

Lectio Divina

SCRIPTURE READING + MEDITATION + PRAYER + CONTEMPLATION

“What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life?” +Saint Benedict, from the Rule of Saint Benedict (73:3)

The month of February is dedicated to the Holy Family + Jesus, Mary and Joseph

“If in Christ we have been tempted, in him we overcome the devil. Do you think only of Christ’s temptations and fail to think of his victory? See yourself as tempted in him, and see yourself as victorious in him. He could have kept the devil from himself; but if he were not tempted he could not teach you how to triumph over temptation.”

+SAINT AUGUSTINE

Monday, February 23 ~ First Week in the Season of Lent
Optional Memorial: Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, Bishop and Martyr

Holy Gospel: Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus said to his disciples: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?’ And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’ Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the Devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.’ Then they will answer and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?’ He will answer them, ‘Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.’ And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Meditation: Jesus’ parable about goats and sheep must have both amused and surprised his audience. Goats and sheep shared the same grazing ground during the day, but had to be separated at night. Goats were less docile and more restless than sheep. They came to symbolize evil and the expression “scapegoat” has become a common expression for someone bearing blame for others. (See Leviticus 26:20-22 for a description of the ritual expulsion of a sin-bearing goat on the Day of Atonement.) Separation is an inevitable consequence of sin and judgment. The Day of Judgment will reveal who showed true compassion and mercy toward their neighbor.

Prayer: God of all creation, who were pleased to give the Bishop Saint Polycarp a place in the company of the Martyrs, grant, through his intercession, that sharing with him in the chalice of Christ, we may rise through the Holy Spirit to eternal life. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: This parable is similar to the parable about Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man, who let Lazarus die on his doorstep, was doomed to crave for drops of cold water he had not thought of giving to the poor man. When Saint Martin of Tours, a young Roman soldier and seeker of the Christian faith, met an unclothed man begging for alms in the freezing cold, he stopped and cut his coat in two and gave half to the stranger. That night he dreamt he saw the heavenly court with Jesus robed in a torn cloak. One of the angels present asked, “Master, why do you wear that battered cloak?” Jesus replied, “My servant Martin gave it to me.” Saint Martin’s disciple and biographer, Sulpicius Severus, states that as a consequence of this vision Martin “flew to be baptized.” God is gracious and merciful; his love compels us

to treat others with mercy and kindness. When we do something for one of Christ's little ones, we do it for Christ himself. Do you treat your neighbor with mercy and love as Christ has treated you?

Tuesday, February 24 ~ First Week in the Season of Lent

Holy Gospel: Matthew 6:7-15 Jesus said to his disciples: "In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them. Your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

"This is how you are to pray:

Our Father who art in heaven, / hallowed be thy name, / thy Kingdom come, / thy will be done, / on earth as it is in heaven. / Give us this day our daily bread; / and forgive us our trespasses, / as we forgive those who trespass against us; / and lead us not into temptation, / but deliver us from evil.

"If you forgive men their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive men, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions."

Meditation: We can approach God confidently because he is waiting with arms wide open to receive his prodigal sons and daughters. That is why Jesus gave his disciples the perfect prayer that dares to call God, Our Father. This prayer teaches us how to ask God for the things we really need, the things that matter not only for the present but for eternity as well. We can approach God our Father with confidence and boldness because Christ has opened the way to heaven for us through his death and resurrection. When we ask God for help, he fortunately does not give us what we deserve. Instead, he responds with grace and mercy. He is kind and forgiving towards us and he expects us to treat our neighbor the same.

Prayer: Look upon your family, Lord, that, through the chastening effects of bodily discipline, our minds may be radiant in your presence with the strength of our yearning for you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: Consider what Saint John Cassian wrote about the Lord's Prayer and the necessity of forgiving others from the heart: "The mercy of God is beyond description. While he is offering us a model prayer he is teaching us a way of life whereby we can be pleasing in his sight. But that is not all. In this same prayer he gives us an easy method for attracting an indulgent and merciful judgment on our lives. He gives us the possibility of ourselves mitigating the sentence hanging over us and of compelling him to pardon us. What else could he do in the face of our generosity when we ask him to forgive us as we have forgiven our neighbor? If we are faithful in this prayer, each of us will ask forgiveness for our own failings after we have forgiven the sins of those who have sinned against us, not only those who have sinned against our Master. There is, in fact, in some of us a very bad habit. We treat our sins against God, however appalling, with gentle indulgence: but when by contrast it is a matter of sins against us ourselves, albeit very tiny ones, we exact reparation with ruthless severity. Anyone who has not forgiven from the bottom of the heart the brother or sister who has done him wrong will only obtain from this prayer his own condemnation, rather than any mercy." Thus we need to honestly ask ourselves: do I treat others as the Lord has instructed me – with compassion, mercy, steadfast love, and kindness?

