

LAY CISTERCIANS OF GETHSEMANI ABBEY  
VIGILS READINGS  
First Week in Lent  
March 1-7, 2020

**SUNDAY, MARCH 1, 2020**

**Commentary on Gospel by St Gregory Nazianzen <sup>1</sup>**

We must not expect baptism to free us from the temptations of our persecutor. The body that concealed him made even the Word of God a target for the enemy; his assumption of a visible form made even the invisible light an object of attack. Nevertheless, since we have at hand the means of overcoming our enemy, we must have no fear of the struggle. Flaunt in his face the water and the Spirit. In them will be extinguished all the flaming darts of the evil one.

Suppose the tempter makes us feel the pinch of poverty, as he did even to Christ, and taking advantage of our hunger, talks of turning stones into bread: we must not be taken in by him, but let him learn what he has still not grasped. Refute him with the word of life, with the word which is the bread sent down from heaven and that gives life to the world.

He may try to ensnare us through our vanity, as he tried to ensnare Christ when he set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said: "Prove your divinity: throw yourself down." Let us beware of succumbing to pride, for the tempter will by no means stop at one success. He is never satisfied and is always pursuing us. Often he beguiles us with something good and useful, but its end is always evil. That is simply his method of waging war, We also know how well-versed the devil is in Scripture. When Christ answered the temptation to turn stones into bread with a rebuke from Scripture beginning: *It is written*, the devil countered with the same words, tempting Christ to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple. *For it is written*, he quoted, *he will give his angels charge of you, and on their hands they will bear you up*. O past master of all evil, why suppress the verse that follows? You did not finish the quotation, but I know full well what it means: that we shall tread on you as on an adder or a cobra;

protected by the Trinity, we shall trample on you as on serpents or scorpions.

If the tempter tried to overthrow us through our greed, showing us at one glance all the kingdoms of the world – as if they belonged to him – and demanding that we fall down and worship him, we should despise him, for we know him to be a penniless impostor. Strong in our baptism, each of us can say: “I too am made in the image of God, but unlike you, I have not yet become an outcast from heaven through my pride. I have put on Christ; by my baptism I have become one with him. It is you that should fall down before me.” At these words he can only surrender and retire in shame; as he retreated before Christ, the light of the world, so he will depart from those illumined by that light. Such are the gifts conferred by baptism on those who understand its power; such the rich banquet it lays before those who hunger for the things of the Spirit.

[1](#)Journey with the Fathers – Year A – New City Press – NY -1999 – pg 36

**MONDAY, MARCH 2, 2020**

**A Reading on Lent by Thomas Merton <sup>1</sup>**

The Paschal Mystery is above all the mystery of life, in which the Church, by celebrating the death and resurrection of Christ, enters into the Kingdom of Life which He has established once for all by His definitive victory over sin and death. We must remember the original meaning of Lent, as the *ver sacrum*, the Church’s “holy spring” in which the catechumens were prepared for their baptism, and public penitents were made ready for penance for their restoration to the sacramental life in a communion with the rest of the Church. Lent is then not a season of punishment so much as one of healing. There is joy in the salutary fasting and abstinence of the Christian who eats and drinks less in order that his mind may be more clear and receptive to receive the sacred nourishment of God’s word, which the whole Church announces and meditates upon in each day’s liturgy throughout Lent. The whole life and teaching of Christ

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<sup>1</sup>Seasons of Celebration - Farrar, Straus & Giroux - NY - 1965 - pg. 113f

pass before us, and Lent is a season of special reflection and prayer, a forty-day retreat in which each Christian, to the extent he is able, tries to follow Christ into the desert by prayer and fasting.

Some, monks and ascetics, will give themselves especially to fasting and vigils, silence and solitude in these days, and they will meditate more deeply on the Word of God. But all the faithful should listen to the Word as it is announced in the liturgy or in Bible services, and respond to it according to their ability. In this way, for the whole Church, Lent will not be merely a season simply of a few formalized penitential practices, half understood and undertaken without interest, but a time of *metanoia*, the turning of all minds and hearts to God in preparation for the celebration of the Paschal Mystery in which some will for the first time receive the light of Christ, others will be restored to the communion of the faithful, and all will renew their baptismal consecration of their lives to God, in Christ.

