



Fr. Roch's *Continuum* articles

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A Cistercian Martyr and Forgiveness: Reflections for 9-11

On May 21, 1996 somewhere in the hideouts of Algeria, Islamic terrorists slit the throats of eight monks, including Fr. Christian de Cherge. The monks had been warned to leave the country or face execution. Yet, they chose to stay in the Cistercian (Trappist) Monastery of Our Lady of Atlas, in Algeria.

Fr. Christian was raised by his French family in colonial Algeria. As a child, he became fascinated by the deep faith and reverence of ordinary Muslims at an early age.

Later, Fr. Christian served as a French officer in Algeria, and one of his Muslim subordinates was killed defending him against terrorists. When Fr. Christian became a Cistercian, he had a strong desire to dedicate his life to living and praying with and for Muslims. He asked to be sent to Algeria. Gradually, his whole community forged strong ties of friendship with the Muslims of the countryside. A medical doctor among them attended to the sick and the community built a mosque on the grounds of the monastery. Thus, their Muslim neighbors could pray there while the monks were praying in their chapel. When the terrorists' ultimatum came, they talked to their Muslim friends about leaving. Since all of them urged the monks to remain with them, Fr. Christian and his brothers decided to stay out of loyalty to their friends. One night a group of guerrillas came, took seven of the monks hostage and two months later murdered them. After Fr. Christian's death, his nephew published the monk's last will and testament that had been written two years earlier.

In the excerpts from his testament below, Fr. Christian speaks to us as we attempt to understand September 11:

"If it happened one day - and this could be the day - that I become a victim of the terrorism that presently seems to envelop all the foreigners who live in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, and my family to remember that my life was given to God and to this country ...

"When the time comes, I would like to have a moment of lucidity so that I could ask for God's forgiveness and for the forgiveness of my brothers; at the same time I would like to forgive with all my heart the one who is about to kill me.

"I could not wish for such a death ... The price for what will perhaps be called 'the grace of martyrdom' is too high if I owe it to an Algerian, whoever it may be, especially if he says he acts in fidelity to what he believes is the teaching of Islam.

"I know of the contempt that has targeted all Algerians collectively. I also know of the caricatures of Islam that a certain form of Islamic ideology has generated. It is only too easy to convince oneself in good conscience that the [the whole Islamic] way of religious life is identical with its extremist tendencies.

"Obviously, my death will vindicate those who have hastily classified me as being naïve and an idealist ... But they should know that, finally, my piercing curiosity will be given free access [to God's mysterious design of salvation].

“See, I will be able - God willing - to immerse my gaze into that of the Father so that I may contemplate with Him the children of Islam as He sees them, completely illuminated by the glory of Christ, being the fruits of his Passion, endowed by the gift of the Spirit whose mysterious joy will always be to establish communion and reestablish resemblance while freely playing with the differences.

“Having lost this life, which is totally mine and totally theirs, I give thanks to God who, in spite of everything, seems to have willed my life in its totality for the sake of that joy.”

Fr. Roch translated the Fr. Christian's testament from the French.



SPRING 2002

Receiving the Peace of God through Prayer

Under the pressure of meeting deadlines and coping with the demands of home and job, it is easy to forget about prayer. Perhaps a few words are mumbled at the end of the day before sleep or distraction carries you away, but you do not really communicate with God. As a result, God appears less and less real to you until his presence is completely forgotten. You may ask, “how can I get out of this hole, how can I develop a healthy, growing relationship with God?”

First, set aside some quiet time for yourself next weekend, when no pressure clouds your mind. Then ask for God's help to become aware of what your most urgent or most deeply felt needs are. It could be as mundane as landing a new job, taking care of your ailing mother, finding the right words in a conversation with your wife who, somehow, always gets irritable when you talk. Then, mustering all your trust and energy, ask God to help you. But not just as a formality, suspecting deep down that nothing would happen, but pray with the confidence of a child who knows that if he is asking for an egg, his father will not hand him a scorpion (Lk 11:12). Pray also with the stubborn persistence of the poor widow who was pestering the wicked judge until the judge got tired of her and responded to her plea (Lk 18:1-8).

If you don't give up. Christ guarantees that you will be heard. “For everyone who asks receives; and the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks the door will be opened” (Lk 11:10). You may not necessarily receive what you asked for, but you will receive a response that is best suited to your need. Perhaps in the process you will discover that what you really need is not a better paying job but a new mindset that looks for joy elsewhere than in an ever-rising income. In fact, God tends to give us so much more than we asked for so that one day we may find ourselves overwhelmed by God's generosity and his alternately tender and tough way of treating us.

Many people get stuck at this point and are satisfied with being grateful for God's gifts. A few, however, reach beyond the gifts to the Giver himself: If his gifts are so good, how much better must He himself be! They begin to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps 34:9).

They will spend time with Him, meditate on His words in Scripture and on His interventions in their lives. They begin to understand that God deserves to be loved and praised for His own sake. The joy and the peace that comes from loving God not just because He fulfills our needs but loving God because He is good can permeate our whole lives. We will still have pressing deadlines and perfectionist bosses, but nobody can take away our peace that comes from Christ himself. That peace may even change the people around us.



SUMMER 2002

“Why Does God Keep Silent?”

How often you hear the complaint. “I am praying to God every day, and I am going to church every Sunday, and still God does not listen. I never get any answer.”

The reason for God's silence may be that when we pray, we listen only to ourselves. We are so focused on our own needs and worries that God, ever respectful of our freedom, will not break through the barrier of our own ego. In the sophomore year's moral theology course we talk about meditative prayer. At that time students may not be ready to take it seriously. Let me suggest here a somewhat different approach, a simple way that could help us tune in to God and find out what He wants to tell us.

First, we should discover that every situation in which we find ourselves, no matter how joyful or painful, how routine and boring, is a potential communication from God. He puts us or allows us to be put in a situation because it is through that situation that He intends to speak to us. Even if entangled in a sinful state, as soon as we repent, our repented sins will also become a means of God's communication. But we should be able to decipher His message. This is where meditation begins to make sense.

Set aside, regardless of how busy you think you are, 20-30 minutes every day, when you can be alone and at peace.

Get up 30 minutes earlier in the morning or reserve about the same amount of time in the evening.

Become aware of God's presence and find a passage in your Bible (a concordance would come in handy) that speaks to your concern or question. For instance, you might look up passages that respond to your desire to excel and shine, or that deal with the sense of depression that overcomes you when you strive to be somebody yet fail.

You may come upon a series of texts in John that speak to this issue: Jn 5:41-44; 7:18. 8:50-54; 12:28; 17:4. Jesus explains to His enemies and to His disciples that He does not seek His own glory but that of His Father and it is for this reason that the Father will glorify Him. Then think about what you read. Isn't it amazing that God himself had to become a human being to teach us the secret of a happy human life? Jesus' driving force, His hunger and thirst, is to see God's name, God's holiness and goodness, acknowledged and loved by men. Jesus finds His own glory and joy in the glory of His Father.

Then ask yourself: "What makes me happy, what makes me sad?" (If you know the answer to this question, you know who you are.) "Does it make me happy if people around me see and value God's goodness, if they carry out His will in their lives? Do sins, my own and those of others, sadden me?" You will then see where God needs to change your priorities, your values, and your attitudes. Then you might begin to realize what God intends to tell you through the events of your life: why, for instance, God allowed you to be humiliated, or why you remain "mediocre" in the eyes of the world. In reality He calls you to true greatness, a greatness that is everlasting, the greatness that comes from the desire to see God glorified in you, in your family, in your friends and colleagues, and even in your work.

I challenge you, my dear former student, my dear Cistercian parent, to try meditative prayer for a month. And call me or email me if it does not "work."

It will work if you sincerely intend to find out in the quiet awareness of your heart and in ruminating on God's Word what He wants to tell you through the very situation in which you find yourself.



WINTER 2002

What is Faith? Crutch, Escape, or Flight from Reality?

We are often tempted to slip into a religious posture that would clearly justify the labels of "crutch" and "escape from reality." But this happens only to the extent that we succeed in creating our own personal god, a docile idol who is supposed to fulfill our expectations: a reliable crutch and an unflinching comforter in all our troubles. Those who create such a god have no awareness of the true God's consuming holiness that becomes a crushing burden and an unbearable fire when it touches sinful man (Hebrews 12:29; Luke 5:8-9).

This kind of a god appeals only to a certain type of people, those who dread responsibility, adventure, risk, uncertainty, struggle or danger. Their "faith" is in fact an escape from the challenge of adult life.

Yet, God does not abandon even these weak children of his. He will use the powerful medication of “reality therapy” to cure them. Thus, those who once felt so secure that God could act only in a certain way, will sooner or later realize that He cannot be controlled. The true God surprises us, puts us off balance, makes our small dreams collapse and lets us struggle in water up to our neck. He allows sickness, death, financial woes and psychological traumas to rock our boat. When such things happen, the incorrigible idol-maker is not amused. His god did not behave as he was supposed to, so he will pour out his rage upon Him; he punishes his god by disbelieving in him. Like a child in a temper tantrum, he smashes his toy in rage.

Those, however, who are willing to learn from the trials of life, those who realize that the true God cannot be squeezed into the straitjacket of our expectations will gradually understand the challenge of Christian faith.

Faith means to follow Christ: “Let the dead bury their dead and you come and follow me” (Luke 9:60), “Lord, where are you going? Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has no place where to lay down His head” (Luke 9:58). Faith means to let Jesus lead me where He wants me to go. He asks me to take up the cross and carry it with Him and for Him.

This cross consists of my own burdens and the burdens of all those people whom God has entrusted to me. If I refuse to carry the cross, it will crush me into despair. If I embrace it with love, I will discover that I am helping to carry the very cross of Jesus Christ. To the extent that my love for Him grows, the burden of the cross becomes light. I no longer cling so much to the comforts and assurances that once my idol-god was supposed to secure. The very cross of Jesus Christ turns into a source of life, joy, and security.



Who Is the Greatest?

The disciples seem to be obsessed with the question, “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” Even a few hours before the arrest of Jesus, this is their foremost concern (Lk 22:24-27). That they are so pathetically human is very comforting for those of us who are plagued by the same temptations.

Our own society is equally obsessed with becoming great: wherever we are employed, we want to be number one or at least higher up than the guy next to us. The more insecure a person is the more he postures to prove his greatness.

Jesus does not disapprove of the ambition to become great. As St. Bernard points out, Jesus knows that we are created for greatness and excellence. Since we resemble God, our striving for greatness is part of human nature. But Jesus wants us to pursue a greatness that is real and attainable.

Jesus explains time and again to his disciples that he who wants to be the greatest should be the least among them (Lk 9:48). The leader should become the servant just as Christ came not to be served but to serve. He is among them as the one who serves (Lk 22:27).

To be the least or the smallest means also “to turn and become like little children” (Mt 18:1-5).

What should we imitate in a child? Obviously, not his self-centeredness, temper tantrums, moodiness, immaturity, or lack of judgment. But even the most selfish child knows that he cannot survive on his own. He depends on his parents for everything. As the child depends on his parents, the adult “child” in the Kingdom wants to depend on his heavenly Father. He wants to receive from God’s hands all that God is giving him because he knows that his Father is good. Just as the child trusts his parents, the adult Christian trusts God unconditionally; not second-guessing God, not afraid that God will take advantage of his trust.

This attitude has nothing to do with infantilism. On the contrary, trust in God requires courage. No matter how dangerous my path, how uncertain the outcome, my trust in God becomes a source of strength for me. As long as I am doing God’s will, I know that I am doing something important and great, even if in people’s eyes my work looks insignificant.

If I am placed in a position of responsibility, decision-making and risky leadership, I should try even more to remain obedient to God. This obedience gives me the ability to make bold decisions; I have nothing to fear. The worst that could happen to me is failure. But even then, if I have been seeking only God’s will, my peace should remain undisturbed. The motto of Blessed Pope John XXIII was “obedience and peace.” As he was preparing for the greatest and riskiest religious event of the 20th century, the Second Vatican Council, Pope John kept his serenity and peace. What could shatter the one who desires only one thing, the will of God?

SUMMER 2003

How Is Your Life?

“I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain” (Jn 15:16).

As I am attempting to recall the many faces I will meet at the CPS Alumni Weekend, I am preparing myself to look at the transformations that middle age, work and worries have wrought on the once familiar, happy faces of my young students. And the question that would take much greater courage in a face to face encounter, I dare to ask you here, my dear Anonymous Reader:

How is your life? How much in your life will survive your earthly life? Have you planted in this life any seeds of eternity?

I don't mean spectacular feats, heroic deeds or great accomplishments. What I have in mind is the ordinary life of an ordinary CPS alumnus. Is your life a service or just a service of the self? Are you welcoming the people who are entrusted to your care into your heart? Is your heart wide and spacious enough for them to feel at home in it? Are you present to the people you talk to so that they realize that you treat them as human beings rather than mere customers, clients, patients or just nuisances? Do you care for the poor and help them to the extent that you can?

These are some of the anxious questions I would like to pose to you (and, unavoidably, also to myself). Let us find our answer by remaining united to the true vine, Christ, so that His life and love might bear lasting fruit within us.



WINTER 2003

“Our God Is a Consuming Fire”

Hebrews 12:29

We know abstractly that God's goodness and love are boundless, yet we have a hard time believing it because we are also aware of God's justice and the eternal punishment of Hell. The existence of Hell and the real possibility of our ending up there makes us either question God's mercy altogether or at least put a limit on God's mercy. It cannot be pure and infinite love. In fact, it seems to be severely limited by his punishing justice.

This, however, is not the way St. Bernard and the Fathers of the Church think of God: God's nature, according to them (and according to Scripture) is pure and infinite love, not limited or tempered in any way whatsoever. Yet, to the extent that we are sinners, God's love remains hidden from us. Thinking of God becomes painful, a condemning judgment, a fire that we want to avoid.

Did we ever encounter a truly good person? Someone who was so outrageously good that we wanted to escape from his presence because we felt ashamed and embarrassed by the way he looked at us? He made us acutely aware of our own dark side, our long-cherished vices and sins. Since God is infinite goodness, our embarrassment and our urge to escape from Him may become quite intense. God, then, is love in His own nature, but only the pure of heart can experience it as love. To the extent that we remain opposed to Him, we perceive His goodness as a threat. Instead of causing warmth and delight, the flame of His love burns us. This is the case even with the lukewarm and the half-hearted. When thinking of God, they also feel uncomfortable.

The good news, however, is that we are still alive and have time to act. Instead of staying a safe distance from God, we should expose ourselves to His fire. Even if it is unpleasant and painful, let us ask Him to burn out all the trash from our hearts, all that is impure, selfish and duplicitous within us. Let us also ask Him to give us opportunities to choose His will over ours, to provide situations in which our love for Him may become real. He will not refuse such a prayer. Then, gradually, we will be able to taste how good the Lord is.



SPRING 2004

“Everything Is Possible to One Who Has Faith”

Mk 9:23

We are tempted to construe these words of Jesus to mean that if we have faith in him, we will be cured of all illness and avoid all misfortune. Consequently, I should believe that if I remain ill or bad luck keeps me down, it happens because I have no real faith. Yet, Jesus' own life and death discredits such an interpretation. Jesus fails to win over his people and does not avoid the torture of the Crucifixion. The meaning must lie elsewhere.

We need to read the whole story of the epileptic boy's cure (9:14-29) in order to come closer to what Jesus really means. At the disciples' question, "Why could we not drive out the unclean spirit? Jesus responds: "This kind can come out only through prayer." These words imply that Jesus prayed before the exorcism and he healed the boy in obedience to the Father's will. Jesus is constantly listening to the Father. He always depends on the Father and carries out the Father's will: "The Son cannot do anything

on His own but only what He sees His Father doing” (Jn 5: 19; cf. 5: 30). Yet, even in His earthly life and in His human nature Jesus carries out these works of obedience with the almighty power of His Father. Nothing can stop Him from fulfilling the Father’s plan.

The believers share in the almighty power of the obedient Son. To the extent that they carry out God’s plan in their lives, everything becomes possible to them. There is no obstacle that could derail them, no barrier to hold them back. The fisherman from Galilee conquers the capital of the Roman Empire, a frail nun in Africa (a missionary of St. Mary of Namur from Fort Worth) single-handedly turns back an armed mob intent on destroying a rival village; a poor peasant boy from the Italian countryside (St. John Bosco) gathers together hundreds of thousands of abandoned children into loving Christian communities all over the world; and so we could continue the list indefinitely. Everything is possible to one who has faith because, in carrying out God’s will, God himself will assist him with His own power. Like St. Paul, he will also boast of his weakness so that Christ’s power may dwell in him (2 Cor 12:9). He will share in the cross of his Lord (failures, rejections, anxieties, ailments and the like), but he will also share at the same time in the power of His Resurrection.

This full obedience to God’s will and the resulting experience of God’s power in our weakness are not reserved only for great saints and extraordinary apostles. Every Christian man and woman who wants to live a Christian life in our society needs God’s almighty power that comes through faith so that they may not be trapped by Satan’s wiles but fulfill God’s plan for themselves and for their families. Thus, if you pray for healing but are not healed, it does not necessarily mean that your faith was not strong enough. God’s almighty power may triumph in you in a different way. By embracing the cross of Christ, your illness may turn into a blessing, a source of deeper and richer life for you and for many others.



