling-places were promised.” Do you really suppose it was only for the eleven disciples that they were prepared? And what of the saying about people coming from all the corners of the earth to sit at the table in the kingdom of heaven? Do we doubt that the divine will will be accomplished? But for Christ, to will is to do! Accordingly, he has shown us both the way and the place: *You know where I am going*, he said, *and you know the way*. The place is where the Father is; the way is Christ, according to his own declaration: *I am the way, and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me*. Let us set out on this way, let us hold fast to truth, let us follow life. It is the way that leads us, the truth that strengthens us, the life that is restored to us through him.

To make sure that we really understand his will, Christ prays later on: *Father, it is my desire that those whom you have given me may be with me where I am, so that they may see my glory*. How graciously he asks for what he had already promised! The promise came first and then the request, not the other way around. Conscious of his authority and knowing the gift was at his own disposal, he made the promise; then, as if to show his filial submission, he asked his Father to grant it. He promised first to make us aware of his power; he asked afterwards to show us his loving deference to his Father.

Yes, Lord Jesus, we do follow you, but we can only come at your bidding. No one can make the ascent without you, for you are our way, our truth, our life, our strength, our confidence, our reward. Be the way that receives us, the truth that strengthens us, the life that invigorates us.

Monday

BEARING CHRIST'S PRESENCE TO THE WORLD

A Reflection from a Gospel commentary by Fr. Louis Lochet

Jesus said to his disciples: If anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love that person and we will come and make our home in that person. There is, if you pause to think about it, a profound reason for Christ's appearing as he did after the resurrection. Jesus came to them in visible form so as to gradually accustom them to his invisible presence through faith. That invisible presence is far more real than the visible one! The great gift he came to give to the world was that of recognizing this presence.

Jesus had foretold the mystery of his passion and resurrection. He did this to help them open themselves to a new mode of being with him. "I tell you the truth; it is to your advantage that I go away, for otherwise, the Paraclete will not come to you." The promises of Jesus make it evident that the abiding of the Spirit in the heart is not simply a way of replacing Christ's personal presence but of renewing and prolonging it in an even more intimate way.

"I shall be with you; because I live, you too will live in me". This means sharing in the life of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. The Father shows himself in the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Father and Son give themselves in the Spirit. We possess the Three-in-one within ourselves. We rejoice in them and share in their life. Christ's presence in the Spirit establishes the Church, and so its unity and Catholicity. It gave the apostles courage to spread throughout the world, and so to spread Christ, while remaining one in Christ. They had to leave an empty Jerusalem Temple and learn to find within them a consecrated temple where the living God abides.

They were upheld by God and so carried God's word to the world. St. Paul says, "Do not be afraid; speak out and do not be silent, for I am with you". He is talking about Christ in us. The first Christians loved to recognize this dynamic, speaking out in the martyrs. Christ was their strength. Christ fought, suffered, and triumphed in them. That is why they were so perfectly at peace. Death did not so much cut them off from the world as unite them forever to the triumphant Christ. What the apostles took to the world was the presence of Christ within them. This is the same presence we are learning to recognize and rejoice in. By letting it make itself known in our love for others, we allow them to recognize Christ living in us, and ask their permission to live within them too.

God intends to transform and save our world not through special divine interventions but through the working of his love within and through us. This begins with the presence of the Spirit dwelling in us. We must not doubt that God can accomplish the entire plan of salvation in this way. Consider what Christ has already done within us as he has taught us how to love one another and to live together in that love.

Tuesday

NOT AS THE WORLD GIVES PEACE

From the Homilies of St. Oscar Arnulfo Romero

...Justice is not enough; love also is necessary... We have said that the power of the Christian is love, and we repeat it: the power of the church is love.

Love enables us to feel that we are sisters and brothers to one and all... As long as we do not reach that strength of love, we cannot be true peacemakers. Those whose hearts are filled with resentment, violence, and hatred cannot be forgers of peace. We have to know how to love like Jesus, who loved even those who crucified him: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do... If they knew you, they would love you... Give them love also, Lord." How much good the powerful would do if they truly loved and were not selfish and envious! How beautiful the world would be... if we all were to expand this power of love!

Here, the Second Vatican Council was careful to define two kinds of peace, and we should pay close attention to this. One kind of peace is that which Christ reserved for his closest friends, those who understood the redemption and the need to root out sin from themselves. As long as there is sin in the heart, there can be no truly divine peace, such as the peace Christ achieved when he reconciled us with the Father by dying on the cross and bearing the sins of all of us in his body. For us Christians and Catholics, this is the culmination of peace: peace in the grace of God, the peace of those who have left sin and controlled their passions, the peace of holy souls. This is the peace that Christ spoke of: "I leave you peace; my peace I give to you, not as the world gives peace."