It is a time in which joy and grief go together hand in hand: for that is the meaning of compunction - a sorrow which pierces, which liberates, which gives hope and therefore joy. Compunction is a baptism of sorrow, in which the tears of the penitent are a psychological but also deeply religious purification, preparing and disposing him for the sacramental waters of baptism or for the sacrament of penance. Such sorrow brings joy because it is at once a mature acknowledgment of guilt and the acceptance of its full consequences: hence it implies a religious and moral adjustment to reality, the acceptance of one's actual condition, and the acceptance of reality is always a liberation from the burden of illusion which we strive to justify by our errors and sins. Compunction is a necessary sorrow, but it is followed by joy and relief because it wins for us one of the greatest blessings: the light of truth and the grace of humility. The tears of the Christian penitent are real tears, but they bring joy.

Only the inner rending, the tearing of the heart, brings this joy. It lets out our sins, and lets in the clean air of God's spring, the sunlight of the days that advance toward Easter. Rending of the garments lets in nothing but the cold. The rending of the heart which is spoken of in Joel is that "tearing away" from ourselves and our *vetustas* - the "oldness" of the old man, wearied with the boredom and drudgery of an indifferent existence, that we may turn to God and taste His mercy, in the liberty of His sons and daughters.

When we turn to Him, what do we find? That “He is gracious and merciful, patient and rich of mercy”. He even speaks to us in His own words, saying “Behold I will send you corn and wine and oil and you shall be filled with them: and I will no more make you a reproach among the nations”. This at the beginning of a forty days fast!

It is necessary that at the beginning of this fast, the Lord should show Himself to us in His mercy. The purpose of Lent is not only expiation, to satisfy the divine justice, but above all a preparation to rejoice in His love. And this preparation consists in receiving the gift of His mercy - a gift which we receive in so far as we open our hearts to it, casting out what cannot remain in the same room with mercy.

Now one of the things we must cast out first of all is fear. Fear narrows the little entrance of our heart. It shrinks up our capacity to love. It freezes up our power to give ourselves. If we were terrified of God as an inexorable judge, we would not confidently await His mercy, or approach Him trustfully in prayer. Our peace, our joy in Lent are a guarantee of grace.

**TUESDAY, MARCH 3, 2020**

**Continuing a reading on Lent from Thomas Merton <sup>2</sup>**

There is confidence everywhere in Lent, yet that does not mean unmixed and untroubled security. The confidence of the Christian is always a confidence in spite of darkness and risk, in the presence of peril, with every evidence of possible disaster. “Let us emend for the better in those things in which we have sinned through ignorance: lest suddenly overtaken by the day of death we seek space for repentance and are not able to find it.” The last words are sobering indeed. And note, it is the sins we have not been fully aware of that we must emend. Once again, Lent is not just a time for squaring conscious accounts: but for realizing what we had perhaps not seen before. The light of Lent is given us to help us with this realization.

Nevertheless the liturgy of Lent is not focused on the sinfulness of the penitent but on the mercy of God. The question of sinfulness is raised precisely because this is a time of mercy, and the just do not need a Savior. Nowhere will we find more tender expressions of the divine mercy that at

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<sup>2</sup>Seasons of Celebration - Farrar, Straus & Giroux - NY - 1965 - pg. 118

this season. His mercy is kind. He looks upon us “according to the multitude of Your tender mercies”. In the Introit for Ash Wednesday we sing: “You have mercy upon all, O Lord, and hate none of those which You have made, overlooking the sins of all for the sake of repentance and sparing them, because You are the Lord our God.”

How good are these words of Wisdom in a time when on all sides the Lord is thought by mortals to be a God who hates. Those who deny Him say they do so because evil in the world could be the work only of a God that hated the world.

But even those who profess to love Him regard Him too often as a furious Father, who seeks only to punish and revenge Himself for the evil that is done “against Him” - One who cannot abide the slightest contradiction but will immediately mark it down for retribution, and will not let a farthing of the debt go unpaid.

This is not the God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself “hides” our sins and gets them out of sight, like a mother making quick and efficient repairs on the soiled face of a child just before entering a house where he ought to appear clean. The words of the Lenten liturgies know Him only as the “God who desires not the death of the sinner”, “who is moved by humiliation and appeased by satisfaction”. He is everywhere shown to us as “plenteous in mercy”.