SUMMER 2004

Divine Providence, Even in Death

If you followed the life of our Cistercian Family over the past seven years, you may have wondered at the unusually high number of deaths. In 1998 Brian Price, a new student in Form V who immediately earned the friendship of his class, died unexpectedly from a congenital heart defect. Within the next couple of years five Cistercian Fathers passed away, some of them after a long struggle with excruciating illness. In the fall of 2000 our beloved Coach Tom Hillary left us. During the last school year the mother of **Sam Bowler ’06** died. Then in the summer of 2003 there followed a month-long vigil at the bedside of **Seth Henderson ’03** ending in a Requiem Mass for him. We had not quite recovered when we were asked to celebrate a memorial mass for Chris Bock, a long-time English teacher at CPS and the founder of our award-winning *Reflections*. Then

came the news of the sudden death of **Dr. Eddie Haller '91**, and just two months ago the mother of **Eric Ojeda '05** was taken away from us, an absolutely unexpected and heart-wrenching departure. I cannot even begin to mention the grandparents of Cistercian students and the parents of alumni.

Of course, not every alumnus, not every student, parent, and faculty member suffered through all these losses to the same extent, yet their cumulative effect has been felt in some way by the whole Cistercian Family. We cannot blame God for what has happened, nor can we find out why God allowed this or that person to die. Each death has a significance and lessons of its own, lessons that those close to the deceased might discover over a period of time; but even the closest relatives and friends will not fully understand until the threads of our confusingly intertwined lives will be finally untangled and reveal their secrets in God's eternity. In this column we can only aim at finding a partial meaning, a flicker of light to help us.

Human beings are eager to forget that our life withers away almost as fast as the flower of the field. So, when someone departs from this world, we shudder at our own approaching end. Confrontation with the death of our loved ones is a confrontation with our own inevitable demise. The effect can be most sobering. We might realize that every moment of our continued existence depends upon the whims of forces, entirely independent from us and entirely indifferent to our feelings: microbes, speeding cars, cold-blooded murderers and the like. On the other hand, our faith tells us that God uses this complex web of chance happenings to carry out his sovereign plan of mercy and justice. We die when He judges that we have received enough chances and graces to be ready for eternal life (or eternal death) and when we are no longer needed to help or test others. By "testing others," I mean that our sinful acts test the goodness of those around us. Our sins constitute a challenge for others to grow in virtue but also a temptation to fall into similar sins.

Blessed are those who learn from these lessons and accept the awareness of being a creature in unceasing, total dependence on God. The teenagers who acquire this sense of reality will grow up much faster than the average and will face life with a serenity that cannot easily be shaken. Brian Price's sudden death first created a stupor in the classroom, the benumbed silence of a mortuary. In the long run, a sense of deep solidarity emerged, his classmates began to support and care for each other and they still do so even now, three years after graduation from Cistercian. We could observe a similar process in Seth Henderson's class. A bunch of carefree, mischievous kids before (at least many of them impressed me so), they turned into a community of tenderly loving friends who came to watch at Seth's bedside for a month and prayed and cried when he finally passed into God's eternity. Seth has sealed their belonging to each other, to the School, and hopefully, to God.

If the person who dies was close to God, his departure takes place only on the level of our sense perception. On a deeper level all who have passed over into communion with God are much more intensely present to those whom they have loved. But they are present to us only in Christ. As Fr. Peter put it in his homily about Seth Henderson: "from now on you can find Seth only in Jesus Christ. And if you want to find him, remain close to Christ."

What a blessing it is to have in Heaven a family member or true friend who was close to us on earth and now sees God face to face. This person serves as a living bridge for us. Because of this person, Heaven becomes a familiar place, a place that is no longer

foreign and unknown. The burning intensity of God's holiness is not so frightening now since we trust that we will find our mother, our brother, our friend in the glow of that holiness.

In addition to the ancient and contemporary Cistercian saints, official and unofficial, Heaven is being enriched every year with more and more members of the Cistercian Family in Texas. We are linked together and pulled upwards by this invisible company.

However, this awareness of eternity should not make us indifferent to life on earth. On the contrary, since we know that every earthly action of ours builds up our eternal personality and our eternal relationships, every earthly moment, even the frustratingly petty and routine actions and sufferings, receive a lasting value that no earthly power can take away from us.



WINTER 2004

Vocation: The Glory of God Is Man Fully Alive

Instead of abstract reflections, I would like to share with you part of my letter to an alumnus who has recently finished college and is wondering about the direction of his life. Here is his question:

The idea of “dying to myself” has come up in conversation a few times recently, and is finding its way into my thoughts and prayers. I don’t really know what it means, and I’ve been apprehensive of embracing it because of its implications. I mean, does Christ really expect us to be fully dead to our own desires and inclinations? The implications of this are disturbing. In big decisions, when I have tried to ignore the longings of my heart in favor of “doing the right thing” or what I think might be God’s will, I have ended up making things hard on myself.

Our faith tells us that we are created in the image of the Triune God and called to share in the love and joy that unites the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. This explains why our deepest desires are to love and to be loved. But original sin and personal sins have wounded our nature (not to the point of total depravity, though) so that without embracing the cross and without God’s grace, we do not really know how to love and we often mistake possessive clinging or noble aloofness for love. The result is frustration and unhappiness.

To die with Christ to myself, then, means to die to this sinful, self-centered self (see Romans 6 and 2 Cor 4:10) so that already in this life we may begin to share in the life of the risen Christ. Thus, dying with Christ means actually the healing and coming to life of my original God-intended self and its enrichment so that I can love more and more with the very love of the Son of God himself. The cross both heals and elevates my wounded nature.

I think you know all this and you have lived it also to a great extent. But this still does not answer the concrete question about what to do with your life. I believe you should follow the deepest and purest desires of your inmost self, the desires that fill you with energy and enthusiasm. God speaks to us through these desires and calls us through them. If someone has no passion to be a doctor, a priest, a teacher a scientist or a businessman for that matter, he will not be very effective. But you may ask, where is the cross in all this? At every step along the road. If I want to follow my purest desires, I need to be available for a lot of renunciation, to choose one path and give up the rest, I need self-discipline, forgetting about the self and committing myself to serving people in one way or another and ultimately committing myself to God. Deep down you know that only by giving away yourself will you be happy. The question that only you can decide still remains, how and in what manner?



SPRING 2005

“I Don’t Get Anything out of Mass Anymore”

We often hear complaints like this: “I used to go to Mass regularly, but I did not get anything out of it, so I finally gave up. I think I live a good life: I pray when I like it, but if I go to a beautiful lake, meadow or forest or even if I look at the sky, I feel closer to God than in the midst of a bunch of hypocrites who go to Mass because they are used to it, who go through a boring ritual that is always the same, who endure a mediocre or bad sermon and listen to a long list of irrelevant announcements from the Parish Bulletin.

Why should I waste my time with all this? I can read the Bible at home and get more out of it than listening to the parish priest. We can have a family meal and pray together as a family, which is a lot more intimate celebration than any Eucharist.”

I would like to get to the root of such an attitude and offer to you a few ideas that you could use for yourself and share with your teenagers and friends.

What is implied in the saying, “I don’t go to Mass because I don’t get anything out of it?” It implies that these people go to Mass in the frame of mind in which they go shopping and want the best buy for their money. They have developed the attitude of a typical customer who refuses to buy what he does not like. He feels he must be in charge, he picks and chooses and follows his likes and dislikes, whims and moods.

This approach is quite normal in a shopping mall but may turn out to be a very dangerous attitude towards God. If God is God, then He is in charge and He is going to tell me what I ought to do. And I have only one right response: to obey Him. The consumer’s approach to Mass ultimately implies that he is above God, that he wants to dictate to God what He should give him: this is the exact opposite of true worship.

Moreover, what do we want to get out of the Mass? Good, uplifting feelings, an aesthetic experience of beauty, a feeling of fellowship, joy, elation, an emotional high?

I am not saying that it is wrong to have a good and uplifting experience while at Mass. I am not saying that beautiful singing and a good homily are irrelevant. In addition, there might be legitimate grievances behind your complaints: poor sermons, irreverent and hasty celebration by a priest, people who are indifferent toward each other, and the list could go on and on.

But do you really think that Jesus on the cross had an uplifting aesthetic experience? Do you really think that He was surrounded by a loving, caring community and that He was comforted and encouraged by those standing around Him? The celebration of the Eucharist includes the whole mystery of Christ: not only the last supper and return among us of the risen, glorified Christ, but also the cruel, bloody reality of Christ hanging on the cross, abandoned by all but a few, and apparently abandoned even by His heavenly Father. All these mysteries of Christ become present to us in the Mass. Sometimes this or that aspect of the mystery is perceived more keenly, sometimes the joy of the Resurrection and sometimes the agony of the cross.

So the right attitude when going to Mass would be something like this: "Jesus gave up His life for me to feed me with His Body and Blood. I come to Mass not to get a thrill, not even an emotionally satisfying experience, but I want to unite my body to His body, my sweat to His blood, so that through Him and with Him I may become an everlasting gift to the Father."

Briefly, we should try to offer ourselves to God the Father through Christ and offer others, ultimately the whole world, to Him. If we persevere in doing so, we will indeed "get something out of it." We will have more peace and may even be able to share this peace with those around us. We will develop an increased ability to love, we will become "community builders" wherever we are, we will even be able to forgive those who sin against us, able to endure sufferings and resist temptations. We will have hope even in desperate situations, for we will know from the changes we have undergone that the crucified and risen Christ lives in us and His transforming presence daily increases in us.



SUMMER 2005

The Pope Benedict the Media Doesn't See

The joy of so many young Catholics over the election of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, who on April 19 became Pope Benedict XVI, sharply contrasts with the caricature that some of the mass media have drawn of him: they characterized him as aloof, cold, closed to modern culture, the ruthless “Panzerkardinal” (“tank cardinal”) of the Vatican who, like a heavy tank, rolled over and crushed more than a hundred theologians.

I am not qualified to give an adequate description of our new Pope, but I would like to reveal a side to his personality and work that may not receive much coverage in the press.

Cardinal Meisner of Cologne has called Cardinal Ratzinger the “Mozart of theology.” Indeed, long before he became prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, Joseph Ratzinger was one of the greatest if not the greatest theologian of our times. His *Introduction to Christianity* has become a classic. It was just recently republished with a new introduction summing up clearly and most insightfully the history of theology in the past four decades. That book alone, not to mention his many other writings, shows Ratzinger’s intimate knowledge of modern culture. He laments precisely the crisis, the self-destructive nature of modern culture in order to save the culture and renew its lasting values.

I believe that one of the reasons for the Cardinals’ choice was their conviction that Ratzinger is best equipped to present the Christian message to the educated people of Europe and to the world in a compelling and challenging way. He is most capable of entering into a patient but forthright dialogue with Western culture, a culture that is increasingly de-Christianized, de-humanized and decadent. He sees better than most of us the connection between relativism and dictatorship: he sees how oppressive that intellectual climate is which denounces and silences any affirmation of a “clear faith based on the creed.”

He has become well known for his total lack of ambition to be part of the Roman Curia, much less become pope. He asked John Paul repeatedly for the permission to resign as head of the Doctrinal Congregation and to be allowed to continue his work as a theologian. Yet, when elected, he accepted the choice. In his homily to the Cardinals in the Sistine Chapel (April 20), he said: “I seem to feel his strong hand (the hand of John Paul) clasping mine, and I look into his eyes and hear his words: Do not be afraid.”

In the same homily he gives expression to the experience we have all had: “the funeral of John Paul II was a unique experience in which we have perceived the power of God who, through His Church, wants to make all nations into one great family through the unifying power of truth and love.”

In this homily he also presents part of his program: a further implementation of Vatican II in harmony with the work of his predecessors and the two-thousand-year tradition of the Church. He also pledges not to spare any effort in his primary task of restoring the full, visible unity of all the disciples of Christ. He calls for actions not just nice declarations, actions that lead to an interior conversion which forms the basis

for any real progress in ecumenism. He also calls for the Church to present Christ as the light of the world and to seek a sincere and open dialogue with other religions. He pledges the Church's work in promoting authentic social progress that respects human dignity, and he expresses his desire to continue the dialogue with different cultures. This program is certainly not reactionary; on the contrary it provides solid reassurance for the continued rejuvenation of the Church.

Let me also add that he has not “rolled over or crushed” any theologian. If he became convinced after a long and gentle dialogue with a theologian that this person continues to contradict the teaching of the Church, he simply declared him unfit to teach Catholic theology. Charlie Curran and Hans Küng, for instance, continue even today to speak up and teach, but they can no longer speak in the name of the Church as Catholic theologians.

Two interesting details shed some further light on the man who has become our Pope. One is his episcopal coat of arms, which includes a bear carrying a heavy pack. Archbishop Ratzinger himself explained it in the following way: according to the legend of St. Corbinian of Freising, a bear devoured the saint's horse on his way to Rome. The saint had no choice but to order the bear to carry the load to Rome. “The bear that replaced the horse – or rather the mule – of St. Corbinian was burdened with his load and thus became a beast of burden (against his will). Isn't this the image of what I have to do and of what I am?” Archbishop Ratzinger asked. He intended to be a theologian, and against his will, he was made an archbishop, a burden he accepted but did not seek.

The second detail is the name he chose. We can only speculate here. On April 1, a day before John Paul died, Cardinal Ratzinger was receiving an award in Subiaco, a Benedictine monastery built close to the mountain slope where Benedict long lived as a hermit and monk.

“We need people like Benedict of Nursia today,” said Cardinal Ratzinger in receiving the award. “He was a man who, in an age of debauchery and decadence, plunged himself into the most extreme solitude, and after he underwent all the necessary purifications, emerged to build Monte Cassino, the city on the mountain top, a city that, amid so many ruins, gathered together the energies out of which a new world was formed.”

Briefly, St. Benedict, the father of Western monasticism, evangelized through his monks the barbarian tribes of Europe and contributed to the emergence of a Christian culture.

Cardinal Ratzinger may also have chosen the name because of his immediate namesake. Benedict XV became pope at the beginning of World War I. He is well known for denouncing the ‘senseless massacre’ and ‘hideous butchery’ on both sides. He also called for a halt to the anti-Modernist witch-hunt, which was leading to a campaign to spy even on professors of church history as pious as Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, later to become Blessed Pope John XXIII. Thus, the name of our new pope may be also an indication that, while never compromising on the full truth of the Gospel, he intends to avoid unnecessary confrontations.



Learning from My Second Trip to the Holy Land

If you agree with the statement that “what matters most is not the person of Jesus, but his teaching,” then make a visit to Galilee and Jerusalem.

If Jesus’ mother lurks in your memory only as the blurred figure of a heavenly Queen, go to the cave in Bethlehem and to the only well of the old city of Nazareth where Mary and Jesus drew their daily water.

If, in spite of reading the Gospels faithfully, you see Jesus in your mind’s eye only with the vague, pious image of a generic human being, take a long, hard look at the black-bearded Jewish youth in Jerusalem and Galilee.

If you don’t understand why his own people did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, eat out in a Jewish restaurant of Jerusalem or Galilee on the Shabath and argue with the waiter who prevents you from signing your own bill because writing is a prohibited work during the Shabath rest.

If you think that it is ridiculous to believe that we live “in the last days” even though history may still continue for thousands of years, then talk to a religious Jew in Jerusalem for whom the destruction of the Temple means the end of his world.

If you think that God has rescinded His Covenant and abandoned His people, go to the Western (Wailing) Wall of the destroyed Temple, pray with the thousands of chanting, wailing and rhythmically bobbing pious Jews who know that the “shekinah,” the sacred presence of God, still overshadows the Wall in order to protect and comfort his people.

If you think that nothing of the above applies to you, then ask yourself: is the word “Jesus” synonymous with “God” for you? If so, go to Galilee and Jerusalem.

Some of the above questions did in fact apply to me, so this summer I went back to the Holy Land for the second time. I could walk on the Herodian streets of Jerusalem for only the few yards where excavations had freed the streets of Jesus’ time from two thousand years of accumulated soil and dirt. Still, I was able to cross the Kidron valley several times between the Mount of Olives and the (probable) place of the Last Supper (Jn 18:1).

I walked in the same places and among the same kind of people as Yeshuah of Nazareth once walked. I saw the places where He once spoke and healed, suffered, died and rose from the tomb. A sharp awareness of His human reality overwhelmed me: He was really there and He was a real man; He is not the product of religious imagination and myth-making.

As I was saying Mass near Kapernaum at the shore of the “Sea” of Galilee (a hardly larger body of water than Lake Texoma), I realized how small and limited his “theater of activity” was – a medium-sized lake, a few towns and villages, all within a two-to-three-day walk. And He did not even want His disciples to go beyond these boundaries during His lifetime: “Go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mt 10:6) – the most effective way to remain insignificant and ineffective.

I celebrated Mass on the Mount of Olives, facing the Temple Mount where in fact not one stone has been left upon another stone (Mt 23:37) because “you (Jerusalem) did not recognize the time of your visitation.” How many times have I also resisted Jesus’ visitations in my life? When will I finally listen to what He tells me: “If this day you only knew what makes for peace” (Lk 19:42-44)?

At our celebration of the Eucharist in the Empty Tomb Chamber (it is highly probable that this was indeed the burial place of Jesus!), the words of the angel reverberated clear and loud in the small cave as if addressing the whole world: “Do not be distressed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him” (Mk 16:6)!

This is, in fact, the place where all sin and all evil has been vanquished. Here the inexorable law of human death and decay was broken and the tortured body of the Son of God was transformed into the firstborn of a new humanity, the beginning of a new universe in which God’s life and love shines in all who belong to his Son.

