

LAY CISTERCIANS OF GETHSEMANI ABBEY
VIGILS READINGS: Seventh Week of Easter
June 2-8, 2019

SUNDAY, JUNE 2

The Various Ways of Ascending - A Sermon by St Bernard of Clairvaux ¹

Today the Lord of heaven passed into the heights of heaven with heavenly power; dissipating the weaknesses of the flesh as if they were clouds, he put on the robe of glory. High is the sun in its rising; it has grown hot and gathered strength; its rays are far reaching and multitudinous over the earth; and there is >no one who can hide from its heat=. The Wisdom of God has returned to the land of wisdom where everyone both understands and seeks the good: their understanding is exceedingly acute, and their inclination is exceedingly intent >on heeding the voice of his word=.

We, however, are in this land where there is great wickedness and little wisdom, for >the perishable body presses down the soul and the earthly dwelling burdens the mind that ponders many things=. I think that Amind@ here means understanding, which is in fact pressed down when it ponders many things, when it does not gather itself together in the single exclusive meditation that takes its beginning from that city >which is banded together in unity=. This type of understanding must necessarily be pressed down and distracted by many things in many and diverse ways. I think that our inclinations are called Asoul@ here, for in a perishable body they are influenced by the different passions, which can never be mitigated, much less quieted, until the will seeks one thing and is directed toward one thing.

There are two parts of ourselves then, understanding and inclination, that must be purified: the understanding, that it may know; and the inclination, that it may will. Fortunate, truly fortunate, were those two men, Elijah and Enoch, from whom every cause and occasion which might shackle either their understanding or inclination was removed. Living for God alone, they know nothing but God and desire nothing but God. We even read of Enoch that >he was carried off, lest

¹ Sermons for the Summer Season - Bernard of Clairvaux - CF53 - Cistercian Publications - Kalamazoo, MI - 1991

wickedness impair his understanding or deceit beguile his soul=.

Our understanding was disordered, not to say blinded; our inclination was tainted, and very tainted. But Christ enlightens our understanding, and the Holy Spirit purifies our inclination. For the Son of God came. He worked so many great and wondrous deeds in the world, that with good cause he called our understanding away from all worldly matters. Thus we could ponder, and never have enough of pondering, that he has done wondrous deeds. Truly he left very extensive fields for our discerning to roam, and the river of these ponderings is so very deep, that, in the words of the prophet, it cannot be crossed. Who can sufficiently ponder how the Lord has come before us, come to us, come to our assistance; and how this unparalleled Majesty willed to die that we might live, to serve that we might reign, to live in exile that we might be brought home again, and even to stoop to the most menial actions so as to set us over all his works.

The Lord of the Apostles presented himself to the apostles in such a way that they would no longer perceive the invisible things of God as understood by the things that are made, but that the very Maker of all things would himself be seen face to face. Because the disciples were beings of flesh and God is spirit, and spirit and flesh are not easily brought together, he adapted himself to them with the shadow of his body, that by the intervention of his life-giving flesh they might behold the Word in flesh, the sun in a cloud, light in an earthen jug, the candle in the lantern.

For this purpose the Lord set his flesh before them, to turn their every thought away from human matters and attach it to his flesh, which was saying wondrous things and performing wondrous deeds. Thus he would turn their attention from flesh to spirit, because >God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth=. Does it not seem to you that he enlightened their understanding when he opened their minds to understanding of the Scriptures, making known that the Christ had to suffer these things and rise from the dead, and so enter into his glory.

Still, having grown accustomed to that most holy flesh of his, they could not listen to a word about his departure: that the one for whom they had left everything would leave them. What is the reason for this? Their understanding was enlightened, but their inclination was not yet purified. Whence their kind Teacher gently and tenderly addressed them, saying: Alit is for your good that I go. For if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you@. ABut because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts@. What does it mean, that

while Christ abides on earth, the Holy Spirit cannot come to them? Was the Spirit shrinking from any involvement with Christ's flesh? From the Spirit and by the Spirit was Christ conceived in the Virgin, and born of a virgin mother. It was nothing of the sort! Christ was showing us the path which we were to walk, and putting before us the form with which we were to be impressed.

And as they wept, Christ was lifted up to heaven. He sent the Holy spirit, who purified their inclination, that is, their will; or rather he transformed it, so that those who at first wanted to detain the Lord, now preferred that he ascend. What he had foretold to them was fulfilled: "You shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy". In this, then, was their discerning enlightened by Christ, and their will purified by the Spirit, so that just as they knew the good, they would also will it. This only is perfect religion and religious perfection.

MONDAY, JUNE 3

From the Homily at the Canonization of the martyrs of Uganda by Pope Paul VI 2

The African martyrs add another page to the martyrology – the Church's roll of honor – an occasion both of mourning and of joy. This is a page worthy in every way of being added to the annals of that Africa of earlier times, which we, living in this era and being people of little faith, never expected to be repeated.