And from the infinite treasure of His mercies He draws forth the gift of compunction. This is a sorrow without servile fear, which is all the more deep and tender as it receives pardon from the tranquil, calm love of the merciful Lord: a love which the Latin liturgy calls, in two untranslatable words, *serenissima pietas*. The God of Lent is like a calm sea of mercy. In Him there is no anger.

This “hiding” of God’s severity is not a subterfuge. It is a revelation of His true nature. He is not severe, and it is not theologically accurate to say that He becomes angry, that He is moved to hurt and to punish.

He is love. Love becomes severe only to those who make Him severe for themselves. Love is hard only to those who refuse Him. It is not, and cannot be Love’s will to be refused. Therefore it is not and cannot be Love’s will to be severe and punish.

But it is the very nature of Love that His absence is sorrow and death and punishment. His severity flows not from His own nature but from the

fact of our refusal. Those who refuse Him are severe to themselves, and immolate themselves to the blood-thirsty god of their own self-love. It is from this idol that Love would deliver us. To such bitter servitude, Love would never condemn us.

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4, 2020**

**A Reading from a letter by St. Maximus the Confessor<sup>3</sup>**

God's will is to save us and nothing pleases him more than our coming back to him with true repentance. The heralds of truth and ministers of divine grace have told us this from the beginning, repeating it in every age. Indeed God's desire for our salvation is the primary and preeminent sign of his infinite goodness, and it was precisely in order to show that there is nothing closer to God's heart than the divine Word of God the Father, with untold condescension, lived among us in the flesh, and that he did, suffered, and said all that was necessary to reconcile us to God the Father when we were at enmity with him, and to restore us to the life of blessedness from which we have been exiled. He healed our physical infirmities by miracles; he freed us from our sins, many and grievous as they were, by suffering and dying, taking them upon himself as if he were answerable for them, sinless though he was. He also taught us in many different ways that we should wish to imitate him by our own kindness and genuine love for one another.

Thus he proclaimed that he had come to call sinners to repentance, not the righteous, and that it was not the healthy who required a doctor, but the sick. He declared that he had come to look for the sheep that was lost and that it was to the lost sheep of the house of Israel that he had been sent. Speaking more obscurely in the parable of the silver coin, he tells us that the purpose of his coming was to reclaim the royal image, which had been coated with the filth of sin. "You can be sure that there is joy in heaven", he said, "over one sinner who repents".

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<sup>3</sup> A Word in Season - Monastic Lectionary - vol. II - Lent - Exordium Books - 1982 -  
pg. 14

To the same lesson he revived the man who, having fallen into the hands of brigands, had been left stripped and half-dead from his wounds; he poured wine and oil on the wounds, bandaged them, placed the man on his own mule, and brought him to an inn, where he left sufficient money to have him cared for, and promised to repay any further expense on his return.

Again, he told of how the father, who is goodness itself, was moved with pity for his profligate son who returned and made amends by repentance; how he embraced him, dressed him once more in the fine garments that befitted his own dignity, and did not reproach him for any of his sins.

Then there was the time when one of the hundred sheep in God's flock went astray. When he found it wandering in the mountains and hills he did not exhaust it by driving it back to the fold, but placed it on his own shoulders, and so in his compassion restored it safely to the flock.

His teaching was the same when he cried out: "Come to me, all you that toil and are heavy of heart. Accept my yoke", he said, by which he meant his commands, or rather the whole way of life that he taught us in the Gospel. He then speaks of a burden, but that is only because repentance seems difficult. In fact, however, "my yoke is easy", he assures us, "and my burden is light".

Then again he instructs us in divine justice and goodness, telling us to be like our heavenly Father, holy, perfect and merciful. "Forgive", he says, "and you will be forgiven. Treat other people as you would wish them to treat you."