As I am leaving the tomb, the words of Rilke, the great German poet, keep echoing in my mind with a serene monotony that brooks no contradiction: “Du musst dein Leben ändern: You must change your life.”

So, in my prayers I should no longer exaggerate and speak to Jesus half-heartedly as if He were a mere phantom of my imagination. When I pray, I am talking to a real person who wants to hear my real promises, wants to see my real sorrow, and wants to be loved wholeheartedly.

He takes every word of mine more seriously than I can ever do. He has a plan for me, a limited small mission to fulfill, but that plan I must fulfill with all my energy, because his plan for me and the universe is the only reality that counts.

He is still a real human being, a Galilean Jew of the first century, but His humanity now radiates the Son’s all-embracing love to every individual human being, and I can carry Him in my own hands to two old Cistercians in the nursing home.

I don’t need to go back to Jerusalem for the third time.



Are You Called to Marriage or to Celibacy?

"An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord; how he may please the Lord. But a married man is anxious about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and he is divided" (1 Cor 7:32-33).

In today's culture, Paul's statement is not very popular even among Catholics. Yet, some fifty years ago, the popular belief of Catholics was quite different. They thought that those who aspire to holiness should embrace religious life that includes celibacy or virginity. Marriage was deemed to be a concession to the weak, providing a back door to Heaven, so to speak, for those who could not endure a lifelong celibate commitment.

Such an exaggerated stance, of course, has never been the Church's official teaching, and the Second Vatican Council corrected this one-sided perception. The Council spelled out the biblical doctrine clearly and convincingly: all are called to holiness, we all should be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48).

It became clearer that 1 Corinthians 7: 32-35 must be read in conjunction with Ephesians 5: 25-26: "Husbands, love your wife even as Christ loved the Church and handed Himself over for her to sanctify her." We began to take more seriously the teaching that marriage is a sacrament in which husband and wife share in the sacrificial, self-giving love which unites Christ and the Church. Some Catholic couples (unfortunately not yet the majority) also realized that this share in the love of Christ is a life-giving love, thus their expression of conjugal love should remain open to cooperation with God the Creator.

The last Hungarian king and Austrian emperor, the recently beatified Karl von Habsburg and his wife Zita, provide us with a shining example. When the young Karl proposed to Zita and the beautiful young lady accepted it, he said, "From now on, our job will be to lead each other closer to God." And this they did. Even after losing their thrones and their wealth, living in abject poverty on the island of Madeira, without any money to call a doctor when Karl was dying from pneumonia, the couple and their eight children had a loving, happy home life because it was centered on Christ.

Indeed, if a couple follows the example of Karl and Zita, they will reach peace, serenity and joy even under the least favorable conditions. Then nothing, not even the worst disaster, the most crippling disease or tragic accident can separate them from Christ and from each other. Such marriage does lead to holiness. The trick is to select well your future spouse or rather, select each other well; you want to make sure that both of you are sincere about your fundamental goal in your marriage: to help one another and your children to grow in the love of Christ and the love of each other.

Yet, St. Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 7:32-33 remains true for all couples to the extent that their love for each other has not yet been fully transformed by the love of Christ. I understood this fact of life better after witnessing the crises in the marriage of many couples. The division of the heart results not from much work and concern for one's family but from a not yet purified love. If a couple is too attached to success and well-being in this world, their love for God might become quite anemic. Is it not

true that exactly happy marriages can make us forget about the reality of eternal life? Wonderful spouses can turn people into idol-worshippers who want to cling to their spouse as if that person were their own possession, and to hang on to this life as if this earth were their final destination.

Such a state of our fallen human nature is one of the reasons we need the example of happy celibates who, for the sake of the Lord, give up their freedom to marry. For them the love and service of Jesus Christ is such a treasure, such a “pearl of great price,” that everything else fades in comparison.

You still may wonder: “This all sounds true but how do I find out if I am called to celibacy or marriage?” I think there is a simple but radical way of going about it: deepen your prayer life, start reading the Bible and the lives of the saints, go to Mass regularly even on weekdays, tell God daily that you surrender your life, your mind, your heart and body to him and that all you want is his will, not yours. After doing so for a while, ask yourself: “Were I to marry, would I feel divided? Would marriage be a compromise for me, a compromise that would lessen my love and dedication to Christ?” If your answer is yes and if you are capable of living a chaste life, then most likely you are called to celibacy “for the sake of the kingdom.” Then the words of Jesus apply also to you: “Whoever is able to accept it ought to accept it” (Mt 19:12).

However, there are many who, when thinking about marrying, perceive more or less clearly: “this woman or this man is teaching me to love better and is leading me closer to Christ.” Such an awareness might be a telltale sign that you are called to marry this person.

If you are not sure, pray more fervently and put yourself at Christ’s disposal more sincerely. As you pray, realize that Christ needs the witness of those who want to give themselves directly to him, those who want to share directly in the virginal marriage between Christ and the Church, not only through the mediation and purification of married love.

Our culture that lives in the delusion that this material world alone matters needs desperately the witness of happy celibates; happy celibates who can show the world that Jesus Christ and his kingdom is real, that he is of infinite value. And the best way to witness to the reality of an invisible treasure is to give up for it that which, in this life, is the greatest visible treasure, earthly marriage and earthly family.



SUMMER 2006

Religion Cannot Be Reduced to the Golden Rule

“Our world and its cities are extremely and increasingly violent. Have you noticed: much of the death, destruction and division follows almost gleefully in the wake of one religion or the other, including mine and including yours.

I’ve been wondering. What if all religion and every “important” question associated with religion and the theologies of the various religions were done away with except for one?

What if God and God’s will were reduced to one single directive, just one? ‘Do to others what you want them to do to you.’”

One of our alumni recently sent me this quote while expressing his (initial) admiration for its wisdom. This alumnus is a faithful Catholic with eight years of Religion/Theology courses at Cistercian. I kept wondering: if even this deeply religious young man was so thoroughly taken (for a while) by the half-truths of such a statement, what do the rest of you think? Are you also enthusiastic about this “true religion in simple human terms” or (what I would like to hope) you have mixed feelings and critical reservations?

The world is indeed becoming more and more violent, acts of nuclear, biochemical terrorism may occur any day. Some say that a major catastrophe is imminent. It is also true that violence and terrorism are presently, to a large extent, religiously motivated. The statement, however, that every religion with a definite creed occasions or causes “death, destruction and division” may only be excused by a thorough ignorance of history.

Christians today are rather the sufferers than the perpetrators of violence, even though it was not always so. From time to time Christians did engage in bloody wars, torture, slave trade and the like. However, they did it against the teaching of their own religion which admits only a just war of self-defense and gives pride of place in its moral teaching to the love of the enemy.

Do you know that Pius VII was kidnapped and kept under house arrest by Napoleon because he refused to join the blockade of Protestant England? Do you realize that Pius IX was forced to escape from his own people in Rome because he refused to take up arms against the emperor of Austria? Are you aware that according to Jewish sources Pius XII and the Catholic Church in Europe saved more than half a million Jewish lives during World War II?

You want to do away with “every important question associated with religion and the theologies of the various religions” except the Golden Rule. Do you notice the hidden hubris and the narrow bias behind such an apparently enlightened attitude? Without examining them, you assume that all belief systems are equally fallible (and even noxious) human fabrications that should be done away with. What if one of them – say, Christianity – is not a man-made religion but is given to us by God himself? What if in other religions we also find seeds of God’s wisdom even if mixed with human errors?

Do you reject all truths and keep only that one rule? In your broad-minded tolerance you deny the right to God to reveal and communicate to us the fullness of his love. And you do so because the acceptance of such revelation creates a distinct religion that differs from others? Would you allow God only one directive, that of the Golden Rule? Don't you see your thinly disguised will to overpower God Himself and at the same time masquerade as a peacemaker?

Evidently, Christianity does include in its teaching the Golden Rule, but it calls for infinitely more than this minimum standard of morality: "Love your enemies... that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for He makes His sun rise on the bad and the good;" "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect;" "Love one another as I have loved you" (Mt 5:44-45, 48; Jn 13:32).

These are Jesus' directives. However, the love of Jesus is inseparable from His person. And the mystery of His person is inseparable from the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Thus, the mystery of Jesus' love implies the totality of the Christian mystery. In Jesus we encounter not just a great philanthropist, but the infinite gift of God the Father who handed over to us His own Son in order to save His renegade creatures from self-destruction.

Take away just one truth of the Catholic Christian Faith and the fullness of God's love for us suffers truncation or distortion. For example, if you downgrade the Eucharist to a mere psychological remembrance, you downgrade the efficacy of Jesus' love: you refuse to believe that His love is almighty enough to give us His very self, His crucified and glorified humanity and divinity, in the most intimate way that is possible for a human being on earth.

So, if God revealed Himself in Christ, we should ponder and guard every truth of the Christian mystery which is the growing, unfolding articulation of the one basic truth that "God is love" (1Jn 4:16), as Pope Benedict has so beautifully shown us in his first encyclical.

At the same time, we should rejoice that every major religion has the Golden Rule in some form or another. For us Catholic Christians, this is a sign that God's grace is at work everywhere, that His call to change and renew our lives is offered to every human being. (Of course, the principle "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is an expression of true love only if your motivation is the well-being of the other person rather than just an exercise of enlightened self-interest:" I treat others fairly so that they may treat me fairly.") However, the more we receive from God, the more we are obliged to Him.

We Catholic Christians were made aware of the "breadth and length and height and depth" of God's love for us in Christ Jesus (Eph 3:18), therefore we cannot not embrace this fullness. Jesus ordered his disciples to gather every fragment that was left over after the multiplication of the loaves "so that nothing will be wasted" (Jn 6:12).

The Word of God, the truths of His Revelation, are infinitely more precious than the crumbs of the five barley loaves. We should not knowingly throw away even the smallest fragment of His Word.



Purity of the Heart Requires the Faith of the Leper

“Do you not realize that everything that goes into a person from outside cannot defile since it does not enter the heart? ... But what comes out of a person that is what defiles. From within people’s hearts come evil thoughts, unchastity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, licentiousness, envy, blasphemy, arrogance, folly. All these evils come from within and they defile (Mk 7:18, 20-23).

In this encounter Jesus tells the Pharisees and scribes that the division into clean and unclean foods is now superseded. The Son of Man came not to enforce dietary rules or the washing of hands before meals but to rescue and re-create the unclean human heart.

He wants to take away our stony hearts and give us new hearts, hearts that are able to see God face to face. Hearts in Hebrew culture is not just the seat of emotions as in ours, but the personal center of the human being, the seat of the intentions and decisions of the will, the seat of the spirit’s inner life.

Jesus never puts down notorious sinners, such as Zacchaeus or the sinful woman, who acknowledge their sinfulness. He rather honors and defends them from the scorn of scribes and Pharisees. By showing love and respect, He inspires them to repent and change.

On the other hand, Jesus is strict and harsh with the self-righteous, with those who cover up their filth by appearing just and pious. But before venting our indignation against the Pharisees, we may recall how often most of us were tempted to act at least partially as a Pharisee. How often we tried our best to appear better than we actually are. Perhaps we like to hide even from ourselves our secret faults and moral compromises.

Of course, we all have at hand a strong excuse: “I cannot clean up my mess, I cannot change my heart, I cannot purify all my motives. Had I wanted to act out of entirely pure motives, I would have had to stop doing anything long ago. Had I wanted to speak only out of good motivation without pride and vainglory, I would be reduced to complete silence. But I must speak and act. Besides, what is wrong with appearing a little better than I am? I do not want to scandalize people by showing my real colors. Is a little hypocrisy not better than uncovering all my selfishness and pride under the impeccable surface?”

True, we do not need to show all our faults to all people, but we should present our leprosy to God. We should acknowledge to him that we are at the end of the rope: we cannot clean up our heart, we cannot change our intentions and motivation.

To speak to God in this way, however, we need faith: we need the faith of the leper, who said, “Lord, if you wish, you can heal me. And I know that you want to heal me, for this you came among us, for this you suffered and died for us. Your purpose was to create a new and pure heart in us, you wanted to reign in our hearts.”

Here lies the greatest test of my faith: it is easier to believe in the Resurrection of Christ than to believe that he can heal my heart. Of course, if I truly believed in the Resurrection of Christ, I should have no problem believing that he can make the impossible possible, that he can make me into a new creation.

The purification of the heart rarely happens instantaneously. We ought to present our wounds to Christ daily with sorrow but also with serenity and trust in His will to heal us. It may last long, but it will be finished before we die or at least in Purgatory.

Meanwhile, even before we are fully healed, we need to speak and act although we foresee that our intentions are mixed and not quite pure. If what we do or say is good and necessary, we should act or speak even if some pride or self-centeredness might be mixed in with our motivation.

By uncovering it to ourselves and regretting what is impure in our heart, we may become more realistic, or rather, more humble. But we should never say or do what is in itself not right or for what the only motive is vainglory.

During this process we are sustained in hope as we realize that Jesus himself wants us to pray for this purpose. When we ask, “your kingdom come, your will be done,” we pray that Jesus may come into our hearts and rule every intention, decision, and eventually every movement of our hearts. Let him set up his throne there as we receive Holy Communion.



SUMMER 2007

Pause and Reflect on God's Word of Spirit and Life

At the end of his life, Jesus sums up his public ministry in these words: “I did not come to condemn the world but to save the world. Whoever rejects me and does not accept my words has something to judge him: the word that I spoke, it will condemn him on the last day” (Jn 12: 47).

No readers or writers of *The Continuum* could claim that they have not heard the Word of God. We have heard the words of Scripture many times, perhaps too many times. As the lector stumbles over the words of the reading, we stop listening – perhaps quite unconsciously. We may even know the text by heart, so why listen? But before we become completely numb to the words of Scripture, it will be helpful to ponder the words of Jesus quoted above: the words we have heard but have not obeyed will condemn us on the last day.

Jesus' words, however, are not only judgment but “spirit and life” for all those who put them into practice. Human words are simply words: they create sound waves in the air and then fade away. Action and reality lag behind. The words of Jesus, on the other

hand, share in the almighty power of the Spirit of God. They create, heal and give life. They turn the water into wine, multiply the loaves, change the bread and wine into his risen body and blood. When we appear before the throne of the Son of Man who will come in judgment, we will see what a glorious masterpiece God had intended to make out of us, if only we had put into practice His words.

Each one of us, however, still has time. Out of consideration and mercy, God has extended our deadline. Yet we live on borrowed time. Let us, then, start reading the Scriptures every day, at least for 20 minutes; a gospel passage or a letter of the apostles first. Read until you find a sentence, a phrase or a scene that seems to apply to you; either because it fills you with dread or it lifts you up with joy. Stop there, chew on it, until you begin to see how it will affect your life. Then give thanks to God for what you have received and go on reading in the same way. If you put into practice only one word of Jesus every week, in a few years you will have changed so thoroughly that you will be unable to recognize your old self in your new self. Your own goodness, serenity and strength will be a great surprise to you. Just make sure not to take credit for the change because this new self, this “new creation,” is fragile enough and will not survive your attempt to steal even a small fraction of God’s glory. Be happy and rejoice that you have been given a share in the risen life of Christ but return all glory and praise to God; to the Father who gave you His Son, to the Son who gave you His life, to the Holy Spirit who clothes you with the Son as a new and shining garment.

The most effective way to listen to Jesus is to spend time with Him after Holy Communion. Instead of immersing yourself in the distractions of the day and beating the crowd to the parking lot, stay for a while in the church and listen to Jesus. He may want to remind you of a phrase or sentence from the gospel of the day or another word of his. Fix it solidly in your heart and let it become life and spirit in you.



WINTER 2008

It is Easier for a Camel to Pass through a Needle’s Eye

This is one of those sayings of Jesus which has caused much anxiety for many people (Mt 19:24). The first to be disturbed were the apostles themselves. “Who then can be saved?” They ask Jesus. He restores their peace: “This is impossible for men but for God all things are possible” Mt 19: 26).

In other words, wealth can be an insurmountable obstacle if someone is so attached to it – as in the story of the young man whom Jesus told to sell all he had, give the money to the poor and literally follow him.

But Jesus did not give the same command to every rich person. He even accepts invitations to rich people's homes. He does not demand from Simon the Pharisee that he sell his property. Instead, He tells His audience in a Pharisee's house that when they invite people, they should invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, those who cannot repay the host (Lk 14: 12-14).

We also learn from the Acts of the Apostles and from Paul's letters that there were rich people among the first Christians (Acts 20:7-12). Their homes served as meeting places for the local churches in every city where Paul established a Christian community (Rom 16:23, 1 Cor 16: 15,19, Phlm 1-2). Paul does not despair about their salvation as long as they are sharing their wealth with the poor generously and serve the needs of the Church.

A just social order does not mean that everyone has an equal share of goods – an impossible ideal anyway. It is one in which everyone who works and those who cannot work – such as children, the sick and the elderly – have a fair share in the goods of the world. In our sinful world, however, we must strive for this goal, but we will never fully reach it.

Yet we can turn this sorry state of affairs to our own advantage. Are we affluent? This indicates our vocation to use our wealth to help those who are in need and in this way learn to be generous and even humble when we realize that some of the poor would more deserve the good life than we ourselves do. Are we poor or indigent? We can learn gratitude toward those who are helping us.

The Fathers of the Church and more recently Paul VI explained in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio* that what is truly superfluous to the rich man and his family does not belong to him but to those in need. This, of course, cannot mean that all superfluous wealth ought to be given away in the form of charitable donations. That would ruin the economy of any society.