In earlier times there occurred those famous deeds, so moving to the spirit, of the martyrs of Scilli, of Carthage, and of that "white robed army" of Utica commemorated by Saint Augustine and Prudentius; of the martyrs of Egypt so highly praised by Saint John Chrysostom, and of the martyrs of the Vandal persecution. Who would have thought that in our days we should have witnessed events as heroic and glorious?

Who would have predicted to the famous African confessors and martyrs such as Cyprian, Felicity, Perpetua and – the greatest of all – Augustine, that we would one day add names so dear to us as Charles Lwanga and Matthias Mulumba Kalemba and their twenty companions? Nor must we forget those members of the Anglican Church who also died in the name of Christ.

These African martyrs herald the dawn of a new age. If only the human mind might be directed not toward persecutions and religious conflicts but toward a rebirth of Christianity and civilization!

Africa has been washed by the blood of these latest martyrs, the first of this new age (and God willing, let them be the last, although such a holocaust is precious indeed). Africa is reborn free and independent.

The infamous crime by which these young men were put to death was so unspeakable and so expressive of the times. It shows us clearly that a new people needs a moral foundation, needs new spiritual customs firmly planted, to be handed down to posterity. Symbolically, this crime also reveals that a simple and rough way of life – enriched by many fine human qualities yet enslaved by its own weakness and corruption – must give way to a more civilized life wherein the higher expressions of the mind and better social conditions prevail.

TUESDAY, JUNE 4

THE ASCENSION AND CHRISTIAN PRAYER, from an Article, *The Humanity of Christ in Monastic Prayer* by Fr Thomas Merton³

At the Ascension, in the sight of the disciples, "the nature of humankind soared above the dignity of all the creatures of heaven" and "there was to be no limit to the advancement of Christ's humanity until, seated together with the eternal Father, it might share enthroned the glory of Him whose nature it shared in the son." And of course, the Fathers never ceased to remind their hearers that this same humanity of Christ which was enthroned with the Father in the divine glory, was to return and judge the world. "He set a limit to His bodily presence, and would remain at the right hand of the Father until He should return in the same flesh in which He had ascended." Monastic prayer is eschatological and is centered on the expectation of the Parousia, the advent of the "immortal and invisible King of ages" who is both "God alone" and the Christ, our Redeemer and Liberator.

In the meantime it is our nature which is enthroned in heaven with Christ. It is our

³"The Humanity of Christ in Monastic Prayer", *Monastic Studies* 2, 1964, 11-13.

nature which shares the divinity of Christ and of the Father. Hence St Leo puts these words into the mouth of the glorious Redeemer: "I have united you to myself and I became the son of man that you might become children of God." St Gregory adds that Christ has made us children of God by taking us to heaven with Him: "He has led captivity because he has swallowed up our corruption in the power of His incorruption." St Leo says that with Christ's ascension into heaven we have recovered possession of paradise, and not only that, "we have even penetrated, in Christ, into the height of heaven," we have been enthroned with Him because we are "one Body" with Him. This is the reason why we should rejoice at His going to the Father: "above all the heavens, your lowliness is raised, in Me, to be placed at the right hand of the Father." He is not separated from us unless we choose to remain bound to the earth by our passions. In contemplation we experience, at least obscurely, something of this mystery of our union with Him now in heaven.

This has important implications for the life of prayer. The life of the monk, being that of a Christian, is a way of living in heaven. While living bodily in exile and in his earthly pilgrimage, the monk is already spiritually in paradise and in heaven where he has ascended with Christ. That is to say, although he is not physically present in heaven, he is free to come and go there as he pleases, in spirit, in prayer, in faith, in thanksgiving, praise and love, because he already "is" there mystically in Christ. "Let us therefore, exult with a worthy and spiritual joy, happy before God in thanksgiving, and let us lift up the free eyes of our heart to that height where Christ is."

The Lord has already "made known to us all that He has heard from His Father"(Jn 15,15). St Gregory, commenting on this line, says that Christ has made us His friends by making known to us "the joys of interior charity and the festival of the heavenly country which He daily makes present in our minds by the desire of love." And St Gregory explains that this loving knowledge of heavenly things is very real indeed, no mere fancy: "for when, hearing of heavenly things, we love them, we already know the things we love, for our love itself is a way of knowing." It is by the charity of Christ in our hearts that we "are in heaven" and know the things of heaven.