**THURSDAY, MARCH 5, 2020**

**A Sermon of Bl. Gueric of Igny for Lent <sup>4</sup>**

O happy the humility of those who repent; O blessed the hope of those who confess. How mighty you are with the Almighty; how easily you conquer the unconquerable; how quickly you turn the dreadful judge into a devoted father. We have heard to our great edification of the prodigal son's

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<sup>4</sup> Gueric of Igny - Liturgical Sermons - vol. 1 - CF #8 - Cistercian Publications - Spencer, MA - 1970

sorrowful journey, tearful repentance and glorious reception. He was so gravely guilty and had not yet confessed but only planned to; had not yet made satisfaction but only bent his mind to it. Yet by merely intending to humble himself he immediately obtained a pardon, which others seek for so long a time with such great desire, beg for with such tears, strive for with such diligence. The thief on the cross was absolved by a simple confession, the prodigal by only the will to confess.

“I said,” Scripture says, “I will confess my transgression to the Lord; and you did forgive the guilt of my sin.” Everywhere mercy precedes. It had preceded the will to confess by inspiring it; it preceded also the words of confession by forgiving what was to be confessed. “When he was still far off,” we read, “his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and running to meet him fell upon his neck and kissed him.” These words seem to suggest that the father was even more anxious to pardon his son than the son was to be pardoned. He hastened to absolve the guilty one from what was tormenting his conscience, as if the merciful father suffered more in his compassion for his miserable son than the son did in his own miseries. We do not mean to attribute human feelings to the unchangeable nature of God; we intend rather that our affection should be softened and moved to love that supreme goodness by learning from comparison with human feelings that he loves us more than we love him.

See how where sin abounded grace abounds still more. The guilty one could scarcely hope for pardon; the judge, or rather not now the judge but the advocate, heaps us grace. “Quick,” he says, “bring forth the best robe and clothe him in it, put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet; fetch the fatted calf and kill it, let us eat and make merry, for this son of mine who had died has come back to life.” To pass over all these: the best robe, that is, the sanctification of the Spirit with which the one who is baptized is clothed and the penitent clothed afresh; the ring of faith by which he pledges his loyalty; the shoes by which he is fortified to trample on poisonous serpents or to preach the gospel; the fatted calf which he offers in sacrifice on the altar; those festive days enjoined for the son’s reception and celebrated by all the host of heaven; to say nothing of all these and leave them to be treated by the more learned, let us consider only that embrace and kiss of the devoted father. What a wealth of graciousness and sweetness, what an abundance of most blessed joy, what

torrents of most holy delight do they not contain? “He fell upon his neck and kissed him.”

When he thus showed his affection for him, what did he do by his embrace and his kiss but take him to his bosom and cast himself into his son’s bosom, breathe himself into him, in order that by clinging to his father he might become one spirit with him, just as by clinging to harlots he had been made one body with them? It was not enough for that supreme mercy not to close the bowels of his compassion to the wretched. He draws them into his very bowels and makes them his members. He could not bind us to himself more closely, could not make us more intimate to himself than by incorporating us into himself. Both by charity and by ineffable power he unites us not only with the body he has assumed but also with his very spirit. If such is the grace accorded to the repentant what will be the glory of those who reign? If such are the consolations of the wretched, what will be the joys of the blessed? And since he gives us so much in advance while we are still on the way, what treasures is he not keeping stored up for us when we arrive in our fatherland? Indeed, what has not entered into the heart of man: that we should be like him and that God should be all in all.

**FRIDAY, MARCH 6, 2020**

**Continuation of a Sermon of Bl Gueric of Igny <sup>5</sup>**

Now you, blessed sinner, although not blessed because a sinner but because repentant of sin, what encouragement was yours in your father’s embrace and his kiss, when he restored his love to you of whom he had almost despaired, when he made your heart clean again and overwhelmed you with the joy of your salvation>

“And how,” he says, “shall speech explain what the mind cannot contain?” Unspeakable are the groans and inexplicable the affections to which the spirit gives birth as if impregnated by the incomprehensible. The human heart is too narrow for them and therefore it is torn and pours itself

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<sup>5</sup> Gueric of Igny - Liturgical Sermons - vol. 1 - CF #8 \_ Cistercian Publications - Spencer, MA - 1970 p 143

out. The ardor, which it conceives but cannot contain, it breathes forth and spreads abroad in what ways it can, by tears, groans, sighs. These things are better known to people who have tasted them often and abundantly.

Now also, I say, when you have been released after those embraces and kisses, when you think over what has passed between you and him, when you consider what your cause was and how it was judged by him, bearing in mind on the one hand the abundance of your offence, on the other hand the superabundance of his grace, to what, I ask, does your thought give birth in you?