But wealth should be used to provide job opportunities, endow foundations, promote better health services and better education for children who are caught in the vicious circle of poor neighborhoods and poor schools.

There are people, however, who are extremely generous with material help but also extremely proud of their status, talents and virtues. They can belong to the poor in spirit to whom the kingdom of Heaven belongs only if they discover their real situation: all that they have and all that they are is an undeserved gift, a cause for gratitude rather than pride.

Blessed are they if they realize this fact before death deprives them of all they cherish.



“From that Hour the Disciple Received Her into His Own”

(Jn 19:27)

Protestants often wonder why Mary is so important for Catholics. Does devotion to Mary not diminish the central role of Christ in our faith? I admit that there are ways in which Marian piety can marginalize the Triune God in our prayer life.

But such devotion would be against the very intention of Mary and the authentic tradition of the Church. Marian piety should be deep and intense but Christocentric and theocentric just as Mary's was. We can find the secret of such an attitude in the scene described in Jn 19:25-27: The crucified Jesus tells his mother, “Woman, behold your son,” and to the beloved disciple who represents under the Cross all believers: “Behold your mother.” And the evangelist adds: “And from that hour the disciple received Mary into his own.”

The Greek phrase “eis ta idia” does not simply mean “into his home”; it includes “into his life and into his heart.” In other words, John receives the mother of Jesus into all that is his, and Mary will share with him her intimate knowledge of her Son. Who else knows a son better than his mother?

Who else knows Jesus better than Mary? Only the Father in Heaven knows the Son fully, but the Father must have shared his knowledge with the mother of his Son more than with anyone else. Mary knows Jesus as her Creator but also as her own child.

She depends completely on Him in every moment for her existence, but the child Jesus depends on his mother for nourishment, survival and growth. She remembers the first words Jesus ever uttered; she looked into the eyes of the newborn baby, returned His first smile and wiped off His tears.

She and Joseph taught Him to walk, prayed with Him, and conversed with Him about God and His people Israel. Reflecting on the words of Jesus, she constantly deepened her understanding of the mystery of Jesus' vocation.

Time and again she was made aware of the infinite abyss that separated her from her Son (“Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I have to be in my Father's house?” (Lk 2:49); “Woman, how does your concern affect me?” (Jn 2:4)), and time and again her faith caught up with Him. At the end, at the foot of the Cross Mary, full of grace, consents to her Son's sacrifice with a broken but undivided heart and identifies with Jesus' almighty prayer: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing!” (Lk 23:34).

It is at this point that the painful birth of the Messiah is completed as Jesus is lifted up on the Cross, King of the Jews and of the world (Jn 16:21; Rev 12: 2). At the same time Mary's motherhood is extended far and wide to embrace all the actual and potential believers: “Woman, behold your son!” (Jn 19: 27). If we truly receive Mary into our life and heart, our holy communions will change because we will ask Mary's help in receiving her Son and in identifying with Him.

Mary gave birth to God's Son both in the flesh and in the spirit. We can do it only in the spirit – that is, we can shrink our ego so as to provide space to Jesus within us. Let Him “increase,” while we “decrease” so that more and more He would speak, act and feel through us. In this way Mary does not diminish the centrality of Christ but rather helps us to be united with Him.

The image of giving birth to Jesus within us calls for some further explanation. It obviously means a spiritual birth, yet a birth which does not affect exclusively the soul. Through the grace of the Holy Spirit Mary takes both our soul and flesh, our concrete, individual humanity and molds it – to the extent that our free cooperation allows it – into the expression of Jesus' presence in the world.

Yet this way of presence will not eliminate our “I” and our personality but – to varying degrees – our “I” and our personality are transformed into expressing Christ's love and activity. As long as we are pilgrims on earth, this birth of Christ in us – which is the same, from another viewpoint, as our rebirth to a new life in God – is just a beginning and is certainly incomplete.

The glory of Christ will shine through us without the admixture of sin and imperfection only in Heaven where Christ will be all in all in His creation.



FALL 2009

“Great Men Dare Great Things” (Yes, Even Christians)

The above statement of St. Bernard, the humble monk, may surprise some of you. In fact, among believers and unbelievers alike you find a widespread conviction that true Christians are not supposed to strive for greatness, but remain contented with being small and insignificant, unknown and child-like.

It is true that real humility does not seek false greatness. We should be grateful for the talents we have received and redouble them rather than attempt to appear more talented and more virtuous than we are. And even the greatest genius is small in comparison to God. The ideal of spiritual childhood has nothing to do with the naiveté and helplessness of a permanent minor – it is childlike trust in God.

St. Bernard, however, does not encourage anyone to seek greatness by accumulating power, riches and fame, yet he did not tell the emperor or the kings to abandon their post of leadership; rather, they should use power and wealth in service for the good of their subjects. The greatness Bernard encourages is to strive boldly for great faith and trust in God. There is no limit to the power of God on whom the believing Christian relies. “All things are possible for the one who believes” (Mk 9:23) as Bernard says, quoting the saying of Jesus for the timid and comfortable souls among his readers because – in the words of Paul – “I can do everything in the one who strengthens me”

(Phil 4:13). The conclusion Bernard draws from the words of Jesus and Paul is bold indeed: "Isn't that person almighty who can do all things"? This limitless trust in God Bernard calls magnanimity, literally, having a great soul. It is not opposed to humility, but to pusillanimity, which literally means having a small soul. The pusillanimous soul does not dare to trust that God fulfills His promises and that He overwhelms the soul with great gifts and ultimately with His gift of Self. Magnanimous people, on the contrary, dare to ask for great things. They are like Moses who asked God to reveal to him His face, or the apostle Philip who asked Jesus to show him the Father, or the apostle Thomas who wanted to put his hand into the side wound of Jesus. Their great desires were fulfilled because their trust was great. The greater our trust, the greater things we will obtain. The promise of God to the Israelites who were exploring the promised land, applies also to us: "Every place your foot (of faith) will tread upon shall be yours" (Deut 11:24). Magnanimous souls, no matter how enslaved and overburdened by sin they are, may and should aspire to become the spouse of Christ and be united with Him as "one spirit" with God (On the Song of Songs 32. 9; 83.1-2).

True humility and magnanimity belong together, and the latter results from the former. We see the connection and the perfection of both in Mary:

In her own judgment she was so humble, nevertheless in her trust in the promise she was so magnanimous that she who had regarded herself as a handmaid of little worth did not at all doubt her election for this incomprehensible mystery, for this marvelous exchange and inscrutable sacrament and believed that she would soon become the true mother of the God-man.

– On the Octave of the Assumption of Mary #13

True humility, then, does not make us men of little faith, nor does magnanimity lead us to arrogance. On the contrary, the less we presume to accomplish by ourselves, the more we trust to do great things by God's power. If one presumes to act without faith, it does not derive from a solid greatness of soul. Such a person is like a balloon filled with hot air, suffering from the tumor of an inflated ego (5 Ascens 2). When applying St. Bernard's teaching to our own lives, we can ask: What do I desire most? To live comfortably, have power, influence and fame? Have I gradually suppressed any ambition that point beyond this world? Obviously, we need the goods of this world to take care of our families and to be of service to others. But if we narrow our ambitions to the dimensions of this short life here on earth, our souls will gradually atrophy and shrink in proportion to the small capacity of our desires. We will make ourselves incapable of tasting the true joys of life.

Do we dare to be magnanimous, asking God with our whole heart, with boundless trust to make us holy, knowing that his will for us is "our sanctification" (1 Thes 4:3). Do we really want to live in intimate union with Christ, becoming one Body and one Spirit with Him? We should not stop begging that God will stretch our minds and hearts wide as to "possess" His infinite light and love.



Aim for Goals that Rely on Your Will and God's Grace

A human being is a goal-setting animal. He cannot act consciously and freely nor can he abstain from acting without at least a half-conscious goal.

Of course, more serious goal setting takes place before entering a new stage in life, such as enrolling in college, choosing a job or graduate school and, above all else, when deciding to get married. Success or failure, happiness or bitterness depends to a large extent on what goals we have set for ourselves.

Fortunately, it is never too late in this life to readjust or even fundamentally change these goals provided we still have the energy to start over again.

Let me concentrate today on goal setting with your fiancée before you decide to get married.

I tell engaged couples who ask me to prepare them for marriage to set such basic goals for themselves that can be achieved under any set of external circumstances; goals that depend solely upon the couple's will and God's grace; goals that not even the worst tragedy can frustrate.

I recommend that their fundamental goal should be to grow together in loving God and loving each other. Blessed Charles IV, the last king of Hungary and the last emperor of Austria, said the same thing in much simpler terms.

When Charles asked Zita to marry him, he told her, "From now on our goal will be to lead each other to Heaven."

Of course, this attitude entails the acceptance of children from God, if that is God's will. This over-arching goal may and should coexist, in fact, with an indefinite number of concrete conditional goals on which the couple agree. But the basic common goal should depend completely on themselves and on God.

What a joy and what an incredible freedom derives from setting this fundamental goal: to grow in God's love and in loving each other, to nurture a common will which relies on the inexhaustible fountainhead of the sacrament of marriage.

As long as the couple adhere to this agreement, they can defy any adversity. All that happens, sickness and health, success and failure, depression or flourishing of the economy, promotion to a great job or the loss thereof, all actually serve the couple in growing to trust in God and trust each other.

Even if one of the spouses becomes seriously ill, the illness can become a challenge revealing the full depth of their love for each other and for God.

Nothing, absolutely nothing, except their own change of will, can destroy the peace and lasting joy of such a marriage.

At the end of World War I, King Charles lost his empire and his crown and was exiled with his large family to the Portuguese island Madeira, where he had to collect firewood and mushrooms in the forest to keep his family from freezing and starving, but he died a happy man.

Both he and Queen Zita fulfilled the promise they had made on the day of their wedding. They led each other and their children to God.

It is never too late for a couple to set this over-arching goal for their marriage. They can always reevaluate their lives under the impact of life's challenges and tragedies and so eventually discover the wisdom of the cross.

My hope is that at the end of your lives, each of you "Cistercian couples" will be able to look back at your joint lives in such a way that gratitude will well up in your hearts toward God and that you will be able to sincerely confess, "God has given us infinitely more happiness, more peace and joy than we had ever dared to hope for."



SPRING 2010

"I Know Him in Whom I have Believed and I am Sure"

These words of St. Paul (2 Tim 1:12) resound through two millennia and evoke a variety of responses: from the enthusiastic "Amen" of a fellow believer to the skeptic's demeaning shrug: "How can you be sure? Did you throw aside common sense and rational inquiry?"

In the middle are those cautious people and perhaps the majority of Americans, who admit, "Yes, you need to believe in something because it increases happiness and good health, but to be sure? Sure of what? Faith is a matter of feelings and actions." It might be helpful for us to find out what Jesus says about faith. Once he asked Peter: "Do you love me more than these?" But most of the time Jesus is asking for faith: "Do you believe I can do this for you?" "Let it be to you as you believed!" "Go, your faith has saved you."

The faith Jesus is looking for is not faith "in anything you choose" nor a generic faith in the God of Israel, but faith in Jesus himself, faith that God's almighty love is present and at work in the person of Jesus.

Most intriguing is the way Jesus responds to the petitions of two Gentiles. He is deeply impressed by the faith of the pagan centurion: "Amen I say to you, I have not found such a great faith in Israel" (Mt 8:10). When a Canaanite woman is shouting after him, "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon," Jesus does not, at first, dignify her with a response. At the prodding of the annoyed disciples he finally declares: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

As the woman continues her desperate pleading, he deliberately – it seems – offends her: "It is not right to take the food of children and throw it to the dogs." But she humbly accepts her unworthiness: "Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters." At this point it becomes clear why Jesus humiliated her with such apparent cruelty; he did it on purpose so that he could admire and praise her faith: "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish" (Mt 15:21-28).

The Call of the Disciple

What if I asked you, “What do you think is the greatest possible, non-material treasure that a Christian can possess already in this life?” Some of you might say, it is my faith, others might point to all the three divine virtues, faith, hope and charity. Still others might mention sanctifying grace which transforms us into a child of God and provides the entrance ticket to Heaven.

I would say all these are invaluable treasures, but there is something infinitely greater than all these, that in fact is the source of all these treasures: the presence of Jesus Christ Himself within us. He made this promise: “If anyone loves Me, he will keep my word and My Father will love him and We will come to him and make Our home in him” (Jn 14:23. Cf. also 1 Jn 3:6, 3:24, 4:12, 4:15).

Finding a home within us is the goal of God’s plan with mankind: He created us and He sent His Son among us as a true and simple human being; for this reason He died for us so that He might become nourishing food and life-giving blood for us and thus enable us to welcome Him in our body and soul so that we might be more perfectly transformed into Him by each Holy Communion.

Even though we know this fact in theory, we live most of our lives as if Jesus were far removed from us in Heaven, and had more important things to attend to than being present in us. As a result, we leave our guest alone, since we rarely return home, to our own hearts. Exciting sounds, thrilling movies, garrulous friends keep us busy. At every waking moment we need something new and stimulating. How could we have energy and time to welcome Christ in our hearts and listen to Him?

Perhaps we ignore Him because we are afraid that in His presence we would have to change – change our thoughts, feelings and attitudes. Yes, in fact, we would need to change – but for the better. It is not about assuming a rigid and unctuous posture, nor putting on a façade. All we would have to do is be ourselves: admit our sins and request a gentle “radiation treatment.” Let the radiance of His love burn out the cancerous growths in our hearts and make us shine with Christ’s own light and love. God loved King David as he was dancing with abandonment before the Ark of the Covenant. We should also alternate “dancing,” rejoicing and joking with awe and adoration.

We cannot outdo Jesus in generosity. If we provide a home for Christ within us. He will also provide a home in Himself - a safe shelter of peace and tranquility. The words of St. Bernard will prove true also in our lives: “Tranquillus Deus tranquillat omnia: The calm God calms down everything.” Unexpected upheavals may come and shake us but they will not destroy us nor can they take away our place.

If we make a home for Christ, he will stretch our heart wide open so that it might become a home for all those who come to us for help but especially for those who are entrusted to our care. There are too many shipwrecked human lives, poor and affluent, estranged from themselves and from their own families, children and adults, who have never experienced unselfish love in their lives.

Then, at the moment when our earthly life comes to an end, we will not find ourselves alone because Christ will accompany us on this final journey. As we fall asleep in death, we will awaken to the dawning of the day that never sets and to the “morning star rising in our hearts” (2nd Pt 1:19).



SPRING 2011

Look for Little Ways to Show Your Wife You Love Her

Could anything or anyone be more closely connected to you for good or for bad than your wife? Whose critique puts you down more than hers? Whose praise lifts your mood higher than hers?

You may look like a perfectly self-confident leader but she could deflate your self-confidence in no time should she choose to do so.

God knows that the relationship with your wife is the most tender spot of your soul, and so it is through your marital relationship that He most often wakes you up, saves you and would like even to make a saint out of you.

At the beginning of their marriage not too many newly-weds think of the grace of the sacrament they gave to each other because they are very confident that their love will conquer any obstacle. By now, however, most of you who are married have encountered hurdles, perhaps even crises, and have begun to discover the effective help of God's grace.

In this short piece I would like to reflect on the immense potentiality of the grace you received in the sacrament of matrimony and offer a few simple suggestions about how you can work with this grace in order to deepen your relationship. I start with a text of St. Paul on marriage and the mystery of the love between Christ and the Church.

“Be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). This mutual subjection follows from the perfect equality of husband and wife and makes clear that any domination of the woman by the man is the result of the Fall (Gen 3:16) and is overcome to the extent that the spouses live and act in the love of Christ.

It is true that Paul says later that wives be subordinate to their husbands, but then he addresses the husbands in these words: “Husbands, love your wives even as Christ loved the Church and handed Himself over for her to sanctify her, cleansing her by the bath of water with the word that He might present to Himself the church in splendor...” (5: 25-26).

Thus, for Paul the headship of the man should show itself in self-giving love which not only imitates but shares in the love by which Christ sacrificed Himself for the Church.

The love which unites Christ and the Church is infinitely more real than the greatest human love and so intense that the saints who have experienced it on earth begged for the cooling of its fire lest they die. Christ's pledge for a share in this love is imparted to the couples in this sacrament.

As long as they are in the state of sanctifying grace and ask for it with trust, they can always count on their love to be rekindled by the love from Christ. If both spouses believe the words of Jesus, "everything is possible to the one who believes" (Mk 9:23), they will always find in the sacrament an inexhaustible source of energy, patience and love.

But how to translate all this into daily practice?

Pray together every day and include the children. Husbands and wives should spend at least once a week some quality time together away even from the children, where they can talk and enjoy each other's presence. Sadly, most of the time when I ask a husband whom I prepared for marriage, "When did you take your wife out last time?" The usual reply is, "Well, we should really do it, but we have been just too busy lately."

"Lately" means often more than a year. If you don't start talking now, once the children fly out of the nest, it might be too late. You will face a stranger in her and she in you. Learn from the couple who go for a walk every day after work. They are each other's best friend.

Forgive me for talking mainly to the men but only they were my students. I trust they are not easily offended by my insistence!

So, then, husbands, I am telling you that every day there are many little ways in which you can show admiration and affection for your wives. You can call her during the day and tell her you love her. You can come up with little surprises.

Listen to what one alum did.

His office and his wife's were in the same building. One day, while she was out to lunch, he sneaked into her office and covered the floor and furniture with small yellow pads, on each he had written three words, "I love you." And note that they had long passed their honeymoon, they were already multiple grandparents!