Here we distinguish another kind of peace, the peace that the church shares with the world, the peace that non-Christians can also possess, the peace of people of goodwill that we sing about in the Gloria of the Mass... Here is meant this other peace, the peace that proceeds from natural love. It is the peace of those who, even though they do not know God, can discover the intense power of being in solidarity with those who suffer. It is the peace that enables people to bring a little comfort to the grief-stricken and to denounce injustices... This is the peace that all people can possess...

The problem of peace is immense, and it needs many peacemakers: priests, men and women religious, laity... the call goes out to all... Let each one of us, according to our means, nurture this vocation to become instruments of peace... Those whose hearts feel the need for God, those who find the joy of life in the cross and sacrifice, those who have learned the true secret of peace in the crucified One. This secret consists of loving God to the extreme of letting oneself be killed for him and of loving one's neighbors to the point of being crucified for them. This is the love of the modern redeemers, the love of Christ, this love that endures forever. Let us promise this to the Lord while we proceed to proclaim our faith in him.

Wednesday

BEARING THE FRUIT OF GODLY LOVE

A Reflection from The Fourth Gospel by Fr. Louis Bouyer

“Jesus said to his disciples: I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser.” All through Scripture, the vine is a symbol of God’s Chosen People. It is a symbol chosen because it reminds us of the loving care which our God has for those united with him as a part of the “true Israel”. However, we must recall again the fact that a “vine” always means an entire vineyard in Scripture. The point is that a vineyard is a better symbol of the unity that God’s love brings us than is a single vine.

Jesus declares he is not only united with his disciples but is one with them. Jesus is the source of the disciples’ life and calls them to form one single organism with him. Jesus is no longer viewing himself as an individual but as a living collective that is a perfect unity. All regenerated humanity is part of this organism. This corresponds to the Pauline theology of the Church as Christ’s Mystical Body. Jesus and his members aren’t separate entities any more than is a body’s head and its members. Yet I think the theology of Christ the vine better expresses this profound unity.

There is no question of two complementary elements. One Divine Person is extending his incarnation from the main stem, Jesus, to all the branches. Christ is the living principle of unity for the whole Church. It is only through Jesus that the vine, the Church, can thrust roots into the depths of the divine life and ensure that the divine life and love find their way to the farthest branches.

Jesus is the source, and the branches must draw from the life-spring in Christ.

We are called to accept two facts. First, branches can’t bear fruit separated from Christ but must remain organically united with him. This is what the Lord meant by saying: *“Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you can’t have life”*. Second, the branches, because they are in Christ, have to bear fruit. If they don’t, they will be thrown away. Believers grafted into Christ, pulsing with the grace of a life-union, are pruned or purged away. What God intends is that they bear more and more fruit. Whoever closes themselves against this life-giving action of the vine-sap is removed and burnt. The sap is love; a love that does nothing isn’t love. Only active love springs from union with Christ.

Again, what is the fruit? The organic unity between Christ and his own has but one fruit, a union of love. The whole purpose of the incarnation is to establish disciples in God’s trinitarian love. As Christ is in the Father’s love, so we are to be in his love. This is obedience. It is by this obedience that Christ remains in the Father’s love and that those who follow Christ remain in his love. Obedience either bears the fruit of love or it is neither Christian nor Godly. Godly love draws all together in unity, and the unity is one of mutually loving and caring for each other, for all God’s children.

Thursday

THE REST CHRIST BRINGS

A Reflection developed from *The Life in Christ* by Nicholas Cabasilas

The Christian's resting place is in Christ. He alone is goodness and truth, and all that is lovable. That means that nothing in Christ prevents a person who rests in Him from loving with all the love that God placed in our spirits in the beginning. Nothing in Christ prevents such a person from rejoicing to the full extent of human capacity. What is more, one's capacity is increased by growth in virtue and Christian maturity as one lives out the gifts received in the water of rebirth.

We can't find full joy or love in our relations with the good things, as they are called, of this present life. All these things seem good, and, in some measure, they are; yet they are still only reflections of what is genuinely good and lovable. In Christ, however, we find a love and a joy that are wonderful beyond the power of words to describe. This is because God, in creating all things, ordained that love and joy should be directed first and last toward Himself. Why? It is because God is infinite good and has infinite joy, and wants to make us capable of entering into infinite goods, into himself, and so into joy that has no measure. That is why God made us, and all our feelings, for Himself. It is God's greatest gift.

Consider for a moment the greatness of God's love. If we would appreciate how wonderful it is to simply love God with the power to love that is God's gift, it overbalances and cancels every unpaid debt we can owe. If the divine judge regards love as balancing innumerable blessings, who can doubt that it is surpassingly excellent and wonderful?

Now it is clear that the plenitude of love is fully matched by the plenitude of joy. Joy corresponds in every way to love. The fullness of the one follows from the fullness of the other. We know that human persons have a great capacity for both love and joy, but that this joy is experienced most fully in the presence of the beloved.