“Naught but this”, he says, “that an unutterable fire blazes out in my meditation, on the one hand for sorrow and shame, on the other hand for joy and love. I would not consider myself a man but a stone if I were so hard-hearted as not to grieve or be ashamed, or so wicked and ungrateful as not to be wholly liquefied for joy or love of that father.”

Keep then, O happy sinner, keep carefully and watchfully this spirit of yours, this most fitting affection of humility and devotion by which you may always think of yourself in humility and of the Lord in goodness. There is nothing greater than it among the gifts of the Holy Spirit, nothing more precious in the treasures of God, nothing more holy among all the charisms, nothing more health giving in all the sacraments. Keep, I say, if you wish yourself to be kept, the humility of that sentiment and word by which you confess to the Father and say: “Father, now I am not worthy to be called your son: make me as one of your hired servants.” Nothing so wins your father over as this sentiment, nor is there any better way of making yourself a worthy son than by always confessing yourself unworthy. This humility not only justifies sinners but also perfects the just and brings their justice to fullness if they confess themselves humble servants even when they have done all they were bidden.

Let your sin be present to you always and, according to the Wise Man’s advice, do not be without fear even for sin that has been forgiven. God’s judgments are uncertain and hidden; they are not rashly to be presumed upon, for we hold nothing more certain in that regard than that in God’s sight no man alive shall be justified, except insofar as he judges himself to be a sinner. Otherwise all our justice is like a filthy rag to be thrown away.

**SATURDAY, MARCH 7, 2020**

## **A Reading from a Sermon of St Leo the Great on Lent <sup>6</sup>**

At the beginning of my sermon to you, beloved brethren, on this the greatest and most sacred of the fasts, what more fitting opening than to begin with the words of the Apostle, in whom Christ spoke, and declare again: "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold now is the day of salvation". For though there is no season that is not filled with the divine gifts, and though at each moment we have, through His grace, access to the Divine Mercy, yet now is the time in which the souls of all mortals should be stirred with greater fervor towards spiritual perfection, and inspired with greater confidence; now when the return of that day when we were redeemed invites us once more to the fulfillment of all our sacred duties, so that purified in body and soul we may celebrate the supreme Mystery of the Passion of Our Lord. Indeed such unending reverence and unceasing devotion is due to these sacred mysteries, that should we ever be in the Presence of God as we now are obliged to be for the worthy celebration of the Paschal Feast.

But since there are few that have this strength of soul, and since because of the weakness of our flesh, the more severe observance is relaxed, and since the manifold duties of the present life take up so much of our care, it will happen that even the most devout of heart are stained with the dust of earth. Accordingly, with great solicitude has this divine means been given us, so that these forty days of reflection may assist us to restore the purity of our souls, and so that during them we may by good works make satisfaction for our past sins, and by devout mortification purge ourselves of them.

As we are therefore beginning this sacred season, dedicated to the purification of the soul, let us be careful to fulfill the Apostolic command that "we cleanse ourselves from all defilement of the flesh and of the spirit", so that restraining the conflict that exists between the one and the other substance, the soul, which in the Providence of God is meant to be the ruler of the body, may regain the dignity of its rightful authority, so that, giving offence to no one, we may not incur the punishment of

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<sup>6</sup> The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, vol. 2, Henry Regnery Co, Chicago, 1958, pg. 29

evildoers. For the sum total of our fasting does not consist in merely abstaining from food. In vain do we deny our body food if we do not withhold our heart from iniquity, and restrain our lips that they speak no evil.

We must then so moderate our rightful use of food that our other desires may be subject to the same rule. For this is also a time for gentleness and patience, a time of peace and serenity, in which having put away all stains of evil doing we strive after steadfastness in what is good. Now is the time when generous Christian souls forgive offences, pay no heed to insults, and wipe out the memory of past injuries. Now let the Christian soul exercise itself in the armor of justice, on the right hand and on the left, so that amid honor and dishonor, evil report and good, the praise of men will not make proud the virtue that is well rooted, the conscience that has peace, nor dishonor cast it down. The moderation of those who worship God is blameless.

**END OF READINGS**