In fact, most of the time love shows itself in small acts and few words, but these mundane signs can express a love that is truly divine. It springs from your own heart, yet it is much greater than your heart.

If you persevere and she reciprocates, your exchange of love will bring both of you closer to the Source of all love. You will become roads to God for each other.



Putting the Little Things into an Eternal Perspective

There is an old Latin phrase that, hopefully, you can translate even if it was some fifty years ago that Fr. Matthew taught you his famous acronym: PAIN.

The phrase I have in mind is *sub specie aeternitatis*. It means that you should look at everything from the perspective of eternity. It is no easy task, especially for those alumni who are in their twenties, bristling with energy and beaming with happiness.

But let's stop and think for a moment. If, in fact, we have only this short span of life on earth, then human existence is not much more than a cruel joke of fate, a brief wave on the river of life, an absurd tale in which goodness is, at the end, always defeated by evil, since death is stronger than love, non-being always prevails over being. But, you may interrupt me here: "This sounds great but you must stop dreaming and accept reality. This is the only life we know."

In a sense that is true, but St. Paul says, "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard what God has prepared for those who love him." Paul and the rest of the New Testament look at everything from the perspective of eternity: we all are encouraged to wait for "the resurrection of the body and life everlasting."

Here I would like to sketch out some of those experiences on earth by which God intimates a foretaste or preview of eternal life to those who do not harden their hearts.

I am always amazed by the fact that whatever we think, feel or will, we always do it with at least a dim, background awareness of the eternal, absolute or infinite. If we say something is "temporary," it makes sense only if we semi-consciously compare it with eternity.

If we establish that something (e.g., happiness, life, wisdom, goodness, being, beauty) is finite, we must have tacitly compared it with what is eternal, absolute and infinite.

Even if we say that all truths are relative, our statement makes sense only if we meant at least this one truth absolutely. Otherwise, only one option would remain for us: to stop thinking and speaking. There is, however, a more positive way to sense eternity.

If we look at our deepest experiences, we find many small signs that speak to us about another dimension of reality, another existence of which our earthly life is only a vague reflection.

When spring comes and fresh new leaves and budding flowers dazzle us in the sunlight, we feel that this new life comes to us not as a deceitful lie, but as a sign of hope that life ultimately is victorious over death and decay. When we look at the distasteful caterpillar wiggling under our foot, we know that one day it will turn into an enchantingly elegant butterfly.

These promises of new life and beauty of nature, however, dwarf in comparison to what we experience within ourselves.

“We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers” – writes St. John (1 Jn 3:14). Thus, through love of our brothers and sisters it is possible to have some foretaste of eternal life here on earth just as there is an intimation of eternal death for those who hate their brothers.

Such brotherly love can seem easy, but only if we share in the love that comes from God and is God. Otherwise, the closer some persons are to us, the harder it becomes to forgive, accept and cherish them. In some cases, it’s even harder than loving of our enemies since we know that, in the latter case, we are doing something heroic.

But those who love their brothers and their enemies will have many instances on earth of a foretaste or even a preview of eternal life. Heaven will not be a place of lazy rest but a state of eternal ecstasy: we will be drawn out of ourselves (ecstasy means literally staying outside of ourselves) in order to give over ourselves to God and to each of our brothers and sisters.

This will be our supreme delight, and it will increase our desire to see and enjoy the infinite riches of God even more.

According to St. Gregory of Nyssa, Heaven will be for us both *stasis* and *kinesis* (i.e., rest and movement); resting in God’s infinite goodness, but always moving us deeper into the delightfully bright abyss of his love and wisdom.



SPRING 2012

Does Scripture Tell Us Anything about Venerating Saints?

For many decades I was convinced that Scripture has nothing to say on the veneration and intercession of the saints. I have accepted the Church’s teaching on this issue because it comes from the constant tradition beginning with the second century.

In the middle of the 2nd century we read about the veneration of the martyrs and later it was extended to those who were like martyrs since they had died to their selfish self and had given themselves to God and men with heroic love.

To my surprise, and embarrassment, I discovered a few years ago that the New Testament actually does speak about the importance and veneration of the saints, if indirectly. But most Catholics are unaware of it just as I had been. I mention here only a few key texts.

At the question of Peter, “We have given up everything and followed you. What will there be for us?” Jesus reassures them, “Amen I say to you, who have followed me, in the new age when the Son of Man is seated on his throne of glory, you yourselves will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Mt 19:27-28).

When will that be? Before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Court, Jesus declares, “From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of Heaven” (Mt 26:64).

In other words, the new age, literally “new birth” or “regeneration” begins with the death and Resurrection of Jesus. This is made clear by Stephen, the first martyr, who, when being stoned, sees the Heavens open and “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 8:56).

Besides, judging in the Bible means not simply judging a case of law but rather governing (think of the Book of Judges). Thus, Jesus promises the apostles that they will share in his governance of the Church, the new Israel. In the Book of Revelation Jesus extends this promise to everyone who wins the battle of faith: “I will give the victor the right to sit with Me on My throne, as I myself first won the victory and sit with My Father on His throne” (Rev 3:21).

There are other scenes in the Book of Revelation where all those who take part in the heavenly liturgy praise God and the Lamb for making them priests and kings (Rev 1:6, 5:10, 20:4, 6).

So our God is not a lonely tyrant who jealously keeps all power to rule to Himself. He does not tell the saints in Heaven: “Stay out of My way. I can do everything infinitely better than you.”

Our God is so loving and so powerful that he wants to govern the world by soliciting the intercessory prayers of the saints. From all eternity He has decided to do certain things at the requests of the saints in Heaven and even of those who pray to Him on earth.

But you may still insist, “Why seek the intercession of the saints when I can go directly to Jesus, or the Father or the Holy Spirit?”

We can and we should “go straight to God,” but the saints like to pray with us and for us, because they love us.

They can also help us to pray better by sharing their love of God with us. It is part of the saints’ joy to help us understand and appreciate God’s plan for us.

Moreover, in Jesus dwells the fullness of divinity. But everyone in Heaven expresses some features of His infinite beauty and goodness in a special way.

No two saints’ holiness is the same. One does not like organizations like Philip of Neri, while St. Ignatius of Loyola organized his Order into a most effective “army.”

St. Francis of Assisi did not want to possess a single book, while St. Albert the Great read all the available books of the 13th century. Yet each of them radiates the same Christ, the same love, peace and joy.

This great variety of saintly characters enables each one of us to feel especially close to some. First, however, we need to become acquainted with them.



A Slight Change and Its Weighty Implications

Many people may not have noticed a slight change in the ending of the first presidential prayer of the Mass, the Collect.

In the old translation we heard, “through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit forever and ever.”

The new one renders the original Latin more faithfully by making one small change: instead of “and with the Holy Spirit,” we now have “in the unity of the Holy Spirit.”

We will better grasp the importance of this small change if we analyze the meaning of the prayer’s entire conclusion.

“Through our Lord Jesus Christ your Son”

Most Collects of the Mass are addressed to the Father.

In order to make clear, however, that the celebrant does not pray as just one individual Christian but gives voice to the prayer of the Church who always prays, as the solemn ending of the Eucharistic prayer says, “through and with and in” the Incarnate Son.

The old, deficient translation sheds no light on the basis on which we dare to pray in such an intimate union with Christ.

*“Who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit.”*

The new, correct translation answers this question by saying that we pray “in the unity of the Holy Spirit.”

Just as the Father and the Son are most closely united in the Holy Spirit so are we united with the Father and the Son and with each other by the same Spirit.

He brings about communion or unity not by abolishing but rather affirming the personal differences between Father and Son, between ourselves and the Son and the Father, and among the individual members of the Church.

Every other natural unity of persons is based on qualities, interests and goals. The unity effected by the Spirit is based on His active personal presence in each of the (spiritually) living members of the Church.

Thus, if the Spirit lives within us, Christ lives in us since the Spirit joins us to Him and, at the same time, He unites us with every other (spiritually) living member of the Church.

The divine sculptor, the Spirit who lives within us, carves the features of the Son in our souls so that the Father sees in us the image of His Son and adopts us as his own children.

Conformed to the Son by the Holy Spirit, the Father raises us from the status of a servant to that of His beloved children and brothers and sisters of His One Eternal Son.

The Spirit who personally dwells in us is also the source of new divine energies that characterize the life of the children of God. Already the Old Testament knows that this Spirit is “intelligent, holy and unique... clear, unstained, kindly, firm, secure, tranquil, all-powerful, all seeing” (Wisdom 7:22-23).

If we cooperate with this Spirit, the fruits of His actions in us will be “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).

We see now why this small change from “and the Holy Spirit” to “in the unity of the Holy Spirit” has such great import.

The new phrase better expresses the Trinitarian dimension of our life and of the Church’s prayer.

When we participate in the prayers of the Mass, we pray not to the Trinity, as if we were “outside,” but rather from within the Trinity: united by the Spirit to the Son as His brothers or sisters and as members of His Body, we are now bold enough to address God as “Abba,” dear Father (Gal 4:6, Rom 8:15).



SUMMER 2013

“At the Still Point of the Turning World”

At the end of these musings it will become clear, I hope, why I used as a title for this piece the intriguing quote from T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets.

As the full extent of the landscaping project around our monastery began to dawn on me, including the two hundred cedar trees planted by the Fourth Formers, the hand-fitted limestone terrace in front of the Church with the elegant cedar benches surrounding it, the statue of Our Lady of Dallas removed from its ancient post and set facing the entrance of the Church, encouraging us, as it were, to enter, I was wondering why all this upheaval?

Could the money not be spent for a better purpose, such as the poor of Dallas?

But then it struck me: “Don’t you see that your thinking is not very far from that of Judas? (cf. Jn 12:5). Don’t you see that the beautiful new landscape is like the precious ointments of Mary poured out upon the feet of Jesus? It serves His plan of love; it makes His invitation to come to Him and find a home in Him more attractive. All these ‘things of beauty’ whisper to you: stop and see ‘how lovely is the dwelling place of your Lord’” (Ps 84:1).

As I think back on the more than five decades since the Monastery and the School have stood on this hill, I understand now how it has gradually become a “still point of the turning world.”

It is true for many University of Dallas students and professors but increasingly so for our own alumni.

Even those who have moved away from this area keep coming back at the great turning points of their lives.

When they experience a great joy or a great loss, they want to come back to this stable point in their world in order to share with us the news of an upcoming wedding, the baptism of a child, or a life changing illness or death.

They come to talk with us but, consciously or unconsciously, they are seeking something or rather Someone greater than ourselves.

They sense that Christ himself waits for them here, no matter how far and for how long they have moved away from him.

They know that this Church and Monastery is their Father's house and that the trees, the flowers and the statue of Mary, all reflect their Father's peacefully welcoming arms.

What a privilege and responsibility for us, Cistercians, to be guardians of this House of God – to live just a few yards away from the tabernacle of the risen Lord – and at least try to become the signs of his never tiring love for all whom he draws here, to the stable still point of their turning world.



FALL 2013

Yearn to Be 'Wounded by Love'

(Song of Songs 4:9)

As I was reading a commentary by Origen on the Song of Songs, a beautiful love poem of the Bible, I began to wonder: how many of our alumni know that this is a love story about God and the Church as well as God and the individual soul?

Do they realize that God wants to wound each one of us with his love, with a wound both delightful and painful at the same time?

Isn't God's love for most of us only an abstraction?

We want to believe in it, but earthly loves — of spouse, children, parents and friends — have a much more powerful pull upon us.

Yet St. Bernard and many other saints confidently declare that no matter how much a soul is "burdened by sins, covered with mud, distracted by worries, trembling with anxieties," God wants to light the fire of His love in her.

Whether male or female, God wants to espouse the soul to Himself in a pure, virginal love in comparison with which every earthly love pales and yet from which every earthly love receives ever renewed strength and purity.

If you are wounded by the love of God, you can heal the wounds you inflicted upon one another in a long marriage.

So why do we continue with our minimalist policy of trying to avoid grave sins but otherwise allow our venial sins to keep us at a safe distance from God's love?

Such a life sooner or later runs out of steam; our work and our relationships become stale, the boring daily routine numbs us.

St. Therese of Lisieux does not stop repeating how much God is yearning for our love.

He does not need it since in His Trinitarian life of perfect communion He is the fullness of love and joy, but He wants to long for our love and is waiting to pour His love down upon us, yet we are obsessed with trivialities.

Think of Jesus' question to Peter, repeated three times: "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?"

Think of the special joy Jesus says will be in Heaven over the conversion of just one sinner.

But you are wondering, "I am a weak, mediocre soul for whom a life of love would be too heavy a burden."

I assure you, His yoke is easy and His burden light. He does not expect you to wear a hair shirt or adopt a diet of bread and water.

He only asks you to do the ordinary things you have been doing with greater fidelity as an offering to Him.

Offer yourself and your actions to the Father every morning and ask that your life that day may give joy to Him.

Kiss your spouse in the morning with more tenderness, deal with your employees or with your boss during the day with greater kindness, try to create a more enjoyable atmosphere in your office. Be interested in your colleagues and find something admirable in everyone you can.

Yearning to love God is already the beginning of love and is a sign that God's grace is working in your soul.

If you persevere and thank God for this beginning, your heart will expand and be ready to receive more of God.

Perhaps you will have no great emotional experiences, yet in faith you will know not just abstractly but in some real way the breadth and length, the height and depth of God's love for you since He will be dwelling in you.



What Happens to Faith and Religion after Graduation?

Being semi-retired now, I think more about our alumni and spend more time corresponding with them. The question that often comes to mind is the title of this piece: What happens to faith and religion after graduation?

The human heart is tortuous according to Jeremiah. I can't fully know even my own standing before God, how could I know the standing of our alumni? But I can try to outline some of the major factors that influence the development of a young man's faith and will draw up some stereotypes. You, the alumni, can then determine how far these conjectures are from your own personal state of mind.

Starting a new life in college, away from parental constraints and former teachers, can have an intoxicating effect on the freshman mind and heart. The lure of an intense social life, the many new activities, the thrills of freedom may prove irresistible for some. The first thing that falls by the wayside in such cases is the Sunday Mass and, later, daily prayer. God becomes the last resort after a late night cram session for the half-awake freshman who stumbles into the classroom and begs God to help him during the exam.

I like to think there are very few among our alums who fit this stereotype. Most have finely honed study habits and nurture a great ambition to excel and want to make the most out of their college years.

So they find a balance between hard work and fun. This group holds on more or less regularly to their habits of praying and going to Mass; nevertheless, the many excitements of campus life often take a heavy toll on their desire to draw closer to God.

Other young people, however, have a very different experience: God's grace breaks into their lives, quietly or forcibly, slowly or suddenly, and they become aware in a new way that God is real. This may happen while reading a book, attending Mass, or walking alone through the autumn fog. They experience its fruits: a surge of joy and peace, a new energy to embrace the world and people around them. They embark on many adventures and recognize in every event, joyful or hurtful, the guiding hand of God. Everything becomes a manifest blessing or a blessing in disguise leading them to a life of service. With time, the first excitement of being in love with God abates, but the peace and joy deepen as love slowly transforms their lives.

There are a few, however, who lose their faith in college or insist that they had never had any "real" faith. This often happens when a young man falls into a habitual sin but does not want to face it. Every time he thinks of God, the feeling of suppressed guilt turns into hostility towards religion. He might convince himself that God does not exist or if he does, he is a cruel tyrant who does not deserve to be worshiped. If they are intelligent, they will build up an impressive system of logical arguments to support their stand. I may be able to show them where their logic breaks down, but that alone does not change their mind. In one case when I tried to show a young man in a long conversation that "if God does not exist, then something equals nothing, being equals

non-being," he agreed but stuck to his denial. There might be some whose doubts or denials derive mainly from intellectual reasons, but so far I have not met a single certain case.

More helpful than the logical argument is an existential approach: I recommend that such alumni have a sincere desire to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, courageously uncovering any suppressed guilt. They must be persuaded to follow their conscience wherever it leads and whatever change of life it demands. Sooner or later their thirst for the truth will lead to God.

I worry only about those who live comfortably in their self-made habitat of lies and are too weak to face the truth about themselves. Meeting the right kind of girl can become a milestone in many young people's relationship to God. Those who had clung before only to an inherited minimum of faith life may find themselves enveloped in a love that brings out the best in them. As the friendship deepens and wedding plans materialize, the lukewarm young man and his bride may discover God's gentle hand in their mutual love. He chose them for each other so that the spouses may become for each other a road to God. Added to this experience is the awareness that they cannot educate their children without the support of a stable framework of faith, so many of them return to a more sincere, personal faith life.

God's grace accompanies each one of us throughout our whole life but we are perfectly capable of turning a deaf ear to its call. His last mercy comes in our dying, the most drastic reality check, to make us realize that we are not gods, that we do not cause our own existence. We are gifts to ourselves and are now returning the gift to God.

My dear alums, young, middle-aged or retired! Let me know if you disagree with this outline or if you want to add or correct something from your perspective.



The Blood of the Martyrs Is the Seed of Cistercian

Several years ago at the Abbot's Circle Dinner, one speaker after another complimented the achievements of the school and the abbey. Alumni and parents were happily commenting on the surprisingly fast growth of the Cistercian Abbey: In seven years, eleven solid young men joined us. (Since then, two more have been added.)

In the midst of the buoyant conversation, Fr. Abbot Denis took the microphone to deliver his concluding remarks. "Do you want to know the secret of our success?" he asked.