The truly supreme beauty, the true beauty, is the Savior. He himself calls these feelings perfect when they are experienced in this way. When the Spirit comes to dwell within us, it brings various fruits. The first of these to manifest themselves is love and joy. Scripture itself calls these the fruits of the Holy Spirit. That is because God is love and God is joy, and the first thing that God does when He comes to dwell in us is to make us aware of these truths. God is the supreme good, and anyone aware of the presence within of the supreme good cannot fail to love that good and rejoice in it. Rejoice with all your heart and strength and share that joy with all those you encounter. This is our vocation and our joy.

Friday

THE FINAL TESTIMONY

From the writings of Bl. Christian de Cherge

If the day comes, and it could be today, that I am a victim of the terrorism that seems to be engulfing all foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, and my family to remember that I have dedicated my life to God and Algeria.

That they accept that the Lord of all life was not a stranger to this savage kind of departure; that they pray for me, wondering how I found myself worthy of such a sacrifice; that they link in their memory this death of mine with all the other deaths equally violent but forgotten in their anonymity.

My life is not worth more than any other – not less, not more. Nor am I an innocent child. I have lived long enough to know that I, too, am an accomplice of the evil that seems to prevail in the world around, even that which might lash out blindly at me. If the moment comes, I would hope to have the presence of mind and the time to ask for God's pardon and for that of my fellowman, and, at the same time, to pardon in all sincerity he who would attack me.

I would not welcome such a death. It is important for me to say this. I do not see how I could rejoice when these people whom I love will be accused, indiscriminately, of my death. The price is too high, this so-called grace of the martyr, if I owe it to an Algerian who kills me in the name of what he thinks is Islam.

I know the contempt that some people have for Algerians as a whole. I also know the caricatures of Islam that a certain (Islamist) ideology promotes. It is too easy for such people to dismiss, in good conscience, this religion as something hateful by associating it with violent extremists. For me, Algeria and Islam are quite different from the commonly held opinion. They are body and soul. I have said enough, I believe, about all the good things I have received here, finding so often the meaning of the Gospels, running like some gold thread through my life, and which began first at my mother's knee, my very first church, here in Algeria, where I learned respect for the Muslims.

Obviously, my death will justify the opinion of all those who dismissed me as naïve or idealistic: "Let him tell us what he thinks now." But such people should know my death will satisfy my most burning curiosity. At last, I will be able – if God pleases – to see the children of Islam as He sees them, illuminated in the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God's Passion and of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to bring forth our common humanity amidst our differences.

I give thanks to God for this life, completely mine yet completely theirs, too, to God, who wanted it for joy against, and despite, all odds. In this Thank You – which says everything about my life – I include you, my friends past and present, and those friends who will be here at the side of my mother and father, of my sisters and brothers – thank you a thousandfold.

And to you, too, my friend of the last moment, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you, too, I wish this thank-you, this "A-Dieu," whose image is in you also, that we may meet in heaven, like happy thieves, if it pleases God, our common Father. Amen! Insha Allah!

Saturday

DOES THE WORLD HATE YOU?

A Reflection from a Homily by Karl Rahner

“You must not be surprised when the world hates you”, we are told. If we look at the context of this verse, we find the following: “We are to love one another, not to be like Cain, who belonged to the Evil One and cut his brother’s throat”. We must not be people who hate others because we cannot endure goodness. According to John, love, kindness, holiness and justice arouse hatred. He assumes that Christians are people who do good works, like Abel. So John thinks that goodness and justice provoke the antagonism, anger and hatred of the unjust because they cannot endure the contrast with themselves; they want to see their actions endorsed by the actions of others, and they are forced to blame themselves and disavow their actions if they meet someone else whose deeds are just and good, even to the point of loving their evil attackers. So goodness stirs up malice, love stirs up hatred, and justices injustice. Injustice comes to light and is exposed because it cannot bear goodness. Now John says that this must happen to us; he admonishes us not to be surprised when it does happen to us.

Let us be perfectly frank. Can we say that the world hates us? Do we suffer violence and impoverishment for conscience’s sake? To be honest, we are no better off than many other countries; we have our difficulties and perhaps our tragedies, but we cannot really pretend that the world hates us because we are just, because we love those who hate us. Now, if this is the case, are we really what we should be, people that St. John can assume will be hated by the world and who must be admonished not to wonder at that hatred? By this standard of real Christianity, we may well find ourselves wanting before God and our conscience.

We need the light of God, fidelity, and purity of conscience that is able to criticize self and criticize the world. A staggering task! We must keep asking ourselves whether we are not, in St. Paul’s phrase, too much conformed to this world. We must keep asking whether we do not misrepresent Christianity and give scandal to those who are in search of true Christianity because we pretend to be Christians and are nothing of the kind. May God give us the grace to bear the real hatred of the world with courage and equanimity; and may God give the Church of today and her hierarchy, and each one of us in our own lives, the grace not to make Christianity seem to the world unworthy of credence through our own fault.