Wednesday, February 25 ~ First Week in the Season of Lent

Holy Gospel: Luke 11:29-32 While still more people gathered in the crowd, Jesus said to them, "This generation is an evil generation; it seeks a sign, but no sign will be given it, except the sign of Jonah. Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation. At the judgment the queen of the south will rise with the men of this generation and she will condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and there is something greater than Solomon here. At the judgment the men of Nineveh will arise with this generation and condemn it, because at the preaching of Jonah they repented, and there is something greater than Jonah here."

Meditation: The Lord Jesus came to set us free from slavery to sin and hurtful desires. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit he pours his love into our hearts that we may understand his will for our lives and walk in his way of holiness. God searches our hearts, not to condemn us, but to show us where we need his saving grace and help. He calls us to seek him with true repentance, humility, and the honesty to see our sins for what they really are – a rejection of his love and will for our lives. God will transform us if we listen to his word and allow his Holy Spirit to work in our lives. Ask the Lord to renew your mind and to increase your thirst for his wisdom. James says that the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity (James 3:17). A double-minded person cannot receive this kind of wisdom. The single of mind desire one thing alone – God's pleasure. God wants us to delight in him and to know the freedom of his truth and love. Do you thirst for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14)?

Prayer: Look kindly, Lord, we pray, on the devotion of your people, that those who by self-denial are restrained in body may by the fruit of good works be renewed in mind. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: Do you pay careful attention to warning signs? Do you pay attention to these signs at all? Many fatalities could be avoided if people paid attention to such signs. When the religious leaders demanded a sign from Jesus, he gave them a serious warning to avert spiritual disaster. It was characteristic of the Jews that they demanded "signs" from God's messengers to authenticate their claims. When the religious leaders pressed Jesus to give proof for his claims he says in so many words that he is God's sign and that they need no further evidence from heaven than his own person. The Ninevites recognized God's warning when Jonah spoke to them, and they repented. And the Queen of Sheba recognized God's wisdom in Solomon. Jonah was God's sign and his message was the message of a merciful God for the people of Nineveh. Unfortunately the religious leaders were not content to accept the signs right before their eyes. They had rejected the message of John the Baptist and now they reject Jesus as God's Anointed One (Messiah) and they fail to heed his message. Simeon had prophesied at Jesus' birth that he was "destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that inner thoughts of many will be revealed" (Luke 2:34- 35). Jesus confirmed his message with many miracles in preparation for the greatest sign of all – his resurrection on the third day.

Thursday, February 26 ~ First Week in the Season of Lent

Holy Gospel: Matthew 7:7-12 Jesus said to his disciples: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asked for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asked for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him.

"Do to others whatever you would have them do to you. This is the law and the prophets."

Meditation: Those who know and trust in God's love, pray with great boldness. Saint John Chrysostom, a Father of the Church, had this to say about the power of prayer: "Prayer is an all-efficient panoply [i.e. 'a full suit of armor' or 'splendid array'], a treasure undiminished, a mine never exhausted, a sky unobstructed by clouds, a haven unruffled by storm. It is the root, the fountain, and the mother of a thousand blessings. It exceeds a monarch's power . . . I speak not of the prayer which is cold and feeble and devoid of zeal. I speak of that which proceeds from a mind outstretched, the child of a contrite spirit, the offspring of a soul converted – this is the prayer which mounts to heaven . . . The power of prayer has subdued the strength of fire, bridled the rage of lions, silenced anarchy, extinguished wars, appeased the elements, expelled demons, burst the chains of death, enlarged the gates of heaven, relieved diseases, averted frauds, rescued cities from destruction, stayed the sun in its course, and arrested the progress of the thunderbolt. In sum prayer has power to destroy whatever is at enmity with the good."