In the ensuing sudden silence, he read for us the conclusion of the Prison Memoirs of Wendelin Endrédy, the Abbot of Zirc, who was imprisoned, tortured, and confined in solitary confinement under hardly imaginable conditions for over six years (see sidebar that follows).

Without heat in the cell for years, the sewage canal dripped upon his bed and an army of bedbugs assaulted him at night. A physics and math teacher who enjoyed precision and objectivity, he counted the bugs he killed at one point (1,050 in six days).

Abbot Wendelin's case, however, is only the most conspicuous from among several other Cistercians who suffered prison and death under Communist domination because they were too effective in their priestly ministry with the young, or they kept the Cistercian community alive even though it had been suppressed.

The famous saying of the 2nd century Church Father Tertullian, however, proved right also in the 20th century: "The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christians."

Indeed, the suffering of the martyr Cistercians has become the seed of new Cistercians. There is no worthless suffering, if endured in loving union with Christ. "Through him and with him and in him," every tear, every physical or psychic suffering becomes an invaluable treasure, a seed for new life and new growth in the Church.

On our tabernacle door Billy Hassell '74 carved out ancient Christian symbols. In the middle a cross stands which is at the same time a vine stock. Its branches, laden with bunches of grapes, wrap around the stem and the side beams of the cross.

The branches are the suffering Christians and in our story, the suffering Cistercians in Hungary, who embraced the cross of Christ. Thus, for them the cross became the fertile vine stock out of whose rich sap they bore fruit in Our Lady of Dallas, Irving, Texas, an eventuality none of them could have dreamed of in their earthly lives.

The important lesson for us is to realize that the secret of our success lies much deeper than in anything we could have ourselves accomplished. And for you, our dear alumni and parents, the fruits of the Cross are also available.

If you unite your sufferings, small or great, illnesses, frustrations, the burdens of family life, of your job or your joblessness, but especially the sufferings you freely choose in order to remain faithful to Christ, you may bear, in this way, the most precious fruits of your entire life.

Abbot Wendelin on prison and his tormentors

I am not yet able to make a closure and move on. My thoughts repeatedly return to the prison; I relive each of its scenes time and again. I cannot help it. The prison transforms a human being in some fundamental way. The first thing I tell myself in retrospect is that for no earthly treasure would I give away the sufferings of these six years. I was given an immense amount of gifts. I finished an education, graduated and now I hold a diploma on which it stands written: an improved human being.

I would have been a bad student of physics if I had not seen in my prison-life a basic law of modern atomic physics proven: "All matter is ultimately light." Today even voice can be pictured. Even that is light. We pick up a few grams of dust from the ground, we may precisely measure and calculate the energy its atomic particles could release. It has been proven that a city like Budapest with more than a million inhabitants could be provided with light and heating from the energy contained in a small amount of matter.

Thus, the second conclusion I come to is this: every piece of trash, no matter how riff-raff and valueless it is, can become light, eternal light, if God's Sun shines on it and releases it from the burden of the horror of evil. This is why I am unable to feel hatred toward those who have hurt me, those who tormented me. I hate none of these evil men. I like to pray for them from the bottom of my heart, asking that they may convert and become good human beings.

With this I think I can come to a closure.



SPRING 2015

When Was the Last Time You Asked, What Is Heaven Like?

Everyone at every age asks this question, but children and people nearing the end of their lives are the most insistent inquirers.

Children, because they have not sinned seriously, feel close to Heaven and take for granted that God prepares a place for them where they will always be happy.

Even if they are agnostic, most dying people getting close to the last stage of life would like to know more about the beyond.

Many may have never inquired about it after their childhood and can no longer take seriously their childish conceptions of Heaven.

But the closer they are to the end, the more desperately they seek an answer. Take this example. One day an elegant motorcade surrounded the Paris home of the Catholic philosopher Jean Guitton.

Francois Mitterand, the terminally ill agnostic president of France, was paying a surprise visit to this old philosopher in his nineties to discuss what happens after death.

I don't know what Guitton said to Mitterand, but I hope in this column to explore the meaning of Heaven as teased out of a few biblical images. 'Heaven' is, perhaps, the oldest symbol for the realm of god(s) in the history of religions. The infinite, all-encompassing, majestic image of the sky beautifully expresses divine transcendence, the lofty, unreachable dimensions of the Divine.

The God of the Bible, however, is a unique kind of heavenly god. Jesus taught us to pray "Our Father who art in Heaven" and that tells us that He is infinitely above us but also infinitely close: He is our father. All that the Father does as well as the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit aim at preparing for us a place in Heaven and make us, rebellious children as we are, ready to come home to our Father's house (Jn 14:1-3).

In the same Our Father, however, the first three petitions suggest an opposite movement: instead of begging God to take us to Heaven, we ask that God's Kingdom, the heavenly Jerusalem resplendent with God's glory, arrive to this earth and transform it.

Then God's holiness will illumine all hearts, transfigure the entire material universe and rule every human will. Heaven, the realm of the angels, and the Earth, the habitat of human beings, will become one Kingdom where "God will be all in all."

We may wonder why in this new, spiritualized Heaven and earth we have bodies? We don't need to eat and drink or procreate. What is our body good for? The scene of transfiguration and the risen body of Christ suggest an answer.

Jesus anticipates on the Mount of Transfiguration His risen state to which we hope to be conformed at the resurrection of the dead. Christ's risen body has been so transformed by the Holy Spirit that, instead of hiding His divine beauty and glory, His "spiritual body" now fully reveals His divine splendor and majesty. Even now, our earthly body reveals to some extent our soul, but obscurely and ambiguously.

A beautiful young face can easily hide a corrupt soul.

In Heaven we hope to have a body perfectly expressive of our soul, a soul transfigured by the Holy Spirit, full of goodness and beauty.

A number of parables describe another, even more unique aspect of the kingdom: It is a wedding banquet, and we are the invited guests who have been brought together from the roads and byways. It is the wedding feast of the King's Son (Mt 22:1-10, Lk 12:36, Rev 19:7,9).

Who the Bride is becomes manifest only after Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection: washed clean from all filth and ugly stain on the cross, the spotless Church is sanctified by the Holy Spirit to become the Bride of Christ.

To the extent that we share in the divine love that unites Christ and the Church, we are incorporated into the Church and we love Christ and each other with the very love of Christ.

The reason there are many different dwelling places in Heaven is that the inhabitants have a different capacity for love. Each of us will be filled, says St. Therese of Lisieux, but each of us can be filled only according to the kind and size of his soul's receptacle.

The more united we are with Christ, the more we become one with all the saved in Heaven.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we then will praise and worship the Father "through Christ, with Christ and in Christ." At the same time we will also love and glorify the Son in union with His Father.

Although sharing in the life of the Holy Trinity is the center and source of all blessings in Heaven, humankind's activity is not restricted to that. Jesus tells us that we will also reign with Him: "I will give the victor the right," He says, "to sit with Me on My throne, as I Myself have first won the victory and sit with My Father on His throne" (Rev 4:21).

In the paliggenesia, the new age of the Messiah, the apostles will sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Mt 19:28). I think this means that in some mysterious way, most likely by intercessory prayer, we will share with Christ in guiding history, helping especially those who were close to us in our earthly life. Our rule over the material universe will be perfected. We will not abuse our power since we will act with the power of God which is the power of love.

When I think of God's infinite mercy, I am filled with hope that many or all, including me, will be saved.

But when I think of what God has in mind for us — eternal ecstasy, straining all our energy to the point of being eternally outside of ourselves, fully one with Christ and fully one with all in Heaven — I can only ask for mercy.



FALL 2015

The Christian Strategy for Becoming Great

Re-telling the preaching of Peter, the evangelist Mark has a special preference for pointing out how obtuse and slow the disciples were in understanding the teachings of Jesus:

They came to Capernaum, and once inside the house, [Jesus] began to ask them: "What were you arguing about on the way?" "But they remained silent. They had been discussing among themselves on the way who was the greatest (9:33-34)

Ironically, this happened a few hours after Jesus had solemnly announced to them that the Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men. The apostles were obviously embarrassed by Jesus' question, but we are somewhat relieved: if the apostles themselves were ambitious, if they were trying their best to advance their own careers, we too might be forgiven for attempting to advance in our jobs as much as we can.

In fact, St. Paul encourages his readers with the language of athletic competition: "Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you win it" (1 Cor 9:24).

Jesus, too, encourages us to strive for true greatness: "If anyone wishes to be first, he shall be the last of all and the servant of all" (Mk 9:35). So he does not discourage us from wishing to be first, but he turns upside down the values by which the world judges greatness. St. Bernard explains to us, that Jesus knows human nature since he created us, and he created us unto the image of God. Therefore, we have infinitely great desires. He knows that it would be totally impossible to suppress this desire for greatness. Besides, he does not want to prevent us from striving for what he himself has created us for.

But he shows the disciples and shows us how different true greatness is from what we imagine.

"If you wish to be first, be the last of all and the servant of all." This is the true greatness, the opposite of what the world is obsessed with. The disciple should strive to make his whole life a life of service. Service to those who are the closest to him, his family, but service also for many others as a doctor, lawyer, businessman, maintenance man, merchant or priest and especially for those who are poor, abandoned or sick.

Many idealistic people want to change the entire world or at least the United States.

This is how Dorothy Day started out.

Then as she learned about Christ and the saints, especially when she came to know St. Therese of Lisieux, she realized that what she can do in the eves of this world is very limited.

She created Catholic Worker Houses in the big cities of the country for those who were without a home and work and she helped them build up their lives. But she also knew that if she really wanted to do God's work, she had to do everything with the very love of Christ. "Love one another as I have loved you," said Jesus. If Jesus commands this, he will give the grace to obey. Is this not the greatest thing any human being can hope for? To love with the very love of God?

Yet this will not happen to us, unless we take the last seat at the table of God's banquet. What do we have that we have not received? asks St. Paul. The truth of our being requires that we acknowledge: without God we are nothing.

The more we admit our emptiness, the more God can fill us.

According to St. Bernard, wherever our alleged merits occupy the space within us, there grace cannot enter. If little space remains, little grace can enter; if our empty space is large, a river of grace can fill it up.

It is for this reason that Bernard presents Mary as the greatest soul among men and women since she does not attribute anything to her own merits, and everything to God.

She sings that “God has regarded the lowliness of her handmaid and ... he has done great things to me...” *plena confessio gratiae, ipsius gratiae plenitudinem signat in anima confitentis*: “The full confession of grace indicates the fullness of grace in the soul of the one confessing,” writes Bernard.

Mary is full of thanksgiving, for she is full of grace.

God presents Mary as our model: she is at the same time the smallest and the greatest, the last and the first. To the extent that we empty ourselves of pride, vanity and self-righteousness, God’s grace enters and transforms our heart. Then God can do great things through us, great things which in the eyes of the world will remain insignificant and perhaps even invisible.



SPRING 2016

Mother Earth and the Fate of Antaeus in Our Time

Many people feel as though the rhythm of our life is accelerating exponentially and the pressures of daily life are increasing far too fast, and that as a consequence our ability to be at peace, to rest, to think, to focus is diminishing. Our prayer life is reduced to a rattling of some vocal prayers and short sighs to God during the day, or only when we go to sleep. Our old vices are less resistible than ever, to the point that we are tempted to give up fighting them.

The usual recommendations in a situation like this are, of course, obvious: slow down, carve out half an hour to read the Bible, and ask God to speak to you and help you. But what if this does not work? God remains silent, the person agitated and helpless against the threatening confusion of daily living. The spirit would be ready, but the flesh is weak. And the supernatural energies of grace need a more or less healthy body as a “base of operation.” At times, grace restores the health of the body, but God will not do for us what we can do for ourselves.

Some of you might remember the myth of Antaeus. His mother was Gaia, the earth, and he was invincible as long as his feet touched the ground; from the earth, divine energies filled him. One of the tasks Hercules had to accomplish was the defeat of Antaeus. He knew his secret, so he lifted Antaeus up and crushed him. Western man today is an Antaeus, lifted up from the ground and therefore unable to defend himself against the destructive forces of technology and “civilization.” He has lost touch with Mother Earth, lives now in a jungle of concrete and glass, pampers and at the same time ruins his body, unaware that his body could be a good friend and cooperator in his endeavors. He does not know how to win it over. A body that is ignored or mistreated will take revenge sooner or later: one day the lower instincts will pierce through the thin veneer of rationality and erupt with a vengeance in outbursts of rage, lust and hatred.

Yet healing is so easy to obtain. Leave the world of concrete and virtual reality for a while, find a park, a forest, a mountain. It is easier to make peace with your body in nature than in virtual reality. Through your body you are in touch with the earth from where you were taken and to which you will return. Be present in your senses. Watch the sky, stroke and feel the grass and the flowers, drink in the life and beauty surrounding you. Stop and see and admire. God has created the world in all its inexhaustible beauty for you to enjoy. It is His personal gift to you, renewed every day.

A young man, who becomes Father Zossima in Dostoyevsky's "The Brothers Karamazov," saw this overflowing joy and thankfulness in his brother who was dying from tuberculosis:

"Well, doctor, have I another day in this world?" he would ask, joking.

"You'll live many days yet," the doctor would answer, "and months and years too."

"Months and years!" he would exclaim. "Why reckon the days? One day is enough for a man to know all happiness. My dear ones, why do we quarrel, try to outshine each other and keep grudges against each other? Let's go straight into the garden, walk and play there, love, appreciate, and kiss each other, and glorify life" [...]

The windows of his room looked into a garden, and our garden was a shady one, with old trees in it which were coming into bud. The first birds of spring were flitting in the branches, chirruping and singing at the windows. And looking at them and admiring them, he began suddenly begging their forgiveness too: "Birds of heaven, happy birds, forgive me, for I have sinned against you too."

None of us could understand that at the time, but he shed tears of joy.

"Yes", he said, "there was such glory of God all about me: birds, trees, meadows, sky: only I lived in shame and dishonored it all and did not notice the beauty and glory."

If we do not have time to hike in nature, let us work in the garden. Weeding, digging, planting make us feel connected to the earth. We find the phrase "Mother Earth" in every archaic culture because it expresses a real tie between us and the earth. She is not a goddess, but our bodies were formed from her, and will again become part of her at death.

If we are strangers to her, we are strangers to ourselves. Reconnected, we will open up powerful channels of energy for love, work and prayer. We will even become more open to the energizing presence of the Holy Spirit.



Is 'Loving People in God' Just an Empty Cliché?

For a long time I had felt uneasy about the recommendation to 'love people in God.' I knew it had to be a right way of loving because St. Paul and other saints have often said it, but to me it seemed opposed to loving a person for his or her own sake.

If I loved someone for God's sake, I thought, I was using that person as a means for strengthening my love for God, not for his or her unique self. I have had a vague but real experience that every human being is unique and irreplaceable. That uniqueness can be described as long as we want, but it will still elude us. All description of a person's unique qualities is nothing more than circumlocution and approximation.

Viktor Frankl, the famous Austrian psychiatrist and holocaust survivor, offers a mental experiment to show that what makes someone *this* or *that* person is real but inexpressible by words of any kind.

Suppose, he says, you claim to be deeply in love with a woman, but someone makes you this offer: "I will pay you one million dollars if you agree to this exchange: I will give you another girl who will look like and sound like your current girlfriend, in fact, she will have exactly the same external and internal characteristics. But she will be someone else. Would you accept this exchange?"

If you do — says Frankl — you do not truly love her, but have only a passing erotic attraction. If your love is real and deep, no price is great enough for you to exchange your girlfriend for her perfect likeness. The true lover knows his friend's unique identity which escapes definitions and descriptions: only love knows *that unique identity* or knows *her as her*.

How then can such a personal love (that exists in its most dramatic form between a man and woman, but to some extent in every genuine friendship) be reconciled with loving someone in God?

My confusion began to clear up when I finally realized what the phrase actually means. To love someone in God means to love that person as God loves him or her, which is possible only if God grants me a share in His own love. God loves His own image in us, yet we are not carbon copies of Him.

Each one of us is His unique image, both different from, and similar to, Him. God's image is what is most uniquely personal in us, that is our inexpressible mystery. To the extent, then, that I unite myself with God's love, I come close to this deepest level of my friend's personality where he or she communicates with God, where God incessantly upholds and unfolds the best in that person.

If the soul is hesitant or reluctant to accept God's love, He gently reproves, persuades, lures and inspires that soul. And at times, He even sets up roadblocks to close all escape routes so that the soul can more easily surrender to Him. But there is one thing God never does: He never forces His will upon anyone.

Thus, loving people in God and loving what is most personal in them mutually presuppose each other. If my love is united with God's love, I can love people at their deepest level, the unique mystery of their persons. If I experience communion with people at that level — provided that my experience is true — I may assume that God's grace enabled me to do so.

If I do not love others in God but only with my own resources, I can reach people only on the surface; I may try to manipulate them in order to dig deeper into their unique mystery, but even the most refined tactics will be countered with resistance or evasion.

Only God's love can reach a person's true depth.

We can, then, join another in his or her deepest mystery to the extent that we are united with God and love that person in God.



SPRING 2017

We Find Rest in Those Whom We Love

During WWII a German SS soldier, infamous even among his comrades as a wild brute, started kicking an American nurse for no reason whatsoever.

Before the nurse lost consciousness, she whispered to him: "God bless you."

The next day as the woman woke up, she found the SS soldier at her bed.

"I would like to know," he asked her, "what God were you praying to yesterday before you passed out?"