The source of our freedom and the power that raises our prayer to the height of heaven is the Holy Spirit, sent by Christ and the Father after the God become flesh ascended into heaven. And faith in Christ's presence in heaven as one of us merits for us the grace of the Holy Spirit. The angels, says St Gregory, already rejoice to have us as their companions, while they adore the humanity of the God become flesh.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 5

A Reading about St Boniface, the Apostle of Germany, by Christopher Dawson.⁴

In art and religion, in scholarship and literature, the Anglo-Saxons of the eighth century were the leaders of their age. At the time when continental civilization was at its lowest ebb, the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons marked the turn of the tide. The Saxon pilgrims flocked to Rome as the center of the Christian world and the Papacy found its most devoted allies and servants in the Anglo-Saxon monks and missionaries. The foundations of the new age were laid by the greatest of them all, St Boniface of Crediton, "the apostle of Germany", a man who had a deeper influence on the history of Europe than any Englishman who has ever lived. Unlike his Celtic predecessors, he was not an individual missionary, but a statesman and organizer, who was, above all, servant of the Roman order. To him is due the foundation of the medieval German Church and the final conversion of Hesse and Thuringia, the heart of the German land. With the help of his Anglo-Saxon monks and nuns he destroyed the last strongholds of Germanic heathenism and planted abbeys and bishoprics on the site of the old Folkburgs and heathen sanctuaries, such as Buraburg, Amoneburg, and Fulda. On his return from Rome in 739 he used his authority as Papal Vicar in Germany to reorganize the Bavarian Church and to establish the new dioceses which had so great an importance in German history. For Germany beyond the Rhine was still a land without cities, and the foundation of the new bishoprics meant the creation of new centers of cultural life. It was through the work of St Boniface that Germany first became a living member of the European society.

But in addition to this, Boniface was the reformer of the whole Frankish church. The decadent Merovingian dynasty had already given up the substance of its power to the mayors of the palace, but in spite of their military prowess, which saved France from conquest by the Arabs in 735, they had done nothing for culture and had only furthered the degradation of the Frankish Church. Charles Martel had used the abbeys and bishoprics to reward his lay partisans, and had carried out a wholesale secularization of Church property. As Boniface wrote to the Pope, "Religion is

⁴"The Making of Europe", New York, 1956, pp 185-186.

trodden under foot. Benefices are given to greedy laymen or unchaste and publican clerics. All their crimes do not prevent their attaining the priesthood; at last rising in rank as they increase in sin they become bishops, and those of them who can boast that they are not adulterers or fornicators, are drunkards, given up to the chase, and soldiers who do not shrink from shedding Christian blood." Nevertheless, the successors of Charles Martel, Pepin and Carloman, were favorable to Boniface's reforms. Armed with his special powers as Legate of the Holy See and personal representative of the Pope, he undertook the desecularization of the Frankish Church.

THURSDAY, JUNE 6

From the Life of St Norbert 5

Norbert is deservedly numbered by historians among those who made an effective contribution to the reform movement under Pope Gregory VII. He established a clergy dedicated to the ideals of the Gospel and the apostolic Church. They were chaste and poor. They wore "the clothing and the symbols of the new man; that is to say, they wore the religious habit and exhibited the dignity proper to the priesthood." Norbert asked them to "live according to the norms of the Scriptures with Christ as their model." They were "to be clean in all matters pertaining to the altar and divine worship, to correct their faults and failings in their chapter meeting, and to care for and give shelter to the poor."

The priests lived in community, where they continued the work of the apostles. Inspired by the practice of the early Church, Norbert exhorted the faithful to join the monastic life in some capacity. So many men and women responded to the invitation that many asserted that no man since the apostles themselves had inspired so many to embrace the monastic life.

When Norbert was appointed an archbishop, he urged his brothers to carry the faith to the lands of the Wends. In his own diocese he tried unsuccessfully to convince the clergy of the need for reform and was confronted with noisy protests both in the street and in the church.

One of the principal goals of Norbert's life was to foster harmony between the Apostolic See and the German empire. At the same time he wanted to maintain Rome's freedom in the matter of ecclesiastical appointments. Apparently his efforts were so successful that Pope Innocent II thanked him profusely in a letter in which he called him a "devoted son", and Lothair made him chancellor of the realm.

Norbert did all these things with a steadfast faith: "Faith was the outstanding virtue of Norbert's life, as charity had been the hallmark of Bernard of Clairvaux." Affable and charming, amiable to one and all, "he was at ease in the company of the humble and the great alike". Finally, he was a most eloquent preacher; after long meditation "he would preach the word of God, and with his fiery eloquence purged vices, refined virtues and filled souls of good will with the warmth of wisdom". He spent many hours in contemplation of the divine mysteries and fearlessly spread the spiritual insights which were the fruit of his meditation.