Prayer: Bestow on us, we pray, O Lord, a spirit of always pondering on what is right and of hastening to carry it out, and since without you we cannot exist, may we be enabled to live according to your will. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: Jesus' parable of the father feeding his son illustrates something most would think unthinkable! How could a loving father refuse to give his son what is good; or worse, to give him what is harmful? We sometimes forget that Christ came to teach us, not only what we are to know and believe, but what we are to do, how we are to live our lives. Jesus taught his disciples to pray with confidence because the Heavenly Father in his goodness always answers prayers. That is why we can boldly pray: "Give us this day our daily bread." Prayer flows from the love of God; and the personal love we show to our neighbor is fueled by the love that God has poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). Jesus concludes his discourse on prayer with the reminder that we must treat our neighbor in the same way we wish to be treated by God and by others. We must not just avoid doing harm to our neighbor, we must actively seek his or her welfare. In doing so, we fulfill the law and the prophets, namely what God requires of us — loving God with all that we have and are and loving our neighbor as ourselves. The Holy Spirit is every ready to transform our lives in Jesus' way of love. Do you thirst for holiness and for the fire of God's love?

Friday, February 27 ~ First Week in the Season of Lent

Holy Gospel: Matthew 5:20-26 Jesus said to his disciples: "I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven.

"You have heard that it was said to your ancestors, *You shall not kill; and whoever kills will be liable to judgment.* But I say to you, whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment, and whoever says to his brother, *Raca*, will be answerable to the Sanhedrin, and whoever says, 'You fool,' will be liable to fiery Gehenna. Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny."

Meditation: Do you allow sin or anger to master your life? Maybe at first glance you say "no, of course not." But take a deep look, an honest look at yourself, at your life, at how you live. The first human to hate his brother was Cain. God warned Cain: 'Why are you angry? ...Sin in couching at the door; it's desire is for you, but you must master it (Genesis 4:6-7). Sin doesn't just happen; it first grows as a seed in one's heart. Unless it is mastered, by God's grace, it grows like a weed and chokes the fruitful vine. Jesus addressed the issue of keeping the commandments with his disciples. The scribes and Pharisees equated righteousness with satisfying the demands of the law. Jesus showed them how short they had come. Jesus points to the heart as the seat of desire and choice. Unless forbidden and evil desires are eradicated, the heart will be corrupted. Jesus points to forbidden anger with one's brother. This is a selfish anger that broods and is long-lived, that nurses a grudge and keeps wrath warm, and that refuses to die. Anger in the heart as well as anger in speech or action are equally forbidden. What is the antidote to anger and rage? Mercy, kindness, and forbearance spring from a heart full of love and forgiveness. God has forgiven us and he calls us to extend mercy and forgiveness towards those who cause us harm and grief. In the cross of Jesus we see the supreme example of love and the power for overcoming evil. Only God's love and grace can set our hearts and minds free from the tyranny of wounded pride and spiteful revenge. Do you harbor any anger towards another person? And are you quick to be reconciled when a rupture has been caused in your relationships? Ask God to set you free and to fill your heart and mind with his love and truth.

Prayer: Grant that your faithful, O Lord, we pray, may be so conformed to the paschal observances, that the bodily discipline now solemnly begun may bear fruit in the souls of all. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Contemplation: Saint Eusebius, a Father of the Church, offered the following prayer as instruction for his fellow Christians: "May I be no man's enemy, and may I be the friend of that which is eternal and abides. May I never quarrel with those nearest me: and if I do, may I be reconciled quickly. May I love, seek, and attain only that which is good. May I wish for all men's happiness and envy none. May I never rejoice in the ill-fortune of one who has wronged me. When I have done or said what is wrong, may I never wait for the rebuke of others, but always rebuke myself until I make amends. May I win no victory that harms either me or my opponent. May I reconcile friends who are angry with one another. May I never fail a friend who is in danger. When visiting those in grief may I be able by gentle and healing words to soften their pain. May I respect myself. May I always keep tame that which rages within me. May I accustom myself to be gentle, and never be angry with people because of circumstances. May I never discuss who is wicked and what wicked things he has done, but know good men and follow in their footsteps." Do you seek to live peaceably and charitably with all? If not, pray that you will! Lent is about reconciliation, not only with God and Jesus, but with anyone whom we have harmed through our actions. Reconciliation is the first step toward conversion of mind and heart. Step-by-step, we turn away from sin and selfishness, and turn back to Christ. Begin these steps now, during Lent.

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