The nurse began to tell him about Jesus and in a few days the man asked for baptism. I mention this story because it sheds light on the strange saying of St. Bernard I quoted in the title: "We find rest in those whom we love."

The word *requiescere* cannot be translated with a single word. It means to find rest, peace, calm, tranquility, refreshment. For a long time I have been wondering why Bernard says the opposite of what we normally think: "we find rest, peace, etc. in those who love us."

If someone is indifferent or even hostile to me, like the SS man was to the nurse, how can I find rest and peace in him?

With God's grace I might decide to help him if he is in trouble, but find rest and peace in him? — that sounds absurd. But, obviously, the nurse had enough peace in her heart to bless the man.

Recently, I found a way to interpret Bernard's experience which begins to make full sense to me. The nurse spoke out of the deepest recesses of her heart where she was in touch with a love, infinitely greater than her own heart.

This love comes from the heart of God which the soldier's lance opened up on the cross at Calvary Hill. If we are bold enough to ask — really ask — to share in this love, we will certainly receive it. Perhaps not immediately, perhaps we need to beg God for a long time, patiently and trustingly.

Jesus himself gave us the commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you." If He commands us to love with His own love, then evidently, He will not deny our request to share in it. And in His love we will find rest, peace, assurance and energy.

Even if someone returns our love with indifference and hostility, it can make us sad, but cannot take away our peace. We still possess an infinite treasure, a participation in the joyful communion of the Holy Trinity. We sense that the Father's love that reaches us through His Son's heart is patient, long-suffering, and at times waits until the last conscious moments of those who keep resisting Him.

In the same letter I quoted in the title, St. Bernard has prepared another surprise. (Forgive me for quoting it first in Latin for the sake of showing how useful your Latin can be!): *Amare in Deo caritatem habere est; studere vero propter Deum amari, caritati servire est.* "To love in God is to possess charity; to strive to be loved for the sake of God is to be at the service of charity."

At first reading it might seem odd that such a great ascetic as St. Bernard deems it virtuous to strive to be loved.

Isn't this rather the attitude of a spoiled child?

Of course, it depends on why we want to be loved — to be flattered, to have another do our bidding, to enjoy physical and emotional pleasures.

However, to be loved for the sake of God, whose very life is manifest in us is to become what He wants us to become, a lovable masterpiece of His creation, a unique, shining image of His Son.

We have been created to love and to be loved, as the only Son is loved and as He loves, and we are to become united with Him in the Holy Spirit.

Does it seem too good to be true? The crucified and risen Christ guarantees its reality.



Longing for Heaven, Where Love and Joy Grow Eternally

On the rare occasions when we think about Heaven, we imagine that it will consist of light and joy, all coming from the vision of God. And we will meet once again the deceased members of our family and friends. This is all true, but God has revealed much more to us, and I would like to outline for you what I have come to understand.

Heaven, just like Hell, begins in this life. Every experience of true love and true community, every sight of beauty is a foretaste, even if tenuous and fleeting, of Heaven. (Just as any manifestation of hatred, revenge and hurtful lies reminds us of the hidden presence of the Father of Lies who has been a murderer from the beginning.) Jesus promised to be with us always. And always with Jesus are all the angels and saints, and Jesus is always united with His Father in the Holy Spirit. Thus, the entire “habitat” we call Heaven interpenetrates this temporary habitat of our world.

The uncorrupted, glorified spiritual bodies of Jesus and Mary, the new Adam and the new Eve, are the foundation in Heaven to which, at our resurrection, our spiritual bodies, conformed to that of Christ, will be united. In fact, the body of Christ exists already in our world. Our souls and our bodies are connected to him. To the extent of that union, we share already on earth in the Son’s relationship to His Father. In Heaven, however, our union with Christ will be complete, unbreakable and manifest to all members. Thus our participation in the Son’s relation to His Father will also become perfect and definitive. Even now having “received the Spirit of adoption, we cry Abba, Father” (Rom 8:15), but in heaven we will also see and taste in the Spirit the Father’s infinite goodness.

If the above reflections are true, in Heaven our joy will not consist of standing before the Holy Trinity as we contemplate the triune God face to face. Just as now we are (in the state of sanctifying grace) not “outside” the communion of the Holy Trinity but within, much less shall we be “outside” in Heaven. The transforming presence of the Holy Spirit within us, who is the same in Christ, in the Father and in all redeemed, will make us share in Christ’s beatifying vision and love of the Father. We will praise the Father “through Him, with Him and in Him,” as well as return the love and praise of the Father to the Son.

Gregory of Nyssa explains that our union with the Triune God will have an eternal dynamism of growth. The life of the Holy Trinity is a never exhaustible infinite mystery. The more we find a joyful rest in Him (*stasis*), the more we want to penetrate and enjoy Him (*kinesis*). Thus our knowledge, love and joy will grow eternally. (While those in Hell will experience the opposite: since human life without love is no longer life, their dying will be unending.)

As our love for God cannot be authentic without loving our neighbor, in Heaven the unity of both loves will be perfect and manifest. As

St. Thomas explains, in Heaven we will love our neighbor as much as ourselves; consequently, we will love also our neighbor's experience of God as our own. Thus our knowledge, love and joy will be multiplied by the number of the redeemed. We shall be perfectly "one heart and one mind." I conclude here with a text of Blessed Aelred, the abbot of the Cistercian Abbey Rievaulx in England, about the same topic of community life in Heaven.



SPRING 2018

Enter the Silence of God for a Short Time Every Day

This time I will tell you the experience of one of my close friends. For years he tried to keep his mind on the prayers he was saying, but within a minute his imagination carried him away, and it took him a while until he realized that.

Then he would start over again, but again he would have the same frustrating exercise. My friend wanted to pray very resolutely, but even more resolutely, he wanted to keep up with the news. It wasn't enough for him to read The New York Times on-line; he had to look at three or four more websites featuring world news, religious news, updates on Trump and Pope Francis, Macron of France and Merkel of Germany, the terrorists in Europe, and missiles in North Korea. Fortunately, God saved him from porn websites. He was always looking for something new, exciting, even scandalous, although he would never admit the latter to himself. He simply insisted to himself that he had to remain close to everything that happens in the world. It became a real addiction. He knew it and joked about it, but he thought this was part of living today.

Then one day he was praying before the Blessed Sacrament, and it finally dawned on him: "You fill your mind daily with trash, and yet you still think there remains space for God in you?" Right then and there he made up his mind: for two weeks, he would not read papers or listen to the media; he would clean up his imagination, and only answer personal and work emails. In a few days, he began to notice that the world had changed. He was no longer floating in virtual reality, but his senses saw and heard and smelled the reality that surrounded him: he discovered that it was spring time! He could smell the roses and the dogwood in the courtyard, look at the budding leaves, the greening grass with the early flowers waving with the wind and the monstrous clouds in the vast Texas sky. "This is all real and beautiful!" he wanted to shout.

A few days later, he felt something more mysterious. He could not articulate to himself what it was, but it made him remember an image in The Great Divorce by C.S. Lewis: as the bus arrived from Purgatory to the gate of heaven, the blades of grass became thicker, their edges sharper, almost hurting. There was more light, more color around him, and the contours of things were sharper, almost piercing his eyes.

At the same time, he became aware that behind and within all that he saw there was an infinitely stronger, weightier reality, the “really Real” which embraced him and all this colorful world around him. When he went to church and prayed, he was surprised that he became interested in the words of the Psalm he read. Their meaning became “meaningful,” and he could even “taste” some of the lines. So ends the happy story of my friend.

St. Bernard, addressing the university students of Paris, says: *Semel locutus est Deus, semel quia semper*. “God spoke only once because He always speaks [...] We do not need to work hard to hear His voice; in fact, the hard work is trying to stop our ears lest we hear Him.” Lest we hear, in other words, we constantly increase the volume and the diversity of the distracting and titillating voices, and we itch to hear or see something that fills the inner void for a few minutes.

Let us try at least for a short time, at least half an hour a day, to stop the noise inside and outside. Let Jesus calm the stormy sea of our soul. As Mark says: “And there was a great calm (4:39).” St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote to the Ephesians that the great mysteries of God, “the virginity of Mary, her giving birth and the death of the Lord,” all took place “in the silence of God, and were kept hidden from the ruler of this age.” Let us, then, ask the Lord to allow us to enter his silence at least for a short time every day. The greater the silence within us, the more loudly the mysteries of God will speak to us. Their truth, their solidity and their majesty will fill us with joy — not every time we pray, but frequently enough to keep us living and loving.



FALL 2018

Turn Everything into a Blessing

In many primitive tribes, ancient myths and cultures, we find the story of humankind’s original happiness, the Golden Age, when man was close to the god(s), did not have to die and lived in peace with the animals. Christians know from the Bible that God has created man and woman for Paradise, for a blessed, happy existence: friend of God and steward over nature. The first conscious sin, however, resulting in an avalanche of individual and corporate moral evil, brought about suffering and death, the foretaste of eternal death.

God, however, did not abandon us, but rather met us where we felt most abandoned, in our suffering and dying. The Son of God dying with us (crucified along with two criminals who represent our whole fallen human race) showed us how to turn the road to Hell into a road to Heaven. If we suffer and die with Christ, sharing in His love and trust of God, then our bodily death will open up for us the door to eternal life, to the very joy of the Son of God.

Most of us know all this intellectually, yet often our prayer life centers on begging for favors we need here on earth. We dream about 'living happily ever after.' This in itself is quite natural: God is our Father and He loves if His children ask Him, even for foolish things. And sometimes He fulfills even our most childish desires. No one can outdo Him in generosity and tender love. But obviously He gives us only good things — 'eggs rather than scorpions,' 'a fish rather than a snake,' even if we are blind to see the difference at all. All that He gives, every detail He arranges in our lives, is so that we may turn it into a blessing which leads us closer to our final goal, communion with God.

A crisis occurs, however, when we evaluate what is happening to us only from the narrow and uncertain perspective of our lives on earth. Then some of us might stop and say: "God ignored all my pleas. If He does not care about me, why should I waste my time with prayer? He might not even exist." We can respond: "In fact, your God does not exist. You treated God as your own puppet. You tried to control Him and He ignored you. 'Your ways are not My ways and your thoughts are not My thoughts' — says the living God. Throw out the idol you have made for yourself so that the true God may enter your heart."

Christian faith opens up our horizon to the infinite dimensions of God's design and of our vocation to eternal life. In that light everything is a potential blessing, an occasion of grace, whether a joyful or sorrowful event, gain or loss, failure or success, health or illness. He invites us to unite our life, our joys and sufferings with the joys and sufferings of the Son of God. We seek healing, but we all must eventually endure pain out of love for God, and we offer especially the pain caused by other human beings for their change of heart. Feelings of anger, resentment and hopelessness might still irritate us for a while but by short prayers, no longer at times than a sigh, we take out the venom of our negative emotions and so turn the curse into a grace. God can use even the memory of our repented sins for healing, for the deepening of our sorrow and of our joy because we have experienced His infinite mercy.

The key, then, for turning everything in our lives into a blessing is to adopt the perspective of God who alone knows what we need if we are to become ready for true life. •

I must add a word about the current crisis in the Church. All of us who love the Church because it is the Body of Christ and who know that, according to St. Bernard, wounding his ecclesial Body hurts him more than the sufferings of his personal Body, are asking 'what we can we do in this grave crisis?' I found the videos of Bishop Barron and a part of our Fr. John's August 18 sermon very helpful (found under Sermons on Abbey website: <https://abbey.cistercian.org/sermons/fr-john/>). Here is the link to Bishop Barron's Resources on the Sexual Abuse Crisis | Word on Fire:

<https://www.wordonfire.org/articles/bishop-barrons-resources-on-the-sexual-abuse-crisis/>



Faith: A Blinder or Light?

Agnostics and atheists are convinced, or at least act convinced, that faith is a blinder which restricts our field of vision and blunts our minds, because we must think and say what the Church teaches us to think and say. Catholic, they say, equals narrow-minded.

Simone Weil, however, herself a former agnostic, writes that God loves those who reject Him for the sake of truth. Being Truth itself, He will soon reveal Himself to such people—as in fact He did to Simone Weil. Many former unbelievers claim similar experiences. They rejected God because they sought the truth, ‘the full truth and nothing but the truth.’ But now they say that the discovery of God extended their vision to a height and depth, width and length beyond any limit. St. Bernard describes the object of faith in these terms:

What would faith not find? It reaches what is inaccessible, grasps what is unknown, comprehends immensity, apprehends the end of history; in its immense lap, faith includes in some way eternity itself. I say with confidence, I believe the eternal and blessed Trinity whom I don't understand and I hold by faith what my mind does not grasp.

In order to grasp the importance of faith in general and the boundless vision of Christian faith in particular we need to start from below, with the act of the most elementary “natural” faith: I believe that my senses and my intellect are capable of knowing material reality. I cannot move outside my senses and intellect to examine from a higher viewpoint if my senses and intellect do not really reach something outside of themselves or rather play a subtle game with me: They make me believe that I know the universe, when in reality I know only the categories of my own mind.

Let us take a look now at personal relationships: what would happen to me if I did not believe in the word of my parents, my spouse, my children, my friends or any other human being? I still could study their medical charts but I would not know the real self of anyone. Banished from the world of sane men and women, I would end up in an asylum. I can know the minds and hearts only of those people whose word I accept as true. The solidity of my knowledge of people depends on the solidity of their word, their truthfulness.

If we need faith to know the material world and the world of human beings, how much more do we need faith in order to know the mind of God, His plan for the human race and for each one of us personally? In this realm of knowledge I have not found a better way than to rely on the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. The long line of truthful men and women, beginning with the fishermen of Galilee, bear witness to Jesus’ truthfulness. I have studied the life of many men and women who followed Jesus faithfully and whom the Church calls saints, and

I found their genuine humanness most convincing and their power of love irresistible. Time and again, through twenty-one centuries, these people renewed the world around them, radiated hope and joy to innumerable men and women.

Faith in Christ, then, opens up the door to the infinite dimensions of God's world which is hidden within us and surrounds us. We have access to the reality of the risen, glorious Christ and to His angels and saints, great giants and the immense throng of small saints, who had lived unrecognized on earth.

Moreover, what Christ did and suffered did not sink into nothingness through the trapdoor of history. It is always present to God, who transcends time. In every Eucharistic celebration we truly enter through faith into God's eternity and partake of Christ's sacrifice on the cross to which we are called to unite our gift of self.

But even in our daily meditations we participate in the events of Christ's life that become contemporaneous to us. Through faith we truly look at Him in the manger, we walk with Him, share His meals, listen to His reprimands, see Him raising the little girl of Jairus, stand under the cross with Mary and worship the risen Christ with Thomas: "My Lord and my God!"



FALL 2019

Who Can Forgive?

During World War II, a German SS soldier was dying in a Polish military hospital. He begged the Jewish orderly, a prisoner from the nearby concentration camp, "Please forgive me so I can die in peace." The prisoner, the future author and future "Nazi Hunter" Simon Wiesenthal, hesitated.

"I cannot forgive him," he reasoned, "because he did not hurt me... Not even God can forgive him—as some rabbis have said, only the ones he has hurt can do that." And he walked away.

While reading Wiesenthal's story, I first became very indignant: "How could he be so cruel that he would embitter the last hours of a dying man?" But years later, I read a statement by a Catholic theologian: "Only the tortured can truly forgive his torturer." Then it dawned on me: "This is why the Son of God had to be crucified." Yes, God could have forgiven us without exposing Himself to the torture of our sins, and the forgiveness would have been valid. But would it have been credible? We may have thought: "God forgave us, it took Him just a simple act of the will, so our sins could not have been so bad!" We would not have understood that every sin infinitely hurts the infinitely loving heart of the Father, for every sin ultimately aims at disowning God who has become our Father. (Please do not be scandalized, dear Aristotelian Christians. The infinite sensitivity of God's love is a divine perfection rather than a defect!)

On the cross, however, the full evil of all sins has been unveiled: the physical pain of the scourging, the nails, and the suffocating breathlessness on the cross make Christ's experience what it means to be burdened and tortured by all sins. The innocent Lamb,

like a magnet, draws to Himself all the sins of the world. The Son of God alone can fully understand how much sin hurts the Father's heart and how much it hurts the sinner. As St. Bernard and many other Fathers have said, when the soldier opened the heart of Jesus, he revealed the Heart of God. This heart alone could offer His Father a love, praise, thanksgiving, and atonement that infinitely counterbalanced the accumulated evil of all sins. Thus, He alone could credibly beg the Father's forgiveness for all of us: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing!" (Lk 23:34). He alone could bestow upon us the Father's forgiveness. More than that even: He shared with us His divine power so effectively that we can also forgive, with His love, those who sin against us. Let me give you just two examples to show how forgiveness is more powerful than hatred and violence.

I heard from a credible person another true story from World War II. An American nurse was captured by the Germans. An SS guard, widely known for his cruelty, began to kick her around until she collapsed. Before she lost consciousness, she whispered to him: "God bless you." The next day she woke up in a hospital and found that same guard keeping watch at her bedside. "Could you please tell me what kind of a god you believe in that made you bless me?" he asked. She then began to explain to him the Christian faith, and the soldier asked for baptism a few days later.