FRIDAY, JUNE 7

A Reading by Gilbert of Hoyland on the Eternal Dwelling.⁶

As the Lord says: 'In my Father's house are many dwellings': dwellings obviously of lesser lights, because God himself 'dwells in light inaccessible'. John understands this as a multitude of dwellings, not because there is one dwelling for each spiritual creature, since for some one or other there are many dwellings, as the Lord says in Luke, 'and you shall have authority over ten towns'. 'For star differs from star in splendor.' Yes, as the number of virtues increases, so the gift of splendors is multiplied, as the prophecy in Isaiah indicates: 'and the Lord shall fill your soul with splendors'. Blissful surely is the soul, which will be filled not only with one but with many splendors, those indeed of which it is said: 'Yours is princely power in the day of your birth, in the splendors of the saints.' The most blissful splendors are those which the Lord pours upon his saints; the beginning of eternity, the day of truth, and the virtue of charity.

⁶Treatise 1, The works of Gilbert of Hoyland IV, Cistercian Publications, Inc. 1981, CF34. p.11-13.

Who will grant me that my spirit may be enlightened with a ray of this triple splendor? that this most blessed number of days may complete, yes complete and contain my days? Who I ask, will grant me that my days may stretch out to that line of eternity, may shine in the splendor of truth and be inflamed with the spirit of charity? Unlike the dispensation which prevailed at the first creation of the world, when an alternating return of dawn and dusk set limits between the many days, then indeed there will be one unending day, one unbroken high noon. There at the first creation, only between morning and evening, so to speak, inauspicious night was banned, but in this new day high noon will replace dawn and dusk: the two limits of the day will no longer grow dim. As Zechariah says, 'in the evening there will be light, for then there will be no temporal 'variations, no shadow of change'. Yet when, oh when, will this occur? When, O good Jesus, will you manifest yourself as you are in your high noon? For in you we shall see the Father, and it will be enough for us. How sluggish are our ears, how slow our hearts! slow to see, quick however to believe!

Scripturally, in each and every appearance after your blessed Resurrection, I do not recall ever having read of your appearance at midday. You appeared either when the day had hardly begun or was already ending, that one might understand that here below all light of truth is obscured by some shadow of ignorance. At the same time, a pleasant distinction should be noted in the fact that in the dawn's early light he showed himself at the tomb to the women seeking him anxiously, but that late on the same day, the first of the week, he showed himself to the disciples huddled at home.

Oh that you would appear to us also, O Lord, here in our dawn or in our dusk, for you are above dawn and dusk, the brightest high noon. In that high noon we shall recline at table in your fatherland. Meanwhile as we are journeying on, let us pray, O Lord, that you may warm us with the last ray of evening light. Now we are concluding our discourse with the onset of a day but we do not exclude you: rather we close with you as we opened with you. In the morning let us give thanks, breaking into that song of the Canticle: 'I rested in the shade of the one I longed for.'

SATURDAY, JUNE 8

From A Sermon by Ogier, Cistercian Abbot of the Monastery of Locedio 7

Let us note the Lord's two dwelling-places: the one along the way, the other in his heavenly home; the one temporal, when he dwelt with us in the flesh, the other eternal, where we shall dwell with him glorified in soul and in body. Of the first he says, *'I have said these things to you while still with you – present in the body. But a time is coming when I shall withdraw from you in my bodily presence and will thereafter speak to you through the spirit. The Paraclete, the Holy spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. He will teach you,'* says the Lord Jesus 'what I have told you.' Not that the son says one thing and the spirit teaches another, for whatever Christ says and teaches the Trinity says and teaches. Because God is triune, each person of the godhead must establish himself in our hearts. We should hear each distinctly and understand them inseparably. Thus when we say 'the Father, Son and Holy spirit', we do not say these words simultaneously, yet those whom we name are simultaneous and could not be otherwise. When the Lord speaks of the Comforter whom the Father will send, we are to understand: 'I am leaving you in my bodily presence but not in the presence of the Spirit. The body I received on earth I now raise up to heaven, but through my Spirit I will remain with you until the end of time. The Father sent me so that I might appear visible in the flesh, but the hour has come for me to pay death's due, and, rising from the dead, ascend to the Father, and there be seated at his right hand. Henceforth the world will no longer see me in the mortal guise of the flesh. But *the Paraclete, the spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will comfort you in my bodily absence by the abundance of his sweetness. He will be your teacher, not noising his words abroad but teaching the heart within. He will prompt you and teach you everything I have told you through him, all that I will have inspired in you. You will not be able to lament my bodily absence so long as the spirit remains in your hearts.'*

O Lord Jesus, may your Spirit come, my God and Master! May He enter my heart and so flood me with your love that I should seek no other love than yours, that I may love no other beauty than yours, that I may taste no other sweetness! For you are honey and honeycomb: the honey of God the Father, in the

7 Ogier of Locedio: Homilies – Cistercian Fathers Series - #70 – Cistercian Publications – Kalamazoo, MI – 2006
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honeycomb of the Virgin Mary; honey in the bosom of the Father, honeycomb broken on the cross; honey reigning with the Father and the Holy Spirit in heaven and throughout the universe, blessed through endless ages. Amen

END OF READINGS