The other story you can watch online: an 18-year-old boy forgiving and hugging the murderer of his brother in a Dallas courtroom after the defendant was sentenced to 10 years in prison. While many among the listeners of the verdict were raging against the "leniency" of the punishment, Brandt Jean, the brother of the slain Botham, told the convicted Amber Guyger in front of the TV cameras, "I know I can speak for myself, I forgive you, I love you as a person and I don't wish anything bad on you. Giving your life to Christ would be the best thing my brother would want for you." His face, his words and the protracted loving hug of the desperate defendant stunned the courtroom and the nation. The forgiving love of Christ has not diminished in two thousand years; the Church of forgiven and forgiving sinners continues to overcome all the powers and principalities of this world. It is a love that lives and ever inspires hope, even in a Dallas courtroom.



SPRING 2020

Post-Pandemic Musings

By the time this issue of the Continuum is published, I don't know if the "curve" will have been flattened, but I hope that we will feel confident that we have survived the worst of this virus. Most of us, I suspect, have not yet digested the enormity of what has hit the entire planet. A tiny mutation of a tiny virus, visible only under a microscope, jumped from some unfamiliar animal in China and spread over the whole earth, disrupting, sickening and killing human beings everywhere, with no respect for borders, continents or social classes. It has certainly succeeded in shaking up our sense of security: we are clearly not in control. When a beggar told the French King Louis XIV, "Your Majesty, I must live," the king replied, "I don't see its necessity at all." A cynical reply but a great philosophical truth. Our existence is not necessary. It is an incalculably random chance that we are alive. And tomorrow we may die. How do we deal with this?

If I knew only about this biological life, I would conclude that the human being is an absurd accident of random evolution. He craves unending life and happiness, but it is only a question of time before he is extinguished by an indifferent universe. If there is a god, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with him because he is a cruel, capricious tyrant who enjoys cutting down people when they are most flourishing. If all I knew were this biological life, all I would do is eat and drink and curse the originator of this senseless universe.

But I have found another way of looking at the world. The beauty of the rising sun, the budding leaves of the old oak tree in front of the abbey, the hummingbird's avid sucking of honey from the flowers in the monastery's courtyard: all of this speaks to me of a beauty infinitely beyond what I see, a mere glimpse and foretaste. When I talk with my confreres, my former students and friends, I sense a spark of goodness, wisdom and love that speaks to me of another world. Goodness, love and truth, and people in whom goodness, love and truth are growing, give me the promise and taste of eternity. Then the historical evidence for the world of the Bible — the words and deeds of Jesus, his Resurrection — make perfect sense to me.

I still understand myself to be part of a cosmic evolution, but of an evolution whose final phase is joining the risen Christ in the Father's glory. This life is still walking toward my end which might wait for me at the next step, but it is a great adventure to know that all of this is part of my Father's plan. He is a tough, and at the same time tender, father who allows good and bad to happen to me and to each one of us in order to give us the hard evidence of our mortality and a glimpse of our eternal communion with him.



A Letter to My Students

My dear friends (who at one point in time were my dear students),

Our ever-vigilant Erin Hart asked me to write this column on a topic related to the upcoming 60th anniversary of my ordination to the priesthood. So I take this happy occasion to address a letter to all of you in order to share some of my experiences, which may strike a chord in your heart or mind.

On October 2, 1960, the Feast Day of the Guardian Angels, I was ordained a priest of Jesus Christ in the private chapel of the Bishop of Sankt Pölten in Austria. Unable to go back to Budapest, my hometown, I celebrated my first Mass a week later on October 9 in Ummendorf, a small town in Germany, which also decided to become my adoptive hometown (Patengemeinde). They received me like a Roman Emperor with a Triumphbogen (triumphal arch) and a music band in fancy folk uniform with loud cymbals and roaring trumpets. As I entered—triumphant but embarrassed—a six-year-old Bräutlein (little bride) in a white wedding gown welcomed me and offered me a sparkling make-believe gold crown.

It was very playful and very beautiful: the children of God receiving with joy the new representative of Christ. Two and a half years later, on May 1, 1963, I arrived at Our Lady of Dallas, and from that point on, you are more or less acquainted with my story.

The first thing I want to share with you is my experience with Providence. It fulfilled my deepest and strongest desire to become a Cistercian priest and a teacher of theology—but not without detours, curves, and shattered expectations. Briefly, God took away my vocation project and then gave it back as his gift with overwhelming generosity, but first I had to realize the absurdity of acquiring the priesthood as one would acquire a business empire. His plan did indeed turn out to be very different from my expectations. Instead of going back to Hungary, I had to go to Irving, Texas, and instead of teaching full time at the University of Dallas, I had to teach and be Form Master at the Prep School. Little did I know then that form mastering would become one of the greatest blessings of my life.

You see now that it is on the basis of experiences such as these that I am full of hope for your lives. All you need is to allow God to inspire you so that your life may become one of happy service for your family and for others. Even disappointments, failures, and sufferings will bring you immense benefits, provided that you keep in touch with God. They can deepen your self-knowledge and love, and clarify the ultimate purpose of your life—a tough and beautiful training for the real life.

You may ask, “What do you mean by letting God inspire my life? And how can I stay in touch with God?” Obviously, through prayer. Ready-made formulas may be good, but what I mean is personal prayer. Read the Word of God in Scripture, or think about his gentle or shocking interventions through events, friends, books or great examples. Then talk with Jesus about what attracted your attention. The crucial point is, talk with him as a real person and not as the target of your dutiful prayer. He has truly

become human. Talk to Him and trust that He listens to your sincere prayer and that He pays attention to you as if you were the only person to listen to in this universe. Pray especially when you dislike it. You are your will, not your emotions! If you persevere, the fruits will not fail to ripen. The greatest of all will be your attraction to the Eucharist!

As the saying goes: “When God closes a door, he opens a window.” Yes, but you must have the courage to jump through that window. If you jump and your intention is good, to serve your family and others, the new plan and the new work become a blessing. And not only the new work and the new plan, but the sufferings and pain as well. In this way you will see the gentle hand of Providence guiding your life as well.



SPRING 2021

Humility and Audacity

“Magni magna audent”

A seasoned old monk once remarked about a mutual friend: “He would be a good guy if he were not as humble as a cow.” Humble as a cow? Quite an expressive portrayal of humble people. The cow goes where she is driven, satisfied with her daily portion of hay, frightened even by a little dog, and at the end she goes obediently to the slaughterhouse. The great philosophers of antiquity would never consider humility a virtue for the above reasons. For them it is opposed to the ideal of the hero who dares to do great things and overcomes formidable obstacles.

Humility became a virtue only in Christianity, and it is far from cow-like passivity. The truly humble man is a realist. He knows and accepts himself and others as they are. Once, a beggar tried to move Louis XIV to compassion. “Sire, I must exist,” the beggar groaned. “I don’t see it is necessity at all,” quipped the cynical king of France. Consciously or unconsciously, Louis XIV uttered a deep truth, that were we not to exist, the universe would go on undisturbed. But then why do I exist? In a random universe riding a random evolutionary wave?

A truly humble person might give us a different answer. Yes, I do not have to exist, but I do because Someone loved me from all eternity, willed me into being, and arranged the web of innumerable secondary causes to work with Him in this process. By myself, I am indeed nothing. But if I look around—at my parents, ancestors, teachers, friends, and the entire material universe—they all contributed to my being in this world. And in the loving eyes of my mother, in the firm embrace of my father, in the quivering petals of the spring flowers in the garden, and in the budding leaves of the ancient oak tree in front of our church, Something, or rather Someone More Beautiful than anything else, is shining through. My Bible teaches me that this Someone More Beautiful is infinitely loving. He is my origin and my end; He is my Father.

Humility, then, is to accept this full reality, the notion that I am alone but in the creating hands of God, His beloved son. In every moment of my existence, He pours into me His love, which makes me myself and gives me His whole Divine Self in Christ. So humility means to be happy that all that I am and all that I receive, even the hard and hurting things, is a gift.

If everything is a gift, does it mean that I cannot be happy in my own achievements and victories? No. God's giving is so perfect that He makes His gifts become truly mine and, unseen by human eyes, enables me to struggle for my own achievements. As another wise priest once said: "Keep the joy of your achievements but give the credit to God."

Once this humility takes root in the soul, we will be capable of great things if God so directs us. "Everything is possible to the one who has faith," said Jesus (Mk 9:23). Mary is the humblest human being, and she is also the most daring; no greater audacity is imaginable than to accept to become the mother of God, welcoming the infinite light and fire in her womb, and facing death by stoning for adultery. Then let us remember Simon Peter, the fisherman from Galilee who decided to confront the wild beast, pagan Rome, and to convert it in the name of the Rabbi of Nazareth. A few years ago, Siamese twins were born in Bangladesh, their heads grown solidly together. As the parents searched desperately for a neurosurgeon to separate them, only one in the entire world volunteered. András Csókay from Hungary was a man of deep faith and a world-class surgeon. It took him and his team two years and several surgeries, but the twins were separated successfully and now live independently of one another. "Without prayer, this would not have been possible," acknowledged Csókay.

Cistercian graduates, what are your ambitions? Everything is a great work, no matter how small, if it is a work of love.

EXTRA CREDIT: Can you translate "Magni magna audent" (St. Bernard)?



FALL 2021

A Mysterious Bond Unites Us

Suppose you came to the realization one day that you are not such a bad guy after all. You remember that you were tempted a number of times to take shortcuts, be negligent, vengeful or unethical, or harbor such thoughts. And yet, you managed to choose what you knew was the right thing to do most of the time. You were also aware that God's grace enabled your own free choice and victory. God inspired you often from inside, but how many times were you lifted up by good, external influences, by a great example, or by a few good words from those important to you? Of course, this also applies to me. Our parents, our spouse, our friends and our children have all inspired us

at one time or another; or rather, God inspired us through them. We are bound together by a thousand invisible threads; those around us hold us up, and we uphold them. This mutual influence begins with the first look of the baby at his or her mother and father. Their loving gaze paints the first smile on the wailing baby's face, and the baby's smile draws out the most tender feelings of the parents' hearts. The more closely the parents are united with Christ, the more their love for each other and for their children acts as a magnet to pull their loved ones closer to Christ. The older we become, the more real these invisible connections to what is good and loving—past and present—appear to us.

We are also surrounded, however, by much negative influence, by irritating or malicious words and actions that upset our peace, and even by darkness. Our first instinct is to pass on the hurt to others. If my superior was nervous with me, I will react nervously to those below me. Once, after an upsetting conversation, I entered my classroom. The students were not behaving differently than at other times; they were just a little too talkative and disorderly. On other days, I may have just responded with a smile. That morning, I yelled at them. In the long run, a teacher's or parent's responsibility is very serious. Habitually angry, emotionally distant and cold fathers or mothers may ruin the lives of their children. The children will not believe in their own worth, because the parents' love has not convinced them that they are worthy of love. Such parental behavior may continue in their adult children, multiplying unhappiness and suffering through generations.

What should we do if we cannot change our outward circumstances? Please do not laugh at this old, trite answer; it is true, and it works: let us offer it up, let us pray at least a short fragment of a prayer for whoever is the cause of our misery. The more love we put into it, the better. St. Bernard said that Jesus was such a unique kind of stone; the harder you hit it, the more beautiful sound it uttered. Let us hope our prayer will sound beautiful for God. In this way, we may save our parents, our in-laws, our spouse or our children. As St. John Paul II said:

Part of the grandeur of Christ's love is not to leave us in the condition of passive recipients, but to draw us into his saving work and, in particular, into his passion. This is said in the famous passage from the Letter to the Colossians: "In my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the Church." (Col 2:24) Everything comes from Christ, but since we belong to him, whatever is ours also becomes his and acquires a healing power.

How beautiful are the fruits of the complementary sufferings of the members of Christ! We see this beauty with our own eyes every day as we look at our monastery and school that have arisen out of the sacrifice and love of those Cistercians who suffered in Hungary.



Does Christ Rule History?

While we hoped it would be over quickly, the war in Ukraine continues. Perhaps you will find these thoughts of some help.

Months after the horrors of the Russian-Ukrainian war began and Vladimir Putin raised to maximum alert his nuclear arsenal, the entire world is still stunned in disbelief. Why is this senseless pure evil happening? Christians may also wonder why God is silent? Why does He tolerate the suffering of millions of innocent men and women and children? How dare we Christians maintain that the Kingdom of God is already present among us in a hidden way, when Christ — “the King of Kings” of universal history — does nothing?

Most of us know the conventional answers: that God gave mankind freedom to support or kill each other, to destroy or build up this world; that He allows evil in order to bring about a greater good. Yes, these are true, but not quite satisfactory, answers. We will understand fully the why of evil only at the last judgment when the dark mysteries of history will be revealed as part of a plan of justice and infinite mercy. Here I can only tell you about how I try to cope with this nightmarish war in my mind and heart.

The events in the Book of Revelation play out on two levels: in the heavenly court of God and on earth. We read about senseless slaughter and destruction on earth and a solemn liturgy with hymns and incense going on in Heaven. The two series of events are closely connected: those who endured the great tribulations and washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb are the ones who join the heavenly liturgy as kings and priests. In other words, Christ the Lamb of God rules the world by forging saints out of those who share in his sacrifice, the sacrifice of the Lamb. Throughout human history, fulget crucis mysterium: “there shines the mystery of the Cross.” In this world, the Cross is the only weapon of Jesus.

Looking now at the horrors of the Ukrainian war, we see how it confronts so many people with the Cross of Christ. On the one hand, the West, to a large extent neo-pagan, addicted to pleasure and wealth, is offered the choice to open their hearts and their homes to several million refugees. Many of those who now open their homes had ignored God in church and prayer, but now they cannot avoid meeting Him in these homeless and desperate strangers.

The Ukrainian soldiers, on the other hand, are called to sacrifice their lives for their country and for each other. For instance, the population of a village formed a live wall of people in front of an incoming tank formation and turned the tanks back. Some of the soldiers knowingly, some of them unknowingly, fulfilled the word of Christ: “No one has greater love than the one who gives his life for his friends.” (John 15:13).

Instead of yielding to depression over the evil and stupidity of the human race, let us pray for the Ukrainians and the Russians that in their own lives and deaths, the Cross of Christ may triumph. At the same time, we can also learn from them that being a Christian does not simply mean being a decent citizen who pays his taxes, doing his

work and trying to squeeze as much pleasure as possible out of each day of his life. Thomas More, a Christian saint and statesman, also aspired to squeeze out as much joy from every moment of his life. His joy and peace, however, sprang from his love of God and inspired a joke even before the axe fell on his neck when he put aside his beard and told the executioner, "Don't cut my beard; it did not commit high treason." Each one of us may face situations when we need to risk our wealth or even our life for God or for others, and that will be for us the share in the victory of his Cross.

FALL 2022

A Life Worth Living

A former student asked me to write about how people can reach happiness and peace in this life. Like one of the Desert Fathers, I offer a list of aphorisms, scattered ideas taken from experience and my reading over a lifetime. It is not that I have realized any of them, but just striving for them provides a foretaste of joy. Needless to say, the list is very incomplete and subjective.

Discover yourself:

- a) Your origin is infinite personal love, and you will be restless until you find Him.
- b) You are born to fulfill your part in God's plan in helping the universe to its final destination. The life of a street sweeper and that of a scientist are equally valuable in God's eyes provided that their love is equal.
- c) Working on human progress (science, arts, technology) is important in God's plan, but your true wealth is love. How many lives have you touched in a loving way?
- d) You are a mixture of mud and spirit, conflicting desires pull you down or upward. It is your choice to sink lower than the level of animals or to allow grace to lift you up to the dignity of a child of God.

Jesus learned what to say and do by listening to the Father, reading the Scriptures, and interpreting the events around him. Analogously, you are called to do the same.

Start and end each day with prayer: "Lord, thank you for a new day. Please give me the grace to love you and those around me more than yesterday." Or, "May I love you and others today with your own love."

Finish the day by giving thanks for all you received from God and asking for forgiveness where you failed.

The more grateful you are, the more generous God will be to you. Gratitude opens God's treasure chest.

God stops giving grace to the ungrateful out of mercy lest they become more guilty for ignoring his gifts (St. Bernard).

Look back at your past. You will see the infinite love through which God has guided even the smallest events in your life and how He speaks to you through them.

Acknowledge and be happy for God's gifts to you, but give the credit to Jesus. St. Bernard said, "In yourself you are nothing, but in God's heart you are a treasure."

When you are consumed by pride, ask God to show you your limitations. Your wait will be short.

Do not be afraid to embrace your share in the cross of Christ.

Everyone must carry a cross, but the unbeliever may kick and scream while the believer finds peace in knowing that he shares in the life-giving Cross of Christ.

When you participate in the Eucharist, put yourself on the paten with the Host. In union with Christ, offer yourself to the Father and ask that you may become a gift for Him and for your neighbor.

Realize that by receiving Christ, you become the Body of Christ (St. Augustine).

For the Christian, **the real destination is God's Kingdom**. This life is a preparation for it, a school and playground. If you learn your lessons well and play honestly here on earth, you will be ready for Heaven (Fr. Lóránt 'Sigmond, my saintly novice master in Hungary).

Suffering out of love opens the door to deeper joy.

The Christian does not seek suffering but cannot avoid it. Uniting his suffering with Christ's, he turns it into a treasure he can offer for the bodily or spiritual well-being of others.

Envy is the source of much evil and makes it impossible to appreciate the good things God has given you.

When torn by envy, thank God that He has given the other person what you are craving; this leads to friendship and peace.

For people with only superficial faith, our life on earth is the real life; Heaven is an uncertain shadow.

Discover the signs of Heaven's joy in your daily life and resist the lures of Hell.

Some of these ideas may be familiar to you, but others are inviting you to try them out in your